



1-1-2012

## "You Are Safe": Black Maternal Politics Of Resistance And The Question Of Community Consensus In African American Women's Literature

Daniela Marinova Koleva

Follow this and additional works at: <https://commons.und.edu/theses>



Part of the [African American Studies Commons](#), and the [American Literature Commons](#)

---

### Recommended Citation

Koleva, Daniela Marinova, ""You Are Safe": Black Maternal Politics Of Resistance And The Question Of Community Consensus In African American Women's Literature" (2012). *Theses and Dissertations*. 1358. <https://commons.und.edu/theses/1358>

This Dissertation is brought to you for free and open access by the Theses, Dissertations, and Senior Projects at UND Scholarly Commons. It has been accepted for inclusion in Theses and Dissertations by an authorized administrator of UND Scholarly Commons. For more information, please contact [zeineb.yousif@library.und.edu](mailto:zeineb.yousif@library.und.edu).

“YOU ARE SAFE”: BLACK MATERNAL POLITICS OF RESISTANCE AND THE  
QUESTION OF COMMUNITY CONSENSUS IN AFRICAN AMERICAN WOMEN’S  
LITERATURE

by

Daniela Marinova Koleva  
Bachelor of Arts, University of Veliko Turnovo, Bulgaria, 1995  
Master of Arts, University of Veliko Turnovo, Bulgaria, 1996  
Master of Arts, University of North Dakota, 2004

A Dissertation

Submitted to the Graduate Faculty

of the

University of North Dakota

in partial fulfillment of the requirements

for the degree of

Doctor of Philosophy

Grand Forks, North Dakota

December

2012

© 2012 Daniela Marinova Koleva

This dissertation, submitted by Daniela Marinova Koleva in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the Degree Doctor of Philosophy from the University of North Dakota, has been read by the Faculty Advisory Committee under whom the work has been done, and is hereby approved.

---

Dr. Sheryl O'Donnell (Advisor)

---

Dr. Sharon Carson

---

Dr. Eric Wolfe

---

Dr. Yvette Koepke

---

Dr. Lana Rakow

This dissertation is being submitted by the appointed advisory committee as having met all of the requirements of the Graduate School at the University of North Dakota and is hereby approved.

---

Dr. Wayne Swisher

---

Date

Title            “You Are Safe”: Black Maternal Politics of Resistance and the  
                  Question of Community Consensus in African American Women’s  
                  Literature

Department    English

Degree         Doctor of Philosophy

In presenting this dissertation in partial fulfillment of the requirements for a graduate degree from the University of North Dakota, I agree that the library of this University shall make it freely available for inspection. I further agree that permission for extensive copying for scholarly purposes may be granted by the professor who supervised my dissertation work or, in her absence, by the Chairperson of the department or the Dean of the Graduate School. It is understood that any copying or publication or other use of this dissertation or part thereof for financial gain shall not be allowed without my written permission. It is also understood that due recognition shall be given to me and to the University of North Dakota in any scholarly use which may be made of any material in my dissertation.

Daniela Marinova Koleva  
Date: 20/11/2012

## TABLE OF CONTENTS

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS.....	vii
ABSTRACT .....	viii
PREFACE .....	x
CHAPTER	
I. INTRODUCTION: HEGEMONY, POLITICS, EMPTY SIGNIFIERS, AND AFRICAN AMERICAN WOMEN WRITING INFANTICIDE .....	1
II. “THE CLOSING DOOR” THAT OPENS THE ENTRANCE TO THE BLACK COMMUNAL DEBATE ON SAFETY.....	42
Mothering The Kipling Way, Going Softly Under the Stars.....	55
“What Had Agnes Milton Wanted in My Room?”.....	63
III. DARK MATERNAL VOICES, PROTEST DRAMA, AND THE MAKING OF POLITICAL SUBJECTS IN AFRICAN AMERICAN PLAYS BY WOMEN.....	69
Scholarly Criticism on Protest Drama.....	73
Shirley Graham and <i>It’s Morning</i> .....	85
Georgia Douglas Johnson and <i>Safe</i> .....	100
Georgia Douglas Johnson’s Literary Salon.....	120
IV. TONI MORRISON’S POLITICS OF CULTURAL DIFFERENCE.....	139

V.	SAFETY, SETHE, STH, SOUND: MATERNAL POLITICS AND THE QUESTION OF COMMUNITY CONSENSUS IN TONI MORRISON'S <i>BELOVED</i> .....	187
	Other Interpretations of Safety Or That Safety Which Is Not One.....	205
	Enter the Sound.....	229
VI.	CONCLUSION .....	250
	BIBLIOGRAPHY.....	256

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I would like to thank my doctoral advisor, Dr. Sheryl O'Donnell, for the dedication and passion with which she guided the whole project. Her class on "bad girls" in literature is the initial inspiration for the current work. Dr. O'Donnell has taught me the power of freedom, curiosity, and experimentation in research.

I would like to thank Dr. Sharon Carson, whose classes on African American literature and democracy proved to be highly informative and insightful. I also want to thank Dr. Eric Wolfe for teaching me the importance of signs in his memorable class on Melville. My thanks to Dr. Yvette Koepke, who with her critical thought and assessment helped me be a better thinker. Last but not least, I am grateful to Dr. Lana Rakow for her punctuality and responsiveness.

Once again, thank you all for your professional feedback and valuable suggestions for revision.

I cannot express enough gratitude to Dr. David Marshall for providing me with much needed support and professional advice throughout my academic career at UND.

Finally, I would like to thank my parents for being with me through all this.



## ABSTRACT

The study focuses on a number of African American women's literary texts that employ the figure of the black mother and the motif of infanticide to engage in critical statements about system arrangements, repressive practices, and theory designs with direct effect upon black people's choices for organizing their lives and existence. Such critical statements are inevitably *political* and their construction is offered in a most provocative and startling way given the choice of maternal infanticide to make the claims.

Angelina Weld Grimke's "The Closing Door" (1919), Georgia Douglas Johnson's *Safe* (c.1929), Shirley Graham's *It's Morning* (c. 1938-1940), and Toni Morrison's *Beloved* (1987) are texts that explicate the working of the political through an expression of controversial black maternal politics that demands a renegotiation of the basis for communitarian unity. In these texts, black mothers murder their children in often utterly grotesque and spectacular ways to claim brazenly that they provide safety for their children from slavery and lynching. Safety is the one thing missing in their lives and the one thing that mothers secure for their children by definition. Through the act of infanticide and its subsequent interpretations, the signifier *safety* is quickly thrust into a field of discursivity where competing notions as to what lends meaning to "safety" exist: "safety" as death and violence, as dismembered human body, as grotesque maternal mastery, as mother-child oneness or as sound that breaks the back of words. Thus, the signifier *safety* reaches the status of what political theorist Ernesto Laclau calls

in *Emancipation(s)* the “signifier of empty communitarian fullness” (43). It will arrest meaning only after a particular articulation of safety brings the promise of communitarian wholeness.

Put in the time of their publication, Grimke’s “The Closing Door” (1919), Johnson’s *Safe* (c. 1229), Graham’s *It’s Morning* (c. 1938-1940) and Morrison’s *Beloved* (1987) serve also as responses to the emerging Harlem Renaissance art theories of the 1920s and 30s and the birth of African American vernacular theories in the late 1970s and 1980s where each, from the perspective of its days and goals, aimed to position African American literature *safely*, with the necessary dose of comfort, on the American literary and cultural map.

The novelty of this project lies first in the fact of putting Angelina Weld Grimke’s “The Closing Door,” Georgia Douglas Johnson’s *Safe*, Shirley Graham’s *It’s Morning*, and Toni Morrison’s *Beloved* together for critical examination. To my knowledge, no such study that links infanticidal literature authored by African American women writers exists. Second, it is a critical exploration of the political role of the literary figure of the black mother in shaping community consensus along intracommunal (black) lines and a glimpse of the relation between African American women’s texts and theories designed to promote African American literary features. Third, I hope that the study will serve as an illumination of Ernesto Laclau’s political theory on hegemony and emancipation, and will contribute to the field of feminism, African American studies, American literature, and political studies.

## PREFACE

This project began several years ago while I was completing my course requirement work and was preparing for the upcoming comprehensive exams for my doctoral degree. The course that I enrolled in was on “bad girls” in literature. The course was not exclusively restricted to the context of any particular national or ethnic literature, a feature that definitely appealed to me, even though for the most part the American geographic and political context remained prevalent for the selection of the majority of the literary texts. Intrigued by the label “bad girls” and the connotations of deviant, disruptive, and often scandalous behavior that such a label inevitably invites, I found myself to be interested in a particular disturbing form of female behavior described in literature as maternal infanticide. The texts of Euripides’s *Medea* and Toni Morrison’s *Beloved* constituted my first emotional encounter with the violent and problematic narrative, a fact, no doubt, which was true for so many generations of readers and groups of people throughout the course of human history. The motif of maternal infanticide seemed to have a long history in literature. But how often did it appear in various literatures and to what purpose?

As I was conducting my preliminary research on the use of maternal infanticide in literature, I came to realize that throughout the centuries, a considerable body of literature grew that tackled the problem from different angles, with diverse historic and cultural contexts with a definitive say on the production of infanticide literature. There were old Greek, French, British, German, and other European versions of this type of literature.

I have described this literary historic development briefly in Chapter One.

As we were advancing in our class toward Morrison's highly-acclaimed novel *Beloved*, my preliminary research on the history of maternal infanticide literature seemed to pay off in an interesting and unexpected way. I already knew that along with the strong European tradition of creating, (re)writing, and expanding the corpus of infanticide literature for all sorts of cultural, nationalistic, feminist, or other social interests, there existed a distinct American, or to be more precise, an African American kind of maternal infanticide literature that clearly deserved a good deal of scholarly attention.

Angelina Weld Grimke's short story "The Closing Door" (1919), Georgia Douglas Johnson's one-act drama *Safe* (c.1929), and Shirley Graham's one-act drama *It's Morning* (1940) provided a curious moment of content similarity to Toni Morrison's famous novel *Beloved* (1987). The four texts shared the motif of maternal infanticide and seemed to compete in developing their full potential to convey an important message to their audiences.

Although belonging to different historical and literary periods, the four texts clearly were pointing to a trend in African American literature, explored and shaped by different generations of black women writers. What kind of connection could the use of infanticide provide between the texts of the New Negro Renaissance era, with Grimke, Johnson, and Graham as major female representatives, and the most-celebrated contemporary African American woman writer, Morrison, who by virtue of her art, literary and intellectual prominence, stood so high above the rest? Clearly, by choice of topic – maternal infanticide – Morrison had positioned herself intricately close to her three literary predecessors. Establishing a reasonable connection between these four

authors and their texts seemed an important task of the project that I wished to pursue. A common story of maternal infanticide was one thing, but maternal infanticide as a narrative device to make a point about slavery (Graham and Morrison) or lynching (Grimke and Johnson) seemed a different affair altogether, along with the fact of the women writers' involvement in the New Negro movement in the first decades of the twentieth century or in the process of institutionalization of African American literature in the late 1970s and 1980s.

My further investigation into the matter of maternal infanticide in African American literature by women showed that no critical connection has been established between Grimke's, Graham's, and Johnson's texts, on the one hand, and Morrison's novel on the other. This was a good sign as well as the first step in terms of claiming a significant scholarly contribution provided by my project. The paradox was that next to the less known and little explored infanticide literature of Grimke, Johnson, and Graham stood the enormous body of literary criticism on *Beloved* and the celebrity figure of Toni Morrison. No matter how overwhelmingly large the volume of scholarship on Morrison and *Beloved* was, I was not able to find an analytic connection between Morrison, Grimke, Johnson, and Graham based on the use of maternal infanticide. Establishing such a connection became a question of primary concern to me.

I was initially captivated by the spectacular aspect of the acts of infanticide depicted in the four texts. Detailed and gruesome descriptions of how the mothers murdered their children and what the witnesses of these horrible events saw were abundant in the texts. The obviously spectacularity of a highly-disturbing and violent event such as infanticide and its meticulous depiction seemed to be an imminent and

compulsory task for the black women writers to accomplish. Somehow, the level of this spectacularity seemed to rival the one that the cultural critics of lynching were describing and analyzing in their studies. The idea of looking at maternal infanticide as an imagined social spectacle came precisely under the influence of these cultural critics, who methodically and convincingly made an argument for lynching as a social spectacle. Maternal infanticide provoked by the harsh conditions of slavery and the trauma of lynching, as Grimke, Johnson, Graham and Morrison would suggest, could not be far from conceptualizing the horrific event of infanticide as a form of imagined social spectacle either. Under this scenario, Bakhtin and his work on carnival appeared a good match for my critical investigation. The Bakhtinian carnivalesque would provide the point that infanticide in African American literature was a major tool of resistance that disrupted the foundations or the conditions of possibility – slavery and lynching – that provoked the maternal rage in the first place.

Later on, as I was rereading “The Closing Door,” *Safe, It’s Morning*, and *Beloved*, I came to the realization that in addition to the spectacle of infanticide, which by virtue of being a spectacle drew immediate attention to itself first, perhaps even overpowering the importance of other elements, I noticed that the infanticidal mothers in the four texts were repeatedly making the same claim to explain their otherwise unacceptable actions. In killing their children, they were claiming that they were providing them with safety. This, to me, was not just a coincidence or a chancy effect generated by the tension of the narratives, but a significant marker for a political intervention by challenging the dominant discursive formations on motherhood, freedom, democracy and human rights. Safety, in other words, was assuming the role of a structural and political signifier

exploited by the black female authors for the purposes of the African American literary project.

Ernesto Laclau's theory on hegemony and emancipation seemed the right fit for the discussion of *safety* as a political and structural signifier. Furthermore, the idea of the political came not just from the content of each literary text, but also from the cultural and literary context of the time when each literary text was created. My major questions for investigation were formulated as follows: How did the various competing notions of *safety* shape the African American communities in the four texts? What was the path of building unity in order to (re)build the notions of stable black communities? How was the infanticidal mother granted political subjectivity, and what was her role in the forming of the new communal consensus? Were Grimke, Johnson, Graham, and Morrison also playing on the notion of safety to extend their comments to the leading literary ideologies and theories of their day?

Laclau's theory on hegemony and emancipation proved a valuable tool for critical investigation on a number of levels. It is a theory equipped to demonstrate the political and social making of communities. It privileges and registers the moments of radical movement and change within communal structures. It also becomes a sufficient lens, even if seemingly neutral and objective, for the critical examination of the reigning black theories of the early and late twentieth century. It becomes possible to highlight the highs and lows of the leading black theories in the making of the signifier *safety* for the political use of African American literature and its social situatedness. Last but not least, Laclau's theory on hegemony and emancipation satisfies my interest and curiosity as a scholar who appreciates the value of theoretical tools in reading literature.

Chapter One of this study serves as an introduction into the subject matter and lays out the major theoretical terms and premises utilized to read infanticide literature by African American women writers.

Chapter Two traces the creation of the black infanticidal mother figure in African American literature, credited to Angelina Weld Grimke, and focuses exclusively on her short story “The Closing Door” as a text that introduces the question of infanticide point-blank into the public space. The short story is also exemplary of Grimke’s political activism and intention to be in service to black communal interests as well.

Chapter Three focuses on the dramaturgical rendition of infanticide in Graham’s and Johnson’s one-act plays *It’s Morning* and *Safe* as well as the creation of political subjects in protest drama by women. The chapter also explores the benefits and drawbacks of the usage of the trope of infanticide and its connection to safety for the development of Graham’s and Johnson’s literary positions and cultural politics.

Chapter Four is an attempt to portray Morrison’s literary agenda and cultural politics in service to African American literature and African American literary criticism. The chapter highlights her presence as an educator, renowned intellectual, and literary scholar which undoubtedly helped her create a distinct body of nonfiction in favor of the African American literary project and its growth and continuity in an institutionalized environment. The chapter provides a valuable link to the application of Morrison’s cultural politics and its moderate but significant modifications regarding the signifier *safety* in her nonfiction and in its introduction in *Beloved*.



Chapter Five offers a reading of Toni Morrison's novel *Beloved* as the most comprehensive and insightful take on the political power of infanticide and its connection to the empty signifier *safety* followed by its connection to Gates's theory of signification. Morrison's *Beloved* is the clearest illustration of the emancipatory and hegemonic potential of the empty signifier *safety* and its capacity to mobilize communitarian unity.

Chapter Six provides the conclusion to the role and function of the empty signifier *safety* in African American women's writing and literary theory.

## CHAPTER I

### INTRODUCTION: HEGEMONY, POLITICS, EMPTY SIGNIFIERS, AND AFRICAN AMERICAN WOMEN WRITING INFANTICIDE

This study is an attempt to apply Ernesto Laclau's theory of hegemony and emancipation to a number of African American literary texts authored by women between 1919 and 1940, and in the late 1980s. These women writers, as their intention indicates, employ the trope of maternal infanticide to condemn the institution of slavery in the nineteenth century and the practice of lynching during the Jim Crow era as oppressive and non-acceptable social arrangements directly responsible for denigrating and racist attitudes as well as systematic violations of basic human rights. In short, these African American women writers were involved in the production of literary texts with social programmatic value to help shape black politics of civic emancipation and cultural independence. To bring stark accusations against the institution of slavery and the practice of lynching, the black women writers, and their male colleagues, had to "make an instrumental demand on [their] literary practice" (11), as Kenneth Warren's most recent study on African American literature suggests. One such instrumental demand, acknowledged and developed by the group of African American women writers featured in this study, was to imagine and create spectacular forms of resistance such as infanticide on the pages of their diverse texts. The writers' artistic choices enabled the least expected characters in their works, the black mothers, to perform the most shocking acts of infant execution – well-plotted schemes that additionally escalated the nature of

of the conflict, its spectacularity, and the adequacy of the imposed instrumental demands to shape black political strategies of empowering and resistance.

Angelina Weld Grimke's short story "The Closing Door" (1919), Georgia Douglas Johnson's and Shirley Graham's one-act protest dramas *Safe* (c. 1930) and *It's Morning*" (1940) represent the New Negro Renaissance bold depictions of infanticide and the political meaning attached to this act. Toni Morrison's *Beloved* (1987) is the most current rendition of infanticide and the most elaborate meditation on the capacity of this violent act and its perpetrator, the infanticidal black mother, to generate political response in the ranks of the black community members. As such, these texts represent substantial parts of the body of infanticide literature created by African American writers through the years and are directly marked by racial and cultural conflicts with white America.<sup>1</sup>

But it is not the state between black oppression and white supremacy fueled by the institution of slavery and the culture of lynching that interests me the most in the study of black infanticide literature. Although important and certainly impossible to omit entirely, it is limited to a well-studied dichotomy of race relations and distribution of power. Certainly the depiction of infanticide in literature serves as an expression of acute protest against the structural legal principle of slavery – children follow the condition of the mother – and its devastating effects on kin relations, or against the most exploited demands imposed by the culture of lynching to defend the honor of white women from black sexual predators, to avenge the assault on white men's property, and to address murder crimes by means of morbidly spectacular and publicly administered vigilante justice.

The peculiar fact about the form of protest – maternal infanticide – created by the four black female writers and examined on these pages is that it excludes a direct confrontation with white enablers and practitioners of slavery and lynching in favor of an introverted or self-afflicted maternal destruction of children’s lives. The drama involving both the perpetrator of violence and the recipient of that violence, unfolds primarily in the ranks of the black community. It circulates strictly within the racially designated domain of the unprivileged Other and is easily dismissed as an act of savagery by the dominant white group or is defined as an undesirable act by the members of the black communities.

The second fact that defines the instance of African American infanticide in fiction by women is that it is, more often than not, committed by the black mother. This is certainly the case with the four texts selected for this study. The racialized and genderized nature of the event emanates in the figure of the infanticidal mother with due debates about the adequacy of the ruling social structure of each historical period and the non-traditional maternal political response to the structural pressure upon the unprivileged black segment of the population. Thus, infanticide in African American fiction by women becomes a weapon for identity and cultural politics. It is the function and capacity of this self-inflicted, gendered and racial violence that shapes the political within intracommunal (African American) lines that interests me the most.

Maternal infanticide shows a remarkable potential to organize black communal space and subjectivity to pursue social unity, justice, and communal integrity. While the act itself is rejected as a viable model for communitarian unity, it foregrounds the debate for the necessity and expression of such collective unity. On a different level, the depiction of maternal infanticide is also conceived as a distinguishable female writing

strategy for acquiring professional influence and political input into the African American cultural and literary politics. As such, the four texts stand in direct relation to the leading literary and theoretical ideologies of the early twentieth century driven by W.E.B. Du Bois and Alain Locke as the most prominent thinkers of that time, and the late twentieth century leading theorists with some of its major representatives, Henry Louis Gates, Jr. and Houston Baker. From this perspective, the four infanticide texts by black women seek for ways to intervene in the debates that structured the theoretical and intellectual visions for a distinguishable and viable African American literature.

To examine the trope of infanticide for its political value in shaping communitarian unity and the role of the black mother for the formation of political subjectivity, I intend to read Angelina Weld Grimke's "The Closing Door," Shirley Graham's *It's Morning*, Georgia Douglas Johnson's *Safe*, and Toni Morrison's *Beloved* through the lens of Ernesto Laclau's theory of hegemony and emancipation and his concept of the empty signifier. Before advancing the specifics of my analysis, I would like to introduce the operative concepts and central premises of Laclau's theory that underlie my observations on infanticide in African American literature as well as the women writers' literary and political situatedness in the cultural movement of the New Negro Renaissance between 1920s and 1940s and the theoretico-institutional direction of African American literature in the 1980s.

Central to Laclau's theory of hegemony and emancipation is the concept of the empty signifier. Laclau develops this concept in his later work on hegemony, more specifically in *Emancipation(s)*, to build on the famous study *Hegemony and Socialist Strategy* authored in collaboration with Chantal Mouffe, where the authors' theoretical

explication of hegemony first appears.<sup>2</sup> In *Emancipation(s)*, Laclau argues that empty signifiers are at the very heart of every hegemonic operation. It is because of them that politics becomes possible, solutions appear viable, and the social tends to exhibit various patterns of organization presented as always allegedly better than previous such attempts.

Laclau approaches the concept of empty signifier with a definition that on the surface appears simple and logical, but upon closer examination, spotlights a serious linguistic paradox. An empty signifier would be any formation of sounds that is deprived of its signifying function or remains detached from its signified. The problem with this definition is that if the formation of sounds loses its capacity to signify, then the whole concept of “signifier” becomes unnecessary or excessive. Thus, Laclau argues, the only possibility for the signifier to sever the connection to its signified, but retain its signifying function by attaching itself to a new signified, is by subverting the nature of the sign by which something internal to signification as such is revealed. Laclau’s full definition for an empty signifier reads:

An empty signifier can, consequently, only emerge if there is a structural impossibility in signification as such, and only if this impossibility can signify itself as an interruption (subversion, distortion, etcetera) of the structure of the sign. That is, the limits of signification can only announce themselves as the impossibility of realizing what is within those limits – if the limits could be signified in a direct way, they would be internal to signification and, ergo, would not be limits at all. (*Emancipation(s)* 37)

The definition of empty signifier achieves several things in advancing the concept as an operable unit in the theory of hegemony and emancipation. There is a dimension of

hegemony that is primarily linguistic in nature that speaks the social and political demands of various groups of people within countries, nations, ethnic and religious boundaries or within supranational, international, and global divisions of human existence. This dimension is closely related to the field of literature, of course.

First, Laclau distinguishes empty from equivocal signifier, insisting that with an equivocal signifier, the function of signification is realized in each context. A second distinction that Laclau makes is between empty and ambiguous or floating signifier. The floating is produced by an overdetermination or an underdetermination of signifieds that prevents the fully fixed meaning of the signifying unit. As the above quoted definition shows, Laclau relies on the poststructuralist premise that since the limits of a signifying system cannot be signified, they will have to show themselves as the interruption or the breakdown of the signifying process.<sup>3</sup> This results in a paradoxical situation, well defined by Derrida, where the condition of possibility of a signifying system – its limits – is also the condition for impossibility for the expansion of the signifying process. The limits, however, cannot be neutral but must be a product of an exclusion against which all other elements in the system are opposed. In other words, the exclusion that becomes the constitutive outside of the system is always in an antagonistic relation to the elements in the system.

The exclusionary limit has a number of effects that relate directly to the social production of empty signifiers. The first effect, according to Laclau, introduces ambivalence within the elements in the system. In order to function as a system, the elements that construct it as such need to be different from one another. It is difference that gives the elements representative value in the system, that maintains their identity

and allows for concrete meaning to take place. But the exclusionary limit poses a different demand to the differential elements within the system; it negates them and thus serves as a basis for introducing the logic of equality among differences. This leads to the moment of acceptance, in Laclau's words, that "the identity of each element is constitutively split" (38). The elements, on the one hand, express themselves as differences, and on the other hand, they cancel their expression of difference by entering into a relation of equivalence among themselves to oppose their constitutive outside. This is an advanced poststructuralist logic at work that leads Laclau to the conclusion that when radical exclusion is at work, it is responsible for the interruption of differential logic and thus what is excluded from the system is the principle of positivity or pure being. We arrive at a possibility for an empty signifier to emerge as "a signifier of pure cancellation of all difference" (*Emancipation(s)* 38).

The second effect of the exclusionary limit is that what is beyond its boundary remains reduced to pure negativity. What is located beyond the boundary functions as a signifier of pure threat or pure negativity. But in order for certain signifiers to be excluded in this radically threatening and menacing role, the various excluded entities have to cancel their differences through an equivalential chain so that it becomes what the system identifies as an existential threat in order to signify itself. Again, Laclau concludes, one witnesses the transformation of differences that collapse into equivalential chains which is the very condition for the presence of operable empty signifiers.

The third effect of the logic of exclusionary limits has to do with the fact that there is no direct way to signify the limits of signification, a process of subversion of signification itself needs to take place. Laclau associates the moment of signifying the



limits of signification with the Lacanian real – an impossible object to signify since it is related to some originary lack. It demonstrates its presence as an absence, in which case it represents itself not just as one more difference but as something that stands for the whole system – something that represents “the pure being of the system,” to borrow Laclau’s phrase. Thus, Laclau concludes, the ontological ground of such signification by the “undecidable locus” of each unit of signification is determined by the rival logics of difference and equivalence. “It is only by privileging the dimension of equivalence,” Laclau writes, “that its differential nature is almost entirely obliterated – that is emptying of its differential nature – that the system can signify itself as a totality” (*Emancipation(s)* 39).

In order for the logic of equivalence to work within a system marked exclusively by the logic of difference, there must be a beyond that is not just one more difference within the system but a difference that remains external to the system. It must be always necessarily articulated as an external difference that threatens the very foundation and systematicity of the system. It is the enemy outside that, as long as it is kept (illusively) outdoors, will guarantee the presence of the system as it is known while, much to the disadvantage of the system, it will also perform as the agent of the system’s subversion. As poststructuralists have famously described this ambiguity, the very conditions of possibility of something become the conditions for its impossibility. This is the deconstructive move in Laclau’s theory that he identifies along with Chantal Mouffe in *Hegemony and Socialist Strategy as antagonism*.

Thus, antagonisms are responsible for marking the limits of the system as well as the specific contexts that give forms to the system. They highlight the moments of

contingency which allow for the structuration of equivalential chains. They also announce the cast of characters involved in antagonistic relations. All the differences and the combinations of their relationships that make the system as system, respond to the external antagonistic force that is by nature contingent, by forming alliances against this contingent threat. It is the externality of this difference – or the constitutive outside as we know it – which mobilizes the positive content of each difference that serves as the moment of equivalence in the chain.

The presence of the equivalential content threatens the identity of the differences in the system. The difference can no longer maintain their pure differential value within the system and thus signal their split character: they are both differences and non-differences, constructive and disruptive elements within the system. They can never achieve their pure identity status but will aspire to it only through processes of identification.

For Laclau, it is the equivalential logic that makes the introduction to the category of the universal that marks its intricate link to politics. Politics cannot exist without the dimension of the universal. In order for the universal to return in a meaningful way after the postmodern and multicultural critique addressing specifically its Enlightenment version, it needs to undergo a decisive poststructuralist treatment, including parts of Lacanian poststructuralism, too, to be able to reflect the construction and lure of powerful political alliances and their goals. The universal function makes such alliances possible.

The dimension of universality, according to Laclau, is “just an empty place unifying a set of equivalential demands” (*Emancipation(s)* 56). The new position in the universality debate that Laclau brings in relation to previous interpretation of universality

is the association of the universal with an empty place. This allows for a new connection between the particular and the universal that is best expressed through the concept of *hegemony* – the spearhead of Laclau’s political theory.

The moment of universality as such cannot be achieved in society. It is a goal that no matter how stubbornly persisted, will always remain unaccomplished because the contents of the universal can be only represented by a given equivalential chain or by a particularism that offers its signifying body to a universal function. It is the emptying of the particularism of its content (particular signified) that makes possible the emergence of an empty signifier. The empty signifier stands for the presence of a lack, and that lack is none other than the absence of communitarian fullness. Thus, Laclau explains the relationship between empty signifier and hegemony as follows, “This relationship by which a particular content becomes the signifier of the absent communitarian fullness is exactly what we call a *hegemonic relationship*” (*Emancipation(s)* 43). The presence of empty signifiers is the very condition for hegemony. And hegemony, as Laclau has numerous times stated, is “the central category for a theorization of politics” (“Deconstruction, Pragmatism, Hegemony” 47).

The hegemonic aggregation and articulation can be formed in two ways. The first one is through the inscription of particular identities and demands into wide equivalential chains. This inevitably results in ambiguity because the elements that constitute a given equivalential chain must be first specific and different and as they enter into equivalent relations; another layer of shared meaning affects the very specificity of their initial differential meaning within the system. The meaning produced by the logic of equivalence is the one that subverts the meaning of the signifiers as determined by the

logic of difference. These hegemonic aggregations achieved by means of equivalential chains are precisely the ones that prevent the system from complete closure. This means that the social as a reflection of certain systematicity is also fully impossible. They serve as proofs and reminders that each difference and its meaning are only partially fixed as such. These differences could never be fully fixed, for if they were, it would be impossible for them to enter into relations of equivalence among themselves. This aspect situates Laclau's theory firmly into the field of poststructuralism where the Derridean conditions for possibility are also the conditions for impossibility as mentioned previously. But Laclau refuses to turn this into the climax of his theory. Instead, he continues to elaborate on the consequences and effects of the work of the logic of equivalence and its direct relation to the logic of difference.

The second way the hegemonic aggregation and articulation work is through the universalization of a particular demand or difference. This means to give a particular difference the function of universal representation – the filling of a universal, and by definition always empty space, with a concrete meaning. Just as in the case of constructing an equivalential chain, the specific difference that carries out the function of universal representation loses its original value and adopts a new one – that of a horizon, to use Laclau's terminology – that gives coherence to the chain of equivalences and keeps the chain open at the same time for other elements to join the equivalential order.<sup>4</sup> It expresses the desire for the system to achieve full closure, the promise that with each equivalential expansion the horizon will be met, yet the pull of its original differential value threatens to collapse the equivalential march toward universality.

Laclau claims, it is hegemony as sustained by the logic of equivalence that opens the door to the political. In *Hegemony and the Socialist Strategy*, Laclau together with Mouffe, introduce the logic of equivalence as “a logic of the simplification of the political space” (130). That in terms of syntactical relations in language corresponds to the paradigmatic pole. It is not concerned with the possibility of opening new positions for articulation as it is preoccupied with providing substitutes for already created positions within the relational sequence of the signifying chains. It simplifies by a rigorous application of the principle of substitution. This simplification elevates the order of figurative expressivity – metaphor, metonymy – to that of literality.

The logic of difference, on the other hand, is the one that is responsible for expanding the syntagmatic pole of language. Difference translates into a greater variability of positions for articulation. It introduces a greater complexity into the relations of combination among the elements of the signifying chain, which in turn, create additional positions in their relation to power and organizational centers of meaning.

It is essential to note that the concept of articulation is central to Laclau’s theory of hegemony and emancipation. As any good poststructuralist analysis, his method of interpretation is discursively oriented. The constitution of objects and subjectivity happens in discursive fields, leaving nothing outside the domain of discourse. Working in the tradition of Wittgenstein and later Foucault, he accepts the axiomatic discursive construction of knowledge along with the fact that discursive structures are material in character. Linguistic signs display their materiality through their form and sound content and serve as building blocks for texts and discourse structures. Laclau, however, together

with Mouffe, are quick to announce that discourses are not just made of words and linguistic units; they include “a dispersion of very diverse material elements” (*Hegemony and Socialist Strategy* 108). The diverse material elements are none other than a mixture of linguistic and non-linguistic elements, capable of constituting differential positions and system structures.

The inclusiveness of non-linguistic elements in discourses is a theoretical position that Laclau maintains throughout his later work as well. Both the linguistic and non-linguistic elements participate in articulation practices, which can only originate in discourse. In this sense, they are discursive practices and their role is to organize the social space around various privileged points.

Since there is no single unifying principle to fix steadily the content and positionality of the differential elements, the discourse overflows in a field of discursivity where partially fixed elements get disarticulated and new ones may get a chance to become a part of a different articulation practice. In other words, the field of discursivity determines the discursive construction of objects and subjectivity, and at the same time, points to the impossibility of any final suturing of discourse. It is an effect of overdetermination, or surplus meaning, which has a definitive say on identity construction. Thus, the purpose of discourse is always an attempt to dominate the field of discursivity, to repress the import of instability by constructing points of partial fixation. The empty signifiers offer such points of partial fixation.<sup>5</sup> What characterizes the life of partial fixations, and respectively discourse, is regularity in dispersion.

According to Laclau, the articulatory moment itself is not sufficient to speak of hegemony. “It is also necessary,” we learn, “that the articulation should take place

through a confrontation with antagonistic articulatory practices” (*Hegemony and Socialist Strategy* 135). We have already examined the mobilizing equivalential effects as a result of clashes with negativity and the attempt to ostracize this negativity in a space external to positivity of all differences participating in equivalential chains. Not every antagonism, however, supposes a hegemonic development. It is this indeterminacy in favoring antagonisms that distinguishes Laclau’s theory from, say, Marxism or feminism, both of which clearly insist on the groundbreaking role of class and gender antagonisms as well as their privileged agents – working class and women – to accomplish their emancipatory mission. This indeterminacy is also the biggest advantage of Laclau’s theory in terms of delimiting or expanding the space of democracy. Laclau views this as radical democracy – the idea that any certain antagonism depending on rules of contingency can create hegemonic points of totalizing effects.

As mentioned previously, Laclau’s theory of hegemony as a way of emancipation relies first on deconstruction and second on decision making. The cycle of deconstruction, in other words, does not end in undecidability and structure paralysis but pushes in a direction of (re)defining and (re)articulating of structural possibilities. Laclau sees the deconstructive and decision-making blocs of his theory not as a marriage between deconstruction and constructionism, but as two dimensions of the deconstructive operation. This extension of the deconstruction project, although not exclusively attributable to Laclau, tends to seek plausible developments for the invigoration of democracy as the sole legitimate communal consensus for social organization.<sup>6</sup>

This insistence of theorizing politics and hegemony as two dimensions of deconstruction perpetuate the non-essentialist character of Laclau’s work and vision for

governing social principles. It has as well the conviction that “the political is the *instituting* moment of society” (“Deconstruction, Pragmatism, Hegemony” 47). If this is true, literature as a reflection of the political can reveal more about these instituting social moments, and particularly the formation of communities and the processes of change that inevitably take place within their spaces.

As a representational means of the social, literature carries a supplementary function. It contributes something to the identities of the social that it represents and thus affects its own identity as well. To claim that it is reductive to view literature – and in particular minority literature – as political because it diminishes the act of creativity as scholars and practitioners of literary aesthetics argue, or to consider the political relevant only as an expression of economic and class problems as the Marxist critics insist, is, at best, a bit pretentious. To leave politics to the domain of literary theories only would be just as inaccurate a conclusion. Instead, if we follow Laclau, literary theories and literature might be competing or constructing chains of equivalence, depending on their content and social proposition, thus actively participating in the shaping of the social. There is no first and second order of meaning between literature and literary theories. They are both operating on metaphoric and metonymic levels of fixing cultural and literary relations. This trend of defining literature and theory relations as political is clearly documented in African American literature and theory. If the struggle for emancipation defines African American literature and theory straight from their inception, as leading African American critics agree, it is also true that different dimensions of emancipation propelled this literature and theory through the different historical stages of their political development.



The purpose of this study is to examine selected moments in African American literature and theory that reveal the political nature of their content and relationship to one another but also to traverse at least one dimension of emancipation related this literature and theory. As I mentioned earlier, Angelina Weld Grimke's "The Closing Door," Georgia Douglas Johnson's one-act drama *Safe*, Shirley Graham's single-act play *It's Morning*, and Toni Morrison's highly acclaimed novel *Beloved* constitute the corpus of the literary works of interest to this study. The four texts share the common motif – maternal infanticide – to refer to specific traumatic events from African American history and provide a critical commentary to these painful events. In the case of Graham and Morrison, the motif of maternal infanticide serves as a radical reaction to the oppressive character of the institution of slavery, while Grimke and Johnson employ the same motif to make the practice of lynching the primary target of their social criticism. The texts speak as well of the writers' emotional and civic responses to violent and degrading racist attitudes that push the structuration of social hierarchy in extreme and unacceptable forms. In other words, through the trope of infanticide, these African American female authors object to interracial, or more accurately stated, intercommunal hegemonies that determine social and cultural positionality in strict hierarchical order.<sup>7</sup> Grimke, Graham, and Johnson were well aware that their works were well-suited to fall into the category of protest literature that made a huge portion of the New Negro Movement. The publication submissions with politically oriented journals and media outlets such as *The Crisis* and *The Opportunity* as well as the attempts to produce the dramas under the sponsorship of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP), the Federal Theatre Project (FTP), or Yale University, as the case with Graham and Johnson, testify

to the political orientation of African American infanticide literature by women towards the broad public.

Although a representative of a different and more sophisticated generation of African American female writers in the 1980s, Morrison is no exception to this case with her declaration in “The Site of Memory” that literature is by definition political.<sup>8</sup> But this expression of the political as negative commentary on imposed intercommunal hegemonies captures only partially the potential of the motif of infanticide as an instrument of political action. The tension between white intrusive regulations of the social relations and black resistance to what these oppressive regulations (hegemonies) have reserved for them has become the central focus of the critics’ discussions of the women writer’s texts as well. Though certainly necessary and accurate in presumption, the accent on the intercommunal relations gives only one dimension of the political function of maternal infanticide in African American literature by women. The examination of the political across intercommunal lines obfuscates the potential of Grimke, Graham, Johnson, and Morrison’s texts and their depiction of infanticide to uncover maternal politics and their grip across intracommunal lines.

To show through what acts communal unity is gained among African Americans is equally important as unmasking white hegemonies. Such an inquiry will point at attempts to hegemonize the African American cultural space from within rather than from outside. Unlike the externally imposed hegemonies that govern the intercommunal relations between blacks and whites, the internally generated hegemonic formations – or probable hegemonic contenders – tend to disperse on consensual bases. This division

between enforced external hegemonies and consensual internal hegemonic operations is essential for the course of emancipatory movements and fulfillment of democratic ideas.

If the contexts of dramatic action, slavery and lynching, lend easily credit to Grimke, Graham, Johnson, and Morrison to make use of infanticide and the figure of the infanticidal mother to pass judgment on historic events that have ossified the power imbalance and divisiveness of blacks and whites, and have attempted to explore the gestures of black communal unity as a resistance to divisive oppression, the contexts of text production reveal a new meaning and function of the infanticidal mother both inside and outside the literary text. First, let us take a look at the contexts of text production to see what they can say about the new meaning and function of infanticide and the black mother committing it.

According to leading experts Henry Louis Gates, Jr. and Nellie McKay, the flowering of African American literature is associated with two distinct times in the twentieth century. The first period of exuberant literary production, between the 1920s and 1940s, is well-known as the New Negro Movement, while the second renaissance of African American literature, vaster in quantity and quality as Gates and McKay confirm, began in the late 1970s and 1980s and continued to shape African American literature well into the next decade.<sup>9</sup> A quick look at the *Norton Anthology of African American Literature* and the names of James Weldon Johnson, Claude McKay, Jessie Redmon Fauset, Jean Toomer, Zora Neale Hurston, Langston Hughes, Nella Larsen, Marita Bonner, Gwendolyn Bennett in the 1920s and 40s, and the names of Maya Angelou, Toni Morrison, Alice Walker, Octavia Butler, Jamaica Kincaid, Ntozake Shange, Gloria

Naylor, Rita Dove, to list just a few, in the 1980s, should convince us of the veracity of this conclusion.

Furthermore, unlike its early twentieth century sibling that saw a doctrinal boom for literary development but no wide institutional recognition, the second renaissance coincided with extraordinary institutional upheaval of African American literature and culture. Representative for the two eras here are the names of Alain Locke, W.E.B. Du Bois, Henry Louis Gates, Huston Baker, to whose work I shall return to later.

It is these moments of literary and cultural prosperity that gave birth to Grimke's "The Closing Door," Graham's *It's Morning*, Johnson's *Safe*, and Morrison's *Beloved*. The question of why these authors chose to rely on the motif of infanticide in their works at the times of the flowering of African American literature, as Gates and McKay tell us, becomes even more curious. If infanticide as a narrative strategy, similar to cannibalism or vampirism, produces horror effects and revamps the carnivalesque in a dark and somber way, how could it serve loyally to the causes and aspirations of the two literary African American renaissances?

Many commentators, both contemporaries of the New Negro women writers and current scholars, have expressed their reservation or outright condemnatory views when it comes to the interpretation of infanticide as a protest writing strategy. The range of negative assessment responses varies from "pulp fiction" to "blackface holocaust" to "race suicide" or "self-suicide" to "hopelessness" and "defeat," all warning of the serious repercussions to the quality and value of similar texts.<sup>10</sup> The ruinous effects of such writing, the line of the argument goes, threatens to outweigh the accomplishments of serious realistic African American literature. For the New Negro commentators, the

image of infanticide and the violent black mother stood as powerful reminders of how quickly the new African American literature could lapse into old stereotypical models of representation catering to the taste of white audiences or directly lifting the white models of representation of blacks. For contemporary critics of Morrison's novel, the accusation of cheap sensationalism and lachrymose sentimentalism also found its place along with a wide variety of critical responses which quickly crossed swords with the ardent defenders of Morrison's interpretation of infanticide. In both cases, it is mostly aesthetic and professional judgments that tune up the mode of negative political criticism.

There is a second distinct line of critical readings of African American infanticide literature by women that, despite its surprisingly slim corpus, is important because it represents the feminist take on this literature.<sup>11</sup> The critics tend to see infanticide as an act of desperation, something that illustrates the intolerable setup of social relations, while the black mother expresses her frustration and weakness with her decision to kill her child. At best, the infanticidal mother is seen as an ambiguous figure, one full of despair and weakness, on the one hand, and a performer of powerful monstrous femininity, on the other hand.<sup>12</sup> And in the case of Morrison's *Beloved*, there are even strictly praise-worthy interpretations of the infanticidal mother as a source of incredible strength and an example of endurance. Thus, the act of maternal infanticide is seen entirely against white hegemonies of racism and sexism.

The two types of critical responses that I have described briefly in the previous paragraphs draw heavily on the act of infanticide to formulate their conclusions. We can almost say that they fixate on the spectacularity of the violent act and its immediate paralytic effect on the witnesses, both black and white, caused by the live encounter with

the infanticidal horror. And it is this nearsighted fixation on the dark carnivalization of the social situation that makes them overlook a significant element allowing for a more complicated but perhaps insightful reading of the political protest depicted in the four texts.

What remains consistently underestimated in these analyses is the claim that the infanticidal mother makes in order to justify her highly problematic action. In “The Closing Door,” *It’s Morning, Safe*, and *Beloved*, the black mothers kill their children in order to provide them with safety. Infanticide, from their perspective, is not just an expression of their dissatisfaction with the system and their treatment in it; it is an expression of their maternal obligation to protect their children and ensure their *safety*. Thus, with the help of the black mother, safety becomes a signifier with sufficiently highlighted political power.

To make use of Laclau’s theory, *safety* functions as an empty signifier and as such is able to mobilize political visions for the (re)organization of the social. If infanticide draws attention imminently to the issue of motherhood, the women’s claim for safety offers a possibility to expand the parameter of public debate beyond the specific topic of motherhood and into the general organization of society. In other words, the resignification of safety might take different forms that may have to do very little with the original discourse of motherhood, where disarticulation of safety initially appeared.

With the act of infanticide, the mothers in Grimke’s “The Closing Door,” Johnson’s and Graham’s dramas *Safe* and *It’s Morning*, and Morrison’s *Beloved* complicate the social field by creating and occupying a new social position – that of the overly protective and murderous mother. Its constitution is also a product of

disidentification with the slave mother as breeder (Graham and Morrison) and the black mother as second rate citizen (Johnson and Grimke). This is to say that these murderous mothers invest heavily into the logic of difference that is not constitutive of the system, but in difference that is external to an already existing system of differential relations. That external difference determines the new social position of the infanticidal mother and foregrounds the established antagonism between the “monstrous” black mother and all those who find her act despicable. It is this external position that reveals the antagonistic split between, on the one hand, the members of the black and white community who are disgusted by the maternal expression of brutality, or severely criticize and ostracize the infanticidal mother for her action, and, on the other hand, the murderous mother herself who makes the case for infanticide as the right action. To find a linguistic equivalent for the social positionality of the infanticidal mother at this moment would mean, as Laclau informs us, to seek an expansion of the syntagmatic pole of language that increases the number of positions from which objects, acts, and phenomena get explained. Given the circumstances, from such a position one can easily embark on a disarticulatory journey of some kind, but one would encounter enormous difficulties articulating new meanings. Infanticide is crucial for the disarticulation of the dominant conception of safety in the discourses on motherhood and freedom. The attempt of the infanticidal mother to articulate new meaning for *safety* fails in the end, as we shall see, but it becomes the reason for a new communal articulation to define the partial fixity of *safety*.

Infanticide always has a negative meaning ascribed to it as it circulates in the discourses of motherhood and freedom. It is the limit against which the dominant notions of motherhood and freedom get constructed in the ante-and postbellum South and North,

and later on in early twentieth century America. By changing the meaning of infanticide, the maternal claim tests the foundational limit of these discourses and threatens to disintegrate the neat fabric of their normative existence. The mothers' claim is that infanticide becomes a true expression of maternal protection and the only way to provide their children with safety from the exploitation of slaveholders and the torture of lynching by the mob. "There is a time coming – and soon – when no colored man – no colored woman – no colored child, born or unborn – will be safe – in this country" (1199), Grimke's black mother says in "The Closing Door" before she makes the decision to smother her child. The infanticidal mother in Johnson's *Safe* keeps muttering after she strangles her baby, "Now he is safe – safe from the lynchers! Safe!" (161), "Tuhgedder wid da mawnin' star – She will sing!" (221), is Graham's black mother's proclamation of safety in *It's Morning* after she slits the throat of her daughter. And Morrison's black mother in *Beloved* is no exception when she reflects about the murder of her daughter, "She had to be safe and I put her where she would be" (237). Thus, the maternal claim is a more complex structure comprising of two distinct elements, nonverbal and verbal, with their fair participation share into the politics of communal existence. Infanticide is the non-linguistic, carry-over element that helps transmit the maternal idea of safety and present the verbal element *safety* for black communal politicization later on in a way that surpasses the narrow domain of motherhood.

Through the act of infanticide, Grimke's "The Closing Door," Johnson's *Safe*, and Graham's *It's Morning* focus exclusively on the initial stage of destabilizing the signifier *safety*. From the perspective of narratology, their literary works end almost immediately after the climax – the gruesome murder of an innocent child. Whether it is after the muter



act of strangulation or after the more mind-chilling bloody slitting of the child's throat, the readers, just like the members of the fictional community, are left in shock without further explanation as to what happens to the murderous mothers or how the problem gets solved in the public space. There is the claim, however, uttered by the mother that her child is now safe in death. This leaves the members of the community in dismay, not knowing how to react to this state of emergency. The absence of denouement coupled with the paralysis of social reaction foregrounds the attempt to ascribe a new meaning to the signifier *safety* by repressing violently the old one. The disarticulation of what the fixed meaning for safety was in the discourses of motherhood and freedom is followed by a substitute meaning proposal shaped by contingency.

The design to cut the narrative very shortly after the climax puts the emphasis on the maternal choice extracted from a moment of extreme social pressure or it is a result of contingent intervention. To follow Laclau's theory, the moment of choice is precisely what defines the subject. "The subject," Laclau writes, "is the distance between undecidability of the structure and the decision" ("Deconstruction, Pragmatism, Hegemony" 54).<sup>13</sup> Thus, in the three texts, we are left with subjects that make a serious claim to political subjectivity, but fail to uncover their full potential which would necessarily involve the transformation of the communal space and the arrangement of subject positions in it.

The climactic endings of the four narratives introduce a second contingency effect, only this time with pressure placed upon the reader. The lack of resolution forces the reader into a state of undecidability where the responsibility of decision making lies on his or her shoulders. This is a mechanism that seeks the politicization of the readers and

strives to engage them with the African American problematics. It is also an attempt to expand the intracommunal problems into intercommunal problems, thus arguing for a universal problem and presumably pushing toward a decision with promised positive totalizing effects.

It is only with Morrison's *Beloved* that we get a full development of political subjectivity and an insight into the mechanism of decision making that is directly responsible for the building of community consensus. Unlike the New Negro Renaissance women writers, Morrison develops the narrative of *Beloved* in a direction that will inform the readers about the fate of the murderous mother after the act of infanticide as well as the reaction of the members of the black community of Cincinnati, Ohio, who ultimately consolidate around the idea of communal safety as a central element of social organization.

By the end of the novel, the signifier *safety* reveals its social construction as an empty signifier that governs the relation of hegemony it has produced. The polysemic spectrum for the empty signifier *safety* ranges from the temporary fix it displays in the dominant discourses of motherhood and freedom, to the moment of subversion of its temporary-fixed meaning by the claim of the infanticidal mother that safety is the primary maternal concern for their children and it could signify death if the conditions necessitate that, to the communal rejection of that maternal proposition of a signified for safety and its substitution with the new communal articulation of safety. It is the job of hegemony, as Laclau explains, to tame polysemy by settling on a specific meaning that will carry out a unifying function.

When we take apart the formation of the communal consensus, it becomes obvious that it has a history of intracommunal and intercommunal intersecting points, and as it reaches its hegemonic point, it is exclusively its intracommunal state of affairs that receives attention in Morrison's novel. There are acts of safety performed by the members of the Underground Railroad, who make sure the slave fugitives receive food and shelter until they carry on with their lives in the free states. There is the establishment of the new black spiritual movement, meant to alleviate the pains of the flesh and the soul thus ensuring a safe emotional transition to the new way of life. But even if the infanticidal mother benefited herself from these communal rearticulations of safety, their structural mandate crumbles under the pressure of the Fugitive Slave Act. It is this higher intracommunal state of order and its possible enactment that abolishes the temporary power of intercommunal arrangements of safety and motivates the maternal deadly decision to kill her child. As a result, her maternal interpretation of safety leaves her outside the circle of social acceptability, her status reduced from that of a serviceable slave and item of property to that of a wild, dangerous, predatory animal with no domestic value or market appreciation credentials at all.

This demoted status of the infanticidal mother is what makes possible her existence in the black community, which by the slaveholder's definition might be the only appropriate habitat, corresponding to her destructive, animalistic impulse. But the members of the black community pass a second negative judgment on her, and far from accepting her among their ranks, they simply tolerate her existence without expressing any intention to integrate her into their social life.

It is the moment of abandoning of the infanticidal mother's marginal position within the black community that interests Morrison the most and becomes the most detailed illustration of how the political works along intracommunal lines.

It is through the scene of exorcism that is structured like a repetition of the event that lead to infanticide eighteen years ago, that the signifier *safety* reaches a new temporary discursive fix in attempt to represent the desire for communitarian fullness. In order to reform the previous social structure, the repetition should be of the more complicated rhetorical type – repetition with a difference – to result in a new signification. This new signification, I will argue, is both emancipatory for the infanticidal mother and problematic for the power of representation.

Three elements characterize the difference that will help disarticulate the maternal notion of safety and articulate its hegemonic version as an image for intracommunal universality. The first one is the change of target of assault; the second is the failure of the repeated maternal act of infanticide, and the third is the active intervention of a group of black women who save Sethe from Beloved and also introduce the new signified for safety that transforms the signifier *safety* into a center for organizing black communal discourse.

According to the group of black women in *Beloved*, safety refers to the power of the sound. It is the sound that “[breaks] the back of words” (*Beloved* 308) and allows for a new relational arrangement among different social positions. The infanticidal mother is no longer displayed as an external threat to the system of communal subject positions, but is identified as a mother who, like many others, had a troubled and traumatic past to

overcome. This moment of identification through shared negative maternal experience is possible because of the experience of lack defined as safety.

It is a select group of women who are able to transform their strictly differential function as healers and perhaps othermothers into a universal function as expressed by the idea of safety as culturally grounded in sound. The application of this sound treatment results in restructuring of the social by forming an equivalential chain where other differences have to suppress their unique differential status in favor of an element that they all share together. In Laclau's theory, this will be the moment of hegemony that also gives the social imaginary its life to live.

To work on the level of sound and to invoke aurality that has the power to break the bone of word is to argue for the obliteration of old semantics and discursive structures and not just a redefinition of power relations or shifts in negotiating identity boundaries – sound(s) or combination of sounds – into relations that can define new discursive limits and discourse structures from the raw and dynamic mass of elements.

If Grimke, Johnson, and Graham use the motif of infanticide as a means of severe protest against oppressive structurations of the social space – slavery and lynching – and manage to map a significant maternal antagonism in the social fabric, it is Morrison who goes beyond the moment of severe protest and crushing antagonism by steering into adopting a form of consensual matter that can serve well the expression of communal politics. In other words, she is directly responsible for the communal transformation of the maternal antagonism and its manipulation into a structural hegemony.

Thus far we have traced the political function of the empty signifier *safety* in the context of Grimke's, Johnson's, Graham's, and Morrison's infanticide literature. It is also

important to follow the political function of the same signifier in the context of call-and-response exchange created by the interaction of African American literary theories and the four literary texts. The signifier *safety* also gives an indication of the cultural situatedness of the four women writers in relation to the leading literary doctrines of their day and the women's attempts to practice their version of black literary and cultural politics.

It might be unusual for us, the twenty-first century practitioners of democracy, to think of safety as a structural signifier of our political establishment. We are trained and conditioned to expect public talks about freedom, human rights, and equal opportunity as the cornerstones of Western liberal democracies – a political order that serves as a model for the democratization of other countries, too. Recent history shows daily proof for the various ways in which this process unfolds. It is this liberal political order that aspires to control the process of globalization, and as such, it elevates its status to that of the new universal order that continuously delivers the promise for peace, prosperity, and social advancement. It is this political order that claims to bring safety and stability for many across the world. And it is this political order that is being cultivated and protected in the face of immanent threats.

Today we hear national governments and international political alliances discuss problems of security and its security mechanisms to ensure the stability and expansion of the democratic political order. The conceptualization of such security mechanisms happens through the development of various securitization theories and adoption of acts designed, among other things, to promote, demonstrate, and voice a long-lasting interest in and public consensus about the core democratic values. The narratives of such

securitization theories and defense acts require our involvement and support of democracy as a desirable hegemony where we, for the most part, willingly engage and commit to its principles and values. Security is the modern political equivalent of safety. It has become the prerogative of (inter)national institutions and political formations while safety remains a concept associated with individual interests, health-related issues, and professional group interests and demands. Safety, like security, is also in the domain of institutional regulation, but unlike its big-scale political contender, security, it remains a more muted, but nevertheless important, political presence.

History, however, tells a different story about the significance of safety. The emergence of safety as a structural political signifier precedes that of security. Safety appears to be at the conception of new social structural projects. To say this more accurately, new social structural projects are conceptualized and appear in the name of safety. As a rule, its conceptualization progresses from the realm of the physical to its absorption into the political which, on its turn, undergoes a radical expansion in different spheres of public and domestic life. Safety is a binder that provides people with a reason to pursue common goals and constitute themselves as political subjects if need be. In politics, safety is this sensitive issue that is always linked to the question of political representation and especially those who seek it. To have your voice heard increases the chance to be safe. Safety, thus, is intricately linked to freedom and independence as constitutive elements of democracy or so one of the programmatic documents of American democracy, the Declaration of Independence, seems to suggest.

In this model document, after the most quoted sentence, “We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal, that they are endowed by the Creator with

certain unalienable rights, that among these are life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness,” that serves as a good illustration of the Enlightenment roots of the new political project of social governance, we come across the word *safety*. While rejecting British colonialism, the people of the New World expressed an agreement, “That whenever any form of government becomes destructive to these ends, it is the right of the people to alter or to abolish it, and to institute new government, laying the foundations on such principles and organizing its powers in such form, as to them shall seem most likely to effect their safety and happiness” (Declaration of Independence, U.S. 1776). Along with the proclamation of life, liberty, and pursuit of happiness as vital goals of the new order, safety is added to the tier of early political signifiers upon which the democratic order will grow. The examination of this political document shows that safety, as are liberty and happiness, is an ideal candidate to produce unifying effects among different segments of the population. It is perhaps the thing that situates the border between the pre-political and the political while its chronological boundary marks the emergence of new political subjects who also seek access to power by infiltrating and changing old institutions of power or creating new institutions as an expression of their political desire.

And if for racially-diverse America in the next century and a half, the project of freedom and democracy remained primarily under the auspices of white men, the black population found itself in a situation to construct its political subjectivity relying on the same signifier, *safety*, which announced the beginning of the American political project in the first place. Here, we are only interested with the politicization of the literary and cultural aspect of the black people’s struggle for democracy.



With the creation of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People in 1909, African Americans entered the rugged terrain of institutional politics to seek social justice and betterment of living conditions, but also attempted to shape their cultural identity with literary means. *The Crisis* magazine, the official publication of the NAACP, became the voice of the cultural expression of people's political claims and ambitions. "In its pages," notable critic Claudia Tate observes, "black Americans not only declared war on racism but on white cultural dependency as well. The New Negro literature was a part of their declaration of independence" ("Introduction" to *The Selected Works of Georgia Douglas Johnson* xxvi). Other magazines such as *The Opportunity*, *Challenge*, *Stylus*, *New Era*, *Fire!!* and the publication of successful anthologies such as Calverton's *Anthology of American Negro Literature* (1929), James Weldon Johnson's *The Book of American Negro Poetry* (1922), Alain Locke's *The New Negro: An Interpretation* (1925), Countee Cullen's *Caroling Dusk* (1927) helped writers find a medium to express their views on literary and cultural independence through their poetry, fiction, and drama. Often these magazines and anthologies tried to compensate for the difficulty of publishing individual book projects as many New Negro writers claimed to have experienced and at the same time were shaping the themes, the forms, and the literary and stylistic strategies of the proclaimed literary and cultural independence. The goal was also to prove that black people could create their own art of great value just as white people did.

It is in the context of creating literary and cultural independence that I examine Grimke's "The Closing Door," Graham's *It's Morning*, and Johnson's *Safe* as they bring the signifier *safety* out of fiction and into the world of their political activism as a

decisive factor for gaining such an independence. The theories and doctrines of what constitutes African American literature, its essential characteristics, its making methodologies, and overall goals in the two eras of African American literary renaissance are also part of the context of literary and cultural independence. With this in mind, the four literary texts authored by Grimke, Graham, Johnson, and Morrison serve as responses to the theoretical currents of their days. The challenge for Grimke, Graham, and Johnson came from the male-directed views on the New Negro literature and art. The context for Morrison's work was also shaped by the predominantly male theorization of the black vernacular and its explanation of what constitutes African American literature.

In the classic 1925 *New Negro* anthology, considered now to be one of the definitive texts of the New Negro Movement, Alain Locke boldly proclaimed the coming of a new era of a "racial awakening on a national and perhaps even a world scale" (*Foreword* 11). Self-expression and self-determination were the cultural forces behind this racial awakening. Locke considered the black cultural movement to be a form of "spiritual emancipation" that provides the people with long-sought self-understanding. For the first time, Locke claims, "Negro life is seizing upon its first chances for group expression and self-determination" ("The New Negro" 7). It is through the working of a specific cultural hegemony and its subject the New Negro that Locke sees the unification of the black community. Realism was the central mode of literary production and the life of ordinary person was to be at the very center of creative investigation. Although emphasizing the racial aspect of this cultural upheaval and emancipation, Locke rejects the moment of interracial cultural confrontation as a way of binding the racial community. He imagines the black cultural emancipation only within shared national context. Thus,

the New Negro movement becomes “a forced attempt to build [...] Americanism on race values” while the success of this unique experiment would be impossible without “the fullest sharing of American culture and institutions” (“The New Negro” 12).

Locke’s soft, non-confrontational approach to black cultural emancipation stands in sharp contrast to W. E. B. Du Bois’s uncompromising view on the same subject. A year later, in 1926, in the much discussed “Criteria of Negro Art,” Du Bois also saw the growth of African American literature and art as “a pushing onward” (981). This progressive tendency, however, is not an expression of some race-value Americanism, but a concentrated communal effort, “art coming from black folk,” to debunk the myth of racial inferiority. As such, it is based on the struggle against and opposition to white literary and cultural models for expression. In that case, literature is nothing more or less than a political expression of black interests and demands. “Thus all Art is propaganda and ever must be,” Du Bois claims, “despite the wailing of the purists” (“Criteria of Negro Art” 985 – 986).<sup>14</sup> For him, the expression of black cultural hegemony is directly a product of politicization of literature.

It is with the Lockean and Du Boisian gravitational poles for literary development on the one hand that Grimke, Graham, and Johnson were trying to define their artistic credo, and with the exploitation of the motif of infanticide, on the other, that they were parading their political activism and demand for revered presence in the New Negro literature. Even though neither Grimke, nor Graham, nor Johnson rose to the level of prominence of Locke or Du Bois, their infanticide literature demonstrates that they were actively looking for ways to intervene into cultural and social politics and constitute their political subjectivity through literary and extra-literary means. Grimke defended her

political views primarily with the help of literature and publications in white magazines, trying to reach a racially diverse audience. Graham tried to develop her “position of authority” with one-act plays, targeting black community audiences. Of the three, Johnson, dared to go far beyond the boundaries of literary writing and into the sphere of informal public formations intending to boost, refine, and alter the black literary and cultural independence project. Her literary salon, *The Saturday Nighters*, reveals yet another dimension of how black female writers participated in the project for literary and cultural independence in the 1920s and 1930s through the engineering of safe spaces for literary creativity and its cultural consumption.

In the late 1970s and 1980s another branch of the black literary and cultural independence began to take shape. This was the period of constituting African American literature as a separate object of academic investigation. The creation of separate academic programs and research centers packaged the study of African American Literature and African American Studies as legitimate academic disciplines with degree-granting status. The process of academic legitimation was accompanied by a process of theorization and critical approaches applicable to African American literature with an explicit insistence on, and conviction to explain, the essential and operative principles of this literature. The vernacular theories of Henry Louis Gates, Jr. and Huston Baker are prime examples of the aims of black literary criticism of the time. Gates’s theory of signification and Baker’s vernacular theory pointed squarely to an identifiable cultural matrix at the bottom of African American literature. For Gates, it is the mythical figure of Esu Elegbara of Nigerian folklore whose linguistic trickery shows full potential for literary production with due social and political consequences, while for Baker, it is the

blues and its sound that gave African American literature its distinct vibrancy in accordance with its crossroad juncture positionality that fostered its fluid forms.

The end result of the development of theoretical frameworks would be to name, confirm, and protect institutionally the identity of an already existing body of African American literature, ushering hospitably current and future literature arrivals. It is this serviceable criticism of the 1980s that created the much needed safety net for independent institutionalization of African American literature. And it is in this atmosphere that Morrison attained her reputation of a top-notch fiction writer. As the fame and glory of this writer grew, she found confidence to build her academic career by boldly entering the project of African American literary and cultural independence through the gateway of theory and literary analysis. *Playing in the Dark*, “Rootedness: the Ancestor as Foundation,” “The Site of Memory,” and “Unspeakable Things Unspoken: the Afro-American Presence in American Literature” have now become seminal texts in African American Literary Studies. It is through them that she makes her scholarly contribution to the safety net of literary criticism that envelops African American literature in educational institutions today.

Her novel *Beloved*, however, stands in rather curious relation to Gates’s theory of signification. Rather than unambiguously siding with its central premise of the power of resistance in language, it “talks back” to the corrective power of the process of redoubling signifiers but manages to retain a position both inside and outside Gates’s signification formula.<sup>15</sup>

My final claim is that the creative exploration of the refusal of motherhood through the dark spectacle of infanticide coupled with the claims of cultural belonging

positions Grimke, Graham, Johnson, and Morrison as literary political agents who, far from being caught in a racialized discourse, participate rigorously in the making of it. In her study on women's narratives of motherhood between 1890 and 1930, Allison Berg argues that "motherhood emerged as an increasingly public, political, and racialized discourse" (9).<sup>16</sup> After examining the work of the four black female writers with their take on the refusal of motherhood, we can transform Berg's claim to highlight the black women writers' intervention into the racialized discourse. *Infanticide*, the rewrite will read, emerged as an increasingly public, political, and racialized discourse with the help of fiction in order to increase the racialized political presence of these women writers and reflect this racialized political presence into nonfiction doctrinal writing or literary society activism to turn the women writers into symbolic mothers and guardians of a racialized culture and literature. These women then conceptualize their political strategy as an exit from the narrow domestic domain of motherhood and femininity and make an entrance into the public domain of politics by profiting on the oscillation between two controversial positions of motherhood – a symbolic caring and protective mother of the community, as their service-of-literature activities suggest, and a literal overprotective infanticidal mother, who relentlessly requests that communal members confront the problem of collective unity, as their fiction postulates.

To sum up, the political subjectivities of Johnson and Morrison to a larger degree, and Grimke and Graham to a lesser degree, are determined by two contradictory images of motherhood – that of the "good mother" impersonated by the writers in real life discussions and debates on African American literature and the infanticidal mother reserved for their fictional characters that become a vehicle for bringing up the urgency

of the moment for social change. The theme of infanticide turns also into a catching display of the extra-literary and intellectual activities that shape the women writers' understanding of the function of literature and culture in building a community.

---

## NOTES

<sup>1</sup> There are a sufficient number of literary texts from antiquity to the present to justify such a category as infanticide literature for analytical purposes. The legendary *Medea* (431 BC) by Euripides marks the beginning of infanticide in literature. Throughout the centuries there were multiple and important dramatic rewrites of the play among which are Seneca's *Medea* (1<sup>st</sup> AD), Pierre Corneille's *Medee* (1635), Franz Grillparzer's *Medea* (1821), Hans Henny Jahnn's *Medea* (1926), Countee Cullen's *Medea* (1935), Jean Anouilh's *Medea* (1946), and Jim Magnusen's African *Medea* (1968).

The motif of infanticide, however, spread far beyond the attempts to rewrite Euripides's play. The sixteenth century Scottish ballad "Mary Hamilton" or "The Fower Maries" was a widely popular text that featured infanticide. The topic quickly caught on the Romantic imagination where we have several prominent examples – Johann Wolfgang Goethe's *Faust* (1808) and the revised version of 1828-1829, William Wordsworth's "The Thorn" (1798), Sir Walter Scott's *The Heart of Midlothian* (1818), Elizabeth Barrett Browning's "The Runaway Slave at the Pilgrim Point" (1847). British realism in the face of George Eliot and her novel *Adam Bede* (1859) produced one of the most influential and compelling treatments of infanticide that is of great interest to literary critics as well. Among the notable contemporary samples of infanticide literature are William Styron's *Sophie's Choice* (1979), Toni Morrison's *Beloved* (1987), Sandra Cisneros's "Woman Hollering Creek" (1991), and Christa Wolf's *Medea* (1993).

African American literature offers a fair amount of texts that employ the motif of infanticide. Scholars point out to Angelina Weld Grimke's drama *Rachel*, produced in 1916 and published in 1920, as the first text to introduce the fictional exploration of infanticide in African American literature. Grimke made her second contribution to infanticide literature with her short story "The Closing Door" in 1919 followed by "Goldie" in 1920. The timeline of African American infanticide literature continues with Georgia Douglas Johnson's poem "Black Woman" (1922) and her protest drama *Safe* (c.1929), Countee Cullen's *Medea* (1935), Shirley Graham's *It's Morning* (1940), Gwendolyn Brook's poem "The Mother" (1945), Toni Morrison's *Sula* (1973) and *Beloved* (1987). The exploration of infanticide as a form of protest to lynching from the time of the New Negro Renaissance inspired even white writers. Ann Seymour Link's drama *Lawd, Does You Undahstan'?* (1936) is modeled closely on the structure and language of the black anti-lynch dramas.

<sup>2</sup> The concept of hegemony was first introduced by Antonio Gramsci in *The Prison Notebooks*. He specifically developed the concept of cultural hegemony from a Marxist perspective. Laclau and Mouffe's approach on hegemony is post-Marxist. Chapter 3 of *Hegemony and the Socialist Strategy* has now become a canonical text in critical theory with its reading on hegemony and antagonism as definitive operations of any attempt to structure the social space.

<sup>3</sup> Jacques Derrida develops this idea in "Structure, Sign, and Play in the Discourse of the Human Sciences" (1966).

<sup>4</sup> In *New Reflections on the Revolution of Our Time* (1990), Laclau thinks of the social imaginary as a horizon; it is the condition of possibility for the emergence of any object.

<sup>5</sup> In *Hegemony and the Socialist Strategy* the points of partial fixation are known as *nodal points*. The term *nodal point* corresponds to the Lacanian *point de caption* as a privileged signifier that quilts or fixes meaning in a signifying chain. See p.112.

<sup>6</sup> Derrida turned toward the question of decision making later in his career. See "Force of Law" (1989) and *The Politics of Friendship* (1994).

<sup>7</sup> The terms "intercommunal" and "intracommunal" that the reader will come across in this study are not intended to bring in essentialist or monistic tones to my work. Their usage is necessary to highlight the operation of communal hegemonies, of moments when the unity of a group of people or the divisions among groups of people become obvious as a result of some political activity.

The term "communitarian" is another instance that deserves a proper explanation at this point. By "communitarian," I mean the expression of certain cultural, institutional, national, and ethnic allegiances,



---

or some combination of the four that result in the formation of identifiable collectives or groups of people. It is also a term that Laclau uses in his work.

<sup>8</sup> See p. 2290. Morrison makes the same statement earlier in her career in “Conversation with Alice Childress and Toni Morrison” published originally in the *Black Creation Annual* (1974 -1975): 90 -92.

<sup>9</sup> See Gates and McKay’s article “From Phillis Wheatley to Toni Morrison: The Flowering of African American Literature” (1996 – 1997) in *The Journal of Blacks in Higher Education*. Gates and McKay define the second renaissance period as it has progressed for three decades between 1970 and 1997, the last being the year of publication of their article, and insist that the second renaissance is clearly still an on-going trend. They look at the 1990s as a decade of national and international recognition of African American literature measured in Pulitzer Prizes, National and American Book Awards, and of course, the reception of Toni Morrison’s Nobel Prize for literature in 1993. The second indicator of this literary prosperity has to do with the commercial success of African American literature and its best-seller achievements. The third equally important component is the institutional spread and purveyance of this literature in colleges and universities. An additional indicator for literary prosperity is the growth and divergence of black literature readers.

<sup>10</sup> Stanley Crouch refers to Morrison’s *Beloved* as “protest pulp fiction,” “a blackface holocaust novel,” and “a melodrama lashed to the structural conceits of miniseries.” Gloria Hull views Grimke’s “The Closing Door” as “marred [...] by forced romping scenes, sentimentality, overwriting, and uncertain tone and point of view” (129). Carolivia Herron agreed with some of Grimke’s contemporaries who saw *Rachel* as “a form of self-genocide.” Walter White dismissed Johnson’s *Safe* as a play that “end[s] in defeat” and expressed concern that it offered nothing but hopelessness for African Americans. In *Their Place on the Stage*, contemporary critic Elizabeth Brown-Guillory reads infanticide as a negative sign that registers a lack of parental knowledge and absence of good models for motherhood.

<sup>11</sup> Feminist scholarship on Morrison’s novel *Beloved*, of course, is the exception in this case. It exists practically in every variety from black feminist criticism, to psychoanalytic and Marxist feminism, to cultural feminist criticism, as well as interdisciplinary feminist versions of criticism. This is not the case with the other three authors, Grimke, Graham, and Johnson whose texts have received a limited critical attention. There is not a single study, however, that draws the connection between Morrison and her New Negro literary ancestors by examining their literature of infanticide.

<sup>12</sup> See Brown-Guillory’s “Disrupted Motherlines” (1996), Meier’s “The Refusal of Motherhood in African American Theatre” (2000), and Dawkins’s “From Madonna to Medea” (2004).

<sup>13</sup> Laclau arrived at this definition after Zizek’s critique of his use of the (post)structuralist idea of “subject positions” in *Hegemony and Socialist Strategy*, that, in Zizek’s view, diminished the very promising concept of antagonism advanced by Laclau also there. See Zizek’s *The Sublime Object of Ideology* (1989) and “Beyond Discourse-Analysis” (1990).

<sup>14</sup> For this citation I have used the reprint of Du Bois’s article in *The Norton Anthology of Theory and Criticism* (2001), Gen. Ed. Vincent B. Leitch. pp. 980 – 987.

<sup>15</sup> In *The Signifying Monkey* Gates lists “talking back” as one of the many black tropes subsumed within the trope of Signifyin(g). See pages 77 – 78. The academic history of the concept of “talking back” goes back to linguistics where people like Roger Abrahams with his study *Talking Black* (1976) and Claudia Mitchell-Kernan’s *Language Behavior in a Black Urban Community* (1971) have isolated it as a black signifying practice. Critic bell hooks, similar to Gates, borrows the linguistic concept and turns it into a central theoretical concept for her black feminist theory. She defines “talking back” as an extremely courageous, risky, and daring act that means “speaking as an equal to an authority figure” (5). The critic associates the act as a strategy for women to acquire their own voice, a voice that belongs to them as opposed to a forced entry into “the right speech of womanhood” as a sign of woman’s submission. See *Talking Back: Thinking Feminist, Thinking Black* (1989) pp. 5 – 6.

---

<sup>16</sup> Allison Berg's study, *Mothering the Race*, examines images of black and white motherhood in the first third of the twentieth century and concludes that even though motherhood remained a primary site of racial hierarchy, motherhood as a universal identity provided a link between women to work across race and class lines. Her review of the literary revisions of motherhood that were specifically depicted as controversial to the dominant ideologies of motherhood reveal the mechanism for women writers to gain national agency through motherhood as a literary and political trope. Berg, however, limits the agency of the female writers to the sphere of women's issues and femininity and misses those moments in women's fiction and activism that make the women's critical inquiries of dominant motherhood release a political verve that surpasses the boundaries of feminine and maternal politics only.

## CHAPTER II

### “THE CLOSING DOOR” THAT OPENS THE ENTRANCE TO THE BLACK COMMUNAL DEBATE ON SAFETY

The exploration of the meaning of infanticide in African American literature by women begins in a chronological order with Angelina Weld Grimke as the first writer of black infanticide literature. The motif of infanticide surfaces not just in one but in several of her works. Her drama *Rachel* (1916) is the first documented source that brings attention to infanticide although not in a direct and confrontational manner as do her subsequent short stories “The Closing Door” (1919), “Blackness” (1920) and its revised version “Goldie” (1920). If *Rachel* introduces the idea of infanticide through the thoughts of a young black woman who chooses not to bear children in a world of social hostility, “Blackness” and “Goldie” confront the readers with instances of infanticide inflicted by lynch mobs. “The Closing Door” is a return to the idea of *Rachel*, where the black woman as prospective mother is at the center of a dramatic plot that features an actual act of maternal infanticide. “The Closing Door,” in this sense, offers a radical revision of *Rachel* by materializing thoughts about the denial of motherhood into a real action by granting agency to the black mother. Thus, “The Closing Door” becomes the most intense and agonizing text by virtue of placing the issue of infanticide squarely at the center of black communal life. Both “victim” and “villain” inhabit the black communal space and turn it into a more complex and nuanced center of resistance that finds its capacity to critique both white hegemonies and its own milieu’s capacity to develop

resistance strategies with a sharp political edge. This is where the role of maternal infanticide becomes instrumental – to ignite the spark for engineering viable political propositions to both build strong intracommunal alliances and oppose intercommunal relations of hierarchy based on racial and racist divisions. Infanticide in Grimke’s “The Closing Door” takes the exploration of the black middle class mother of the North as a political subject and a subject of racial politics in the 1920s. It also sends a message of Grimke’s view of how literature enters the sphere of politics and propaganda.

Similar to Georgia Douglas Johnson, Grimke tested her literary talent in multiple literary genres. She was best known for her poetry, as was Johnson. The topics of lost love, commemoration of famous people, and black racial concerns – although the last one constitutes only a part of the body of her verse – shape the content of her poetry. As Herron and Hull observe, the nature of Grimke’s poetry hardly speaks of any racial problems or acute social tensions. It is with the shift to fiction and nonfiction, as Herron notes, that Grimke focused exclusively on the topic of lynching and social injustice and gave her prose a strong political feel. For example, her entry into the world of theatre and drama was explosive and full of promise both in terms of dramatic achievement and potential to represent a long-sought, valuable and worthy African American art. With the theatrical success of *Rachel* (1916), Grimke raised the bar in black protest drama so high that, later, it challenged the efforts of Graham and Johnson to create equally good responses.

*Rachel* made literary history in becoming the first successful African American drama to be published and performed, a rare treat for the emerging African American drama at the time. It scored a phenomenal theatrical success.<sup>1</sup> Despite the stage success

that *Rachel* saw in New York, Washington, Massachusetts, and Pennsylvania, and the secured publication of the play in 1920, Grimke did not continue to deliver many plays of comparable quality. Critics praise its innovative elements and techniques and define it as Grimke's most prominent piece of literary propaganda.<sup>2</sup> Grimke herself was aware of the fact that *Rachel* is intricately linked to politics and propaganda. The play program advertised *Rachel* as "the first attempt to use the stage for race propaganda in order to enlighten the American people to the lamentable conditions of ten million of colored citizens in this free Republic" (qtd. in Hull 117). And Grimke, in defense of her own drama from those who saw more harm than benefit in her rendition of drama as race propaganda, wrote that its appeal was not primarily to the black people, but to the whites and that the play's goal was to counter the stereotype of "the darkey."<sup>3</sup>

The propagandistic trend of her drama quickly spread in her short stories. Although considerably higher in number than her dramas, they did not win her strong popularity and literary recognition. Most of them became a source of controversy especially in relation to their service to African American literature and relevance to address adequately the social problems of the black community. Black commentators at the time accused Grimke of advocating "race genocide" or flatly going against the interest of the black people especially when it came to depictions of refusal of motherhood and infanticide.

Some of her white friends and contemporaries advised Grimke to refrain from stark depictions of the lynching horrors, create more attractive characters, and limit giving prominence of scandalous racial oppression in favor of doing other things with literature.<sup>4</sup> This, however, did not help Grimke reorient the political direction of her short

stories. Nor did she soften the plots by avoiding depictions of atrocities and “appalling” black characters.

Similar to Graham and Morrison, but far from the reception and accomplishment of their nonfiction, Grimke tried her hand at nonfiction as well. The brevity of her nonfiction writing, its limited scope of topics and structural organization, suggest that it served more as a written defense of her work against negative criticism and managed to a lesser degree to develop a signature line of her artistic credo. In this sense, her nonfiction pieces convey a few ideas about the politics of her fiction and allow in to be read as political documents, too.

In her introduction to the *Selected Works of Angelina Weld Grimke*, Carolivia Herron reads the corpus of Grimke’s prose implicating precisely the political tone woven into the fabric of her art. Clearly, in terms of content, the direction of Grimke’s non-poetic work harbors the mixture of literature and politics that is characteristic of African American literature of that period. “These works,” Herron contends, “take on African American cultural grief rather than personal grief as their thematic focus, and they express great outrage over the lynching of African Americans in the South, over the failure of Northern whites to band together and demand an end to the crimes, and over racial injustice in general” (“Introduction” 5). The criticism of lynching as a racist and oppressive practice is the first element to identify the political verve of Grimke’s prose. That the collective grief prevails over the individual is another serious attestation for the political edge of Grimke’s work. The addition of “great outrage” as expression of Grimke’s, and by extension of black communal reaction to social injustice, is the next element of Herron’s making of the political in Grimke’s prose. With the exception of her

reading of *Rachel*, this is the extent to which Herron deals with the political aspect of Grimke's prose works.

In *Color, Sex, Poetry*, Gloria Hull examines Grimke's fiction not as functional propaganda pieces but rather as samples of failed political objectives. Her lynching fiction is described as too sentimental and saccharine, almost an instance of melodrama, that inevitably disappoints the reader with the overwhelming presence of emotions, poorly constructed plots, and unrealistic characterization.

In addition, a quick review of the scholarship on Grimke indicates that the majority of the studies are dedicated primarily to her poetry and best known drama *Rachel* while her other fiction gets little or no coverage at all. Miller calls Grimke "one of those forgotten figures in African American literary and historical tradition, identified as important but with little explanation as to why" (*The Other Reconstruction* 59). The accusations of advocating "race suicide" by raising the issue of infanticide in her drama *Rachel* provide a long lasting negative effect on the critical exploration of her work. It is only after the publication of Toni Morrison's *Beloved*, which revives the theme of infanticide in an unprecedented artistic way, that a return to the forgotten figure of Grimke and her account of black motherhood became possible. Scholarship, although still limited and insufficient, expanded to include some interesting but often controversial readings of "The Closing Door," recognizing the short story as another principal work of Angelina Grimke capable of providing much needed insight into the author's literary and social world.

As with the critical reception of Grimke's literary work in general, the responses to "The Closing Door" remain controversial. Hirsch reads "The Closing Door" as a text

that substantiates and gives voice to African Americans. By examining silences forced upon the African Americans by dominant discourses, he argues how the short story transforms these silences into an identifying “song.” To repossess the traces of words in the silence, the critic argues, is an attempt to define blackness as something different from a negative absence. Carolivia Herron takes a biographical perspective on Grimke and by foregrounding her sexuality and race allegiance suggests that stories such as “The Closing Door” reveal “her inner astonishment at her failure to find sexual and romantic companionship, and her outer astonishment at finding herself in a world that denigrates her value because she is a black woman” (“Introduction” 18). Claudia Tate tries to see Grimke relying on domestic discourse to explore the deterioration of African Americans’ dream of freedom, yet she argues that in trying to address her work to white audiences, Grimke “forfeits the posture of intraracial affirmation that was the principal source of inspiration in the post-Reconstruction domestic novels of her black precursors” (214). Gloria Hull reads “The Closing Door” primarily as a lynching story that is marred by “romping scenes, sentimentality, overwriting, and an uncertain tone and point of view” (129). She does not find any effective political or propagandistic function of the text except for the negative fact that it turned out to be the “wrong tale of madness and infanticide” to appear on the pages of *The Birth Control Review*, where the story was initially published.<sup>5</sup> Miller puts “The Closing Door” into the context of *The Birth Control Review* and women’s politics on reproduction in the 1920s and argues that Grimke’s writing for *The Birth Control Review* is a conscious political act to claim that the difference of race exceeds the difference of class and cannot guarantee the good experience of motherhood even to middle class black women. Miller sees agency in



Agnes's act and defines it as a revolutionary act of a refusal of not good enough motherhood.

Similar to Miller, I also treat Agnes as an agent rather than a melodramatic tool for claiming victim status and collecting sympathetic audience rewards. Furthermore, Agnes designs a political agency that affects directly the members of the black community and urges an inevitable intracommunal response and engagement with political debates. Although the scope of political maneuvering and engagement of different intracommunal groups remains somewhat limited in Agnes's case when compared to Graham's, Johnson's, and especially Morrison's treatment of mother characters, level of communal engagement with the act of infanticide and its political accent on safety, "The Closing Door" opens the entrance toward the need for an intracommunal politics of unity to counter its dominated status and demand the development of viable resistance strategies.

As constructed, "The Closing Door" reveals also the author's manner of shaping cultural responses as political ones. It is through tracing the curious connection between lynching and infanticide that we can obtain an answer to the working mechanism of Grimke's politico-cultural project.

Although lynching is the real social spectacle designed to discipline "misconducts" and keep the racial hierarchies intact, infanticide emerges as a competitive spectacular strategy to denounce lynching through linguistic and literary means. But its critical effects go beyond the mission of exposing lynching as an inhumane practice and behavior aimed at racial control and subjugation of the black population. It aims to hit

home the message that the safe existence of the black community, regardless of class and social status of its members, is under serious threat.

A crucial way in which Grimke's "The Closing Door" stands on its own when compared to Graham's *It's Morning*, Johnson's *Safe*, and Morrison's *Beloved* is the profile and background of the infanticidal mother. If the latter three authors prefer to explore the figures of Southern black mothers who, in conditions of extreme social disadvantage, react in a highly controversial manner to save their children from slavery or lynching, Grimke focuses on the black mother of the North who, by racial association and family connections, reacts acutely to the segregationist order in the South that normalizes the regime and culture of lynching, but by intellectual absorption of knowledge and class manners marks certain stages of her maternal protest with Northern middle-class presence similar to that of white women and their forms of political activism.

The distinction between the black mother of the North and that of the South is never a question of geography in America as its modern history demonstrates, but an attempt to inscribe the black mother in two white rival political systems of representation. Grimke's black mother denounces both the racial politics of the South and the North to demand a self-defined intracommunal existence. It is an attempt to work black maternal politics on a national scale, embracing the black communities of the North and the South under the banner of the empty signifier *safety*. A mother figure with a family and cultural history in the North and the South is best equipped to do so.

Grimke's option for a female literary character who has abandoned the South in her teens and moved up North for a more prosperous and comfortable life might be as well motivated by the fact that Grimke herself never lived in the South. Her biography

reveals her New Englander background, somewhat extraordinary and unusual for an African American woman of her day. Grimke's father, Archibald Grimke, was the son of a wealthy Southerner, Henry Grimke, and his mother of mixed race, Nancy Weston, was a slave. Archibald's two white half-sisters were the famous abolitionists, Angelina Grimke Weld and Sarah Grimke. It was their wish to accept Archibald as a true relative. Acknowledged as a nephew, life for him in the North became possible with their help and protection. Archibald became a lawyer and married a white woman, Sarah Stanley, from a prominent Bostonian family. Sarah gave birth to Angelina and for unknown reasons left Archibald Grimke and her daughter. Archibald raised his daughter while her great-uncle, Theodore Weld, supported the education of young Angelina. She attended prestigious schools in Boston and Washington D.C. and had access to the American upper middle-class.

Grimke's social and family background singles her out from Graham, Johnson, and Morrison. None of the other three authors at the start of their writing careers enjoyed the social privileges of Angelina Grimke and particularly her access to white families and powerful educational institutions without being dependent on their institutional or private patronage. Some critics quickly put a stamp of disapproval of such privileged existence, labeling Grimke as a representative of the elite, an assumption that automatically questions her knowledge and experience of blackness in America in the 1920s. To this charge, Grimke might have answered that "no one can know us as well as one of ourselves" (436) as she was commenting on the function of the black writer in her essay "Remarks on Literature." This is a clear declaration about her own perception as a writer

of color, one who unequivocally wishes to situate her work in the context of African American literature, yet with little direct exposure to the situation in the South.

Grimke's relatively high social status, nevertheless, caused a disconnection from the ordinary lives of African Americans. To imagine and create a plausible black mother from the South might have been a difficult task to accomplish. In general, knowledge of the South arrived to her second-hand so to speak. None of her biographers lists the South even as temporary a place of residence for Grimke. Her perception of the racial problems in the American South might have been predominantly shaped by accounts of black Southerners, communication with black and white intellectuals who condemned the living conditions in the South, as well as the stream of news covered in newspapers and journals must have constructed to a large degree her knowledge about the South. It is then quite normal to see why Grimke's infanticidal mother has to have her life centered in the North while her Southern roots have to be kept to a bare minimum to establish primarily the connection to lynching and infanticide. So, Grimke gives us the portrait of Agnes Milton – the black infanticidal mother of the North. Chronologically she is also the first one to appear and claim political agency in a radical way in African American literature by women. While defending a black cause, her strategies to advance it are not entirely designed for blacks in mind only. This tendency will become obvious later on as the narrative progresses, to include Agnes Milton's reference to, and ultimately a rewrite of one of Rudyard Kipling's short stories, followed by her maternal speech that is a lot closer to models of white women's activist rhetoric.

Agnes Milton is a twenty-five year old woman of lighter skin who lives in a small apartment, presumably in New York, with her husband Jim. She is a housewife while her

husband is the bread winner with a prosperous career in the entertainment business. He makes what he calls “easy money” by playing ragtime for dances in a troupe. He is quite generous with his earnings, entrusting them fully to his wife. As the narrator informs us, “he’d put his hand in his pocket and bring out sometimes a big, sometimes a little, wad of greenbacks and toss it to her and she’d catch it” (“The Closing Door” 254).<sup>6</sup> The playful gesture speaks of no financial difficulties or possible economic deterrence that might threaten the couple’s comfortable lifestyle and family bliss. Agnes herself is a responsible keeper of the family’s finances with knowledge of how to spend wisely and save at the same time for rainy days. She is also a compassionate person who is “always giving a nickel or a dime to some child, flowers or fruit to a sick woman, money to tide over a friend” (“The Closing Door” 254 – 255).

The financial stability of the family and her generous character make Agnes Milton a representative of the middle class with a public profile resembling that of a genteel lady.

Of the four black mothers that this study examines, Agnes Milton tops the social and economic ranking of the hierarchy these women occupy. This is a distinction that complicates the explanation of her choice to kill her own baby. Agnes Milton is not an immediate victim of the system the way Graham’s Cissie and Morrison’s Sethe are. Her runner up, Johnson’s Liza Pettigrew, is of a working class family and has the disadvantage to live in a southern town. This makes Agnes Milton, in terms of exposure to social and economic injustice, the most protected woman of the four and the most eligible for political activism in terms of securing publicity outlets for her views and intervening with meaningful gestures of support into the life of other black people.

Contrary to expectations, however, she turns out to be the most limited in terms of delivering her maternal and political message of protest across the spectrum of black community members. This is not to undermine, however, the important first step that she makes in channeling the problem for black communal consideration.

An important addition to Agnes Milton's genteel qualities is her maternal attitude. She accepts in her home a fifteen-year old "forlorn, unattractive, homeless girl-woman" (252) from whose perspective we learn the story of Agnes Milton. Lucy's unfortunate destiny, with the death of her father and a mother who could not afford to quit her job as a maid in a rich family, send the girl from relative to relative until Agnes Milton opens the door of her apartment for Lucy to come and live with her and Jim.

The gesture of acceptance is indeed incredible, given the fact that "no binding blood-tie" (252), in Lucy's words, existed between the two of them.<sup>7</sup> Grimke tries to profit on the absence of kin relation in two ways. Ascribing Lucy the function of the narrator, Grimke strives to create a seemingly objective point of view. Technically Lucy is an outsider with an insider's access to the family affairs of the Miltons – a privileged position for a first-hand account of events in their entirety but not necessarily on their veracity and fair interpretation. To borrow from Genette's narratology, "The Closing Door" operates on the principle of external focalization that the reader confronts.<sup>8</sup> The credibility of the narrator's profile rests upon her age of innocence (fifteen years of age), her transitional stage between girlhood and womanhood (girl-woman) that marks as well her initiation into the gender dynamic of the feminine sphere and particularly through the passage of motherhood, as we shall see later on, and her low economic status, a marker of

existence for so many black people, against which she evaluates the merits of Agnes's giving soul.

It is precisely with the narrator's inclusion into the discourse on motherhood that Grimke tries to gain the second benefit of external focalization. Agnes reveals to Lucy different acts of maternity that, at first, are in line with the dominant discourse on motherhood, only to confront severely its authoritativeness later on. The acts vary from noble and dedicated maternal articulations to disruptive and disturbing disarticulations of motherhood that threaten the integrative capacity of the practice of standard motherhood.

The friendly and caring attitude with which Agnes accepts Lucy into her home makes Lucy recognize her benefactor's strong maternal instinct defined as "a fine, free, generous act" that illuminates the "the wonder-quality of her soul" (252). Lucy is very clear that it was "the mother heart" of Agnes that showed pity and love for her. Thus, Agnes becomes an idealized mother figure for young Lucy and a fine substitute for the non-availability of her biological mother. This idealization finds reflection on the physical contrast between Agnes, the "othermother," and Lucy, her "adopted" daughter. Agnes possesses "happy eyes" and a "soft voice." She is "graceful" with "soft and silky and black" hair, while her soul is "of shining beauty and gayety" (257). When Agnes announces to Lucy that she is expecting, Lucy confides, "The beauty of her face made me catch my breath" (260). In contrast, Lucy, the girl-woman, is "yellow, scrawny, unbeautiful girl" and "forlorn, unattractive, and homeless" (252).

The contrast between presence and absence of beauty, between compassion and generosity and their consumption, between middle-class status and poverty, happiness and misery, between leisure and work that the pair Agnes/Lucy projects is a good

illustration of Grimke's artistic principle of main character selection. In " 'Rachel' the Play of the Month," Grimke develops the thesis that in order to counter the stereotype of "the darkey," she looks to the well-educated, cultured, moral and ambitious people of color who could best speak for the potential of the colored people as a group. "I drew my characters, then," she writes, "from the best type of colored people" (415). The best type of colored people should be placed in service of others, a Du Boisian echo of the "talented tenth" and the doctrine of "racial uplifting," perhaps affirmed in order to help build a strong sense of communal belonging. Agnes is undoubtedly the representation of Grimke's best type of colored people – or colored women in this case – who has the task to bring out in Lucy the best personal qualities, maximize her potential for social development by turning this girl-woman into a model black woman. Aspiration to reach a higher level and emulation of a positive model is Lucy's way to absorb this uplifting program. While the best type of person, Agnes, employs othermothering as a powerful strategy to accommodate Lucy's progress. But how Lucy will advance when confronting conflicting versions of motherhood offered by Agnes remains to be seen.

#### Mothering the Kipling Way, Going Softly Under the Stars

The days of Agnes's maternal protection of Lucy and wifely duty to Jim are marked by a state of happiness. Joyous laughter, unburdened days, respectful and sincere companionship are some of the dimensions of Agnes's attitude toward Lucy. And young Lucy perceives this attitude as maternal perfection. "It was the mother heart of Agnes that had yearned over me, had pity upon me, loved me and brought me to live in the only home I ever known," Lucy confesses, and concludes, "Agnes Milton is the only person I have ever really loved. And Love her still" (256). Lucy admires maternalism professed as



such and is convinced that it is a big part of Agnes's state of incredible happiness. In her eyes, Agnes's true and pure happiness is almost unattainable to others. This exceptional state of happiness, acknowledged by Agnes, too, is a potential good prerequisite for the positive experience of biological mothering, too, for Agnes announces one day to Lucy that she is expecting. It would seem like a natural progression of Agnes's happiness grounded on expanding the base of motherhood options, but it is precisely this expansion that decreases the level of happiness.

It is with the possibility for biological motherhood that the aesthetic signs of Agnes's idealized beauty begin to fade. Shortly before Agnes announces her pregnancy to Lucy, the young girl-woman expressed a concern about wrinkles damaging the immaculate smile and beauty of Agnes's face. The note on the transformation of Agnes's case is clearly implanted as a foreshadowing effect that something troubling and disturbing slowly creeps into Agnes's maternal life.<sup>9</sup> Lucy is appalled by this physical damage and wants to get to its source while Agnes insists that it is too much smiling and happiness that marked her face with wrinkles.

It is after Agnes informs Lucy of her pregnancy that she examines critically her excess of happiness and begins to fear the state of being too happy. Biological maternity intensifies the fear of being too happy, which at this point is not directly socially motivated but is rather a distinct product of western literary cultural influence.

In addition to being a representative of the highest economic class when compared to the mother characters of Graham, Johnson, and Morrison, Grimke's mother is also the most intellectual – another Grimke emphasis on a character representing the best type of colored people. This is also a convenient use of Grimke's significant literary

knowledge put to use in favor of her art. “I am a voracious reader,” Grimke’s autobiographical statement reads, “and possess something of a private library” (qtd. in Hull 147). Grimke was well familiar with the classics and contemporary literature and took English classes for some time at Harvard. It is with this knowledge that Grimke is capable to create Agnes the intellectual.

This authorial choice marks Grimke’s stark deviation from the figure of the black infanticidal mother in African American literature.<sup>10</sup> None of the other three mother characters subject to this study reads. Agnes’s intellectualism finds expression in extensive engagement with British colonial literature. So, how does the black mother’s voracious pursuit of the written word tie into motherhood and the act of infanticide?

A great admirer of Kipling, Agnes owns ten volumes of his work and is well familiar with their content. Under Agnes’s influence, Lucy also discovers Kipling. Having read him, as she claims, from cover to cover, he becomes an author that she, like Agnes, loves. In this context, Agnes’s fear of too much happiness is a direct borrowing from Kipling’s “Without Benefit of Clergy,” a story of a woman of India, Ameera, and her English master, who lose their child, and shortly after, Ameera, herself, dies of cholera. Ameera, like Lucy, used to be very happy and retrospectively assesses the death of her child as a punishment for being too happy with her British lover and showing it shamelessly on the roof terrace of her house under the stars causing the wrath of God. The death of Ameera’s son mars the harmonious but imagined husband/wife relationship and underlies rather the colonized aspect of Ameera’s identity, who in choosing to keep her lord and lover, essentially complies with the muted position that the dominant

colonial discourse ascribes to her. Her solution for her and her partner is to “go softly underneath the stars, lest God find us out” (“Without Benefit of Clergy” 231).

With this knowledge of feminine and maternal otherness dependent on and adjustable to the colonizer’s hegemony, Agnes rewrites Kipling’s story twice primarily through the actions of Ameera in an attempt to seek the power of her own maternal agency.

The first rewrite is of temporal nature. Agnes reads Ameera’s story as a precaution to avoid the consequences of being too happy and decides to implement Ameera’s later realization of going “softly underneath the stars” even before the birth of her child, in order to avoid a cruel payback for too much happiness. The euphemistic expression of “going softly underneath the stars” stands for the retention of a position of silence and compliance associated with the western cultural hegemony reserved both for mothers and women of color. Agnes’s actual demonstration of this policy is reflected in her switch to an introverted behavior where both Jim and Lucy see and hear less of her. She quickly slips behind closed doors to seek protection in seclusion or frequently uses “Sh!” to tone down an outburst of laughter or discourage communication in favor of protective silence. The policy of solitary confinement and valued moments of constricting communication to the point of silence substitute the excess of words and display of emotions, but they hardly prove to serve as a reliable model for protected happiness in the experience of motherhood. The model circumvents the bitter race relations in America and its power dynamic fails, once the South crosses to the North as constructed in the narrative to represent the black mother’s maternal interests. The Northern illusive shield of protection breaks under the pressure of Agnes’s family history in the South.

Half way through the text, we learn that Agnes Milton comes from the South with her father and two brothers still living there. Agnes and her younger brother, Bob, are constantly in touch through weekly correspondence. One Tuesday, however, the letters from Bob stop coming followed by her father's telegram informing her that Bob died suddenly and that Agnes should not come under any circumstance. This tragic news and puzzling explanation turns Agnes into "a changed woman" (265) but the narrator provides no clear explanation about the kind of change that has incurred. It is with the arrival with her older brother, Joe, that the mystery surrounding Bob's death begins to unravel.

Joe's mission is to inform Agnes's husband about the real cause of Bob's death while seeking his consent that a different version regarding Bob's lethal end will be presented in front of Agnes.<sup>11</sup> The talks about the fake version and the real story take place at moments when Agnes leaves the room and goes to the kitchen to tend to her cooking and dinner preparations which she plans to serve to her family and guest. The second time she leaves the room, she pretends that she goes to the kitchen while in reality stands at the door and catches Joe's real story of Bob's death:

An orderly mob, in an orderly manner, on a Sunday morning – I am quoting the newspapers – broke into the jail, took him out, slung him up to the limb of a tree, riddled his body with bullets, saturated it with coal oil, lighted a fire underneath him, gouged out his eyes with red hot irons, burnt him to a crisp and then sold souvenirs of him, ears, fingers, toes. His teeth brought five dollars each. [...] He is still hanging on that tree. – We are not allowed to have even what is left." ("The Closing Door" 272)

The reason for the mob lynching was Bob's refusal to get off the sidewalk as a white man passes. As a result, the white man decides to teach Bob a lesson in white race respect.

The graphic description of the disfigurement and dismemberment of the black male body brings the interracial and intercommunal conflict to the forefront. Agnes's subsequent reaction of indignation and rage is already inscribed in the context of black communal allegiance and siding with the problems of black Southerners.

What follows is a disarticulation of Ameera's adopted model of silence and submission of colored women within an established white hegemony of racial difference. The strategy "to go softly underneath the stars" serves Agnes no longer. With its negation, Agnes also rejects the genteel qualities of her essentialized gender role – the angel in the house, the wifely and maternal duties as currently performed, the charitable public face. Along with these breaks away the hope that integration in the North is possible if approached as imitation of preferred lifestyles and values.

Agnes's first reaction, unlike the initial response of the mothers in Graham's, Johnson's, and Morrison's texts, is a verbal outbreak of emotional, strong disagreement with the violent and degrading handling of the social problems. Her outburst is on the border of despair and derangement, but at the same time, the subject matter and the overall argument are not far from the patterns of white female activist speeches. Let us not forget that Grimke created "The Closing Door" for the pages of Sanger's *Birth Control Review* – a magazine with predominantly white female audience to whom Grimke could speak perfectly well given her education and good connections to white families. But how can the speech become important to black women and members of the black community?

Some commentators like Hull describe Agnes's speech as a "hysterical crying" but miss the point to see it as a rhetorical disarticulation of the pattern of "protective" silence on behalf of the black mother. Agnes is the only one out of the four black mothers subject to this study, who first presents her criticism of the shameful practice of lynching, in this case, followed further down by a political motivation for the coming act of infanticide:

"Yes! – Yes! – I! – I! – An instrument of reproduction! – another of the many! – a colored woman – doomed! – Cursed! – put here! – willing or unwilling! For what? – to bring children here – men children – for the sport – the lust – of possible orderly mobs – who go about things – in an orderly manner – on Sunday mornings!" ("The Closing Door" 274).

The speech is fragmentary in nature, abundant in exclamations of disgust and rebuke and a single rhetorical question to obviate the cycle of lynching in its social reproduction. Nouns and participles prevail in this distorted syntactic unit while verbs, although scarce, convey actions applied on "the cursed" precluding their possibility for action and movement. The speech is an instance of locating the intersectionality of the hegemony of biological reproduction with its fixed meanings for colored women and children with the hegemony of vigilante justice and lynching, fixing meaning for black males as fragmentary commercial objects, as Joe's newspaper summary indicates. It names the exploitation of both male and female black bodies as performing in a cycle of repetition while suppressing, through the very working of the hegemonies, the ability to perform with a difference; it creates the awareness of eliminating proliferation of positions on the syntactic axis of social relations. This is the speech of the discontented

hegemonized black mother of the North, who seeks to shatter the hegemonic power grips by unmasking their negative structural effects which support exclusively the racial difference.

Agnes's emotional outburst ends, as the narrator informs us, with a statement from a "seeress." "There is a time coming – and soon – when no colored men – no colored woman – no colored child, born or unborn will be *safe* – in this country" ("The Closing Door" 275) (italics mine) This is the climactic moment of Agnes's political declaration that speaks of the absence of safety and in essence introduces safety as the signifier of maternal politics that could bridge the gender, age, and class gaps among the members of the black community on a national level. In other words, the declaration aspires toward the construction of a counter hegemony across black communal lines. The declaration is read on a prophetic level from another female member of the black community – the "adopted" daughter of the Miltons, Lucy. And her take on the safety of children remains to be seen.

The declaration also ends as a counterstatement to Ameera's action of "going softly underneath the stars" and marks a decisive breakup from the policy of silence and muted presence. "There is no more need for silence – in this house," Agnes concludes, "God has found us out" ("The Closing Door" 275). In terms of fictional audience, Agnes delivers the declaration both in front of Southerners and Northerners to indicate that the scope of the problem is bigger than a regional inadequacy of handling relations of difference based on racism and racialism.

Paradoxically, after the explosive speech that ties the knot between reproduction and lynching as an absence of safety, Agnes's voice quickly loses public presence to be

replaced, however, with a controversial action that rips the drapery of silence with its formidable visual and psychological effect. This is where the second rewrite of Kipling's "Benefit of Clergy" begins to take place, and it is shattering in its radicalism.

"What Had Agnes Milton Wanted in My Room?"

After Agnes gives birth to a baby boy, she refuses to look at him or take care of him. It is Lucy who takes the responsibility of mothering Agnes's discarded child. The sex of the child plays a big role in Agnes's choice. The refusal to perform as the mother of her son is in direct correlation to the social phenomenon of lynching. Agnes identifies her newborn son with her dead brother, Bob, and projects on her baby boy the dreary destiny of a Southern black male who is a potential victim of vigilante justice.

The rejection of motherhood goes along with the creation of distinct spheres of separation in the domestic space. Agnes inhabits her own bedroom, sharing it presumably with her husband, while Lucy takes the baby in her room. Lucy's room becomes the space of affirming motherhood. Note that it is the traditional mother-child idealized type of motherhood that is reminiscent of the religious Madonna and, respectively, of the socially sacralized discursive formation on motherhood that Lucy embraces as a surrogate parent. The baby is a restless but lovely little sleeper, a beautiful child to tend to. And the surrogate mother seems fully devoted to its needs.

Lucy performs her maternal duty with no interruption and complaint; she checks on the baby several times at night making sure that he is covered well in bed, and she listens with immense joy to the lovely sounds of the breathing, sleeping baby. She creates carefully the maternal space in Agnes's home and elevates the level of duty and devotion



to the needs of the child, similar to that of a Victorian model mother. She has internalized the maternal attitude of an earlier Agnes with its compassionate and charitable approach.

This particular discursive mode of devoted and sacrificial mothering creates the sharp contrast between Agnes's politics of social protest motivated by the despicable lynching culture and practices in the South and Lucy's exclusion of the shadow of lynching from the maternal space that she has created up North for Agnes's son. Lucy tries to offer safety by not recognizing her maternal inclusion into the discourse on lynching. She does not inscribe her maternal function and the baby's body into the social and racial problematics of her time, nor does she consider the political threat coming from the biological mother. It is precisely this interpretation of safety that severs the connection between maternity and other social contexts that exceed the domestic terrain which Agnes finds problematic in Lucy's maternal performance.

Agnes enters Lucy's maternal space twice: once as a solitary observer of her baby that brings her to an emotional state of mind revealing both her love for the child and the fear that if experienced, such love may come at a tremendous cost and unbearable loss for her. She pleads to Lucy, crying, to take away that cooing, smiling baby.

The second time Agnes enters the maternal space, she smothers her child with a pillow. Her act of infanticide directs the assault not only against the innocent child but also against the maternal space as a Victorian construct of maternal devotion and respectability, as a space of domestic care, protection of life, preservation of a child's interests, and development of the child away from the harshness of social reality. Infanticide becomes the negation of the hegemony of good motherhood by rearticulating one of its key elements – safety – in a different way. Protection is brought to its radical

form – overprotection – to give safety its new meaning (safety = death) and at the same time reclaim motherhood by revising it in a formidable way.

If Kipling's Ameerah wants to put her femininity and motherhood in service of her family, "First," Ameerah prays, "that I may die in thy stead if thy death is demanded, and in the second that I may die in the place of the child" (223), Grimke's Agnes avoids the sacrifice of the mother (and wife) in order to give her maternal body agency. Agnes no longer rejects motherhood but reenters it on her terms and conditions. She kills her son because she fulfills her maternal duty constituted by contingency of negative reinforcement – the lynching of her own brother. Executed in Lucy's room, which at this point stands as a metaphor for model black mothering and a design for a model of maternal space influenced by white maternal models, Agnes publicizes her action, turning it into a social affair, opening it up for communal consideration.

Lucy does not condemn Agnes but perceives her anticipated action, as she sees Agnes enter the baby's room with the door closing behind her, as "something terribly wrong" (280). Her thoughts are not an attempt to defend the type of motherhood that she performs, although she sincerely misses the baby's loss, but to recognize the necessity for some sort of acceptable solution that would exclude the state of something being terribly wrong.

Ultimately, Grimke decides for a tragic ending of "The Closing Door." Unlike the infanticidal mothers in Graham's *It's Morning*, Johnson's *Safe*, and Morrison's *Beloved* who remain alive, some of them to see the consequences of their social protest in the long run, Grimke's mother, Agnes Milton, dies. Although it is difficult to determine when exactly Agnes loses her sanity, it is certain that after the murder of her son, she gets sent

to a mental institution where shortly after she passes away. We do not know the details about who sent her or how Agnes ended in the mental institution. The stress is on the presentation of Agnes's death as a form of salvation. "The door has finished closing for the last time – Agnes Milton is no more," Lucy concludes, "God, I think, may be pitiful after all" ("The Closing Door" 281). Agnes is saved from her agony in death just like she saved her child in death. But with similar interpretation, the question of involving black women in political agency becomes problematic again. Lucy shifts the center of power to God, while Agnes has made a stubborn effort to locate it in the feminine communal space and beyond. We do not know how Agnes's husband up North, nor how her father and brother down South, react to the act of infanticide, but it is not hard to imagine that a strong reaction there undoubtedly will be. One might say that the tragic finale dulls the edge of Agnes's maternal political intervention by masquerading it as a personal tragedy that only God can sort out. But this might be simply Grimke's rhetorical move for gaining white women's compassion, if we remember that the short story was originally published in *The Birth Control Review*, a journal run by white women with an exclusively white female audience. The political transaction of motherhood between a surrogate mother (Agnes) and a surrogate daughter (Lucy) has been completed after all. Lucy, who fills in the gaps of silence after the murder of the child with her story about Agnes Milton, has passed on Agnes's political agenda of safety, despite its controversial status. Grimke's infanticidal mother closes the door only after herself, but her surrogate daughter opens it for further discussion.

With Grimke, the social construction of the empty signifier *safety* remains strictly within the domain of black motherhood and femininity, ready to be transmitted into the

bigger black communal space, and in essence, already reaching it through the act of narration and an audience that absorbs the narrative. With Graham, Johnson, and especially Morrison, the political value of the signifier *safety* and its interpretation circulates actively along intracommunal lines, engaging with other political centers of communal authority to reach consensus decisions on the meaning of safety.

---

NOTES

<sup>1</sup>The recognition of Grimke's *Rachel* as a dramaturgical and theatrical success comes both from her contemporaries and present-day critics. Alain Locke and Montgomery Gregory, editors of *Plays of Negro Life*, refer to *Rachel* as "the first successful drama written by a Negro and interpreted by Negro actors" (414). In *Black Female Playwrights*, Kathy L. Perkins calls *Rachel* "the first twentieth century full length play written, performed, and produced by blacks" (8).

<sup>2</sup> See Hull's chapter on Grimke in *Color, Sex Poetry*.

<sup>3</sup> See Grimke's "'Rachel' the Play of the Month: The Reason and Synopsis by the Author' in the *Selected Works of Angelina Weld Grimke*, 413 – 414.

<sup>4</sup> See Lillie Buffum Chace Wymon's letter to Grimke from November 21, 1922, qtd. in Hull, 132 -133.

<sup>5</sup> *The Birth Control Review* was edited by birth control activist Margaret Sanger. The magazine was published monthly from February 1917 to 1940, but Sanger resigned from her editorial position in 1929. The magazine enjoyed good audience, especially among white women. Its policies and mission evolved over time. It reflected initially a feminist position on birth control that would empower women to make their own decisions on reproduction and provide them respectively with opportunities for economic, educational, and political development. Later on, Sanger turned to eugenics, led by the assertion that the poorer classes in America were reproducing at an alarmingly high rate sinking even deeper into poverty and posing a threat to the existing order. The eugenics concern did not spare the women of color either in assuming that increase in their birth rates would challenge white supremacy in the future. Scholars of Sanger, Ericka M. Miller for example, think that ultimately Sanger adopted a mixed position between feminists and eugenicists by advancing racial maternalism.

Grimke had a good reason to publish "The Closing Door" in Sanger's *Birth Control Review*, judging by a statement she made earlier regarding her play *Rachel*. According to Grimke, the one thing that can make all women sisters is motherhood, and by depicting the difficulties involved for black mothers under oppressive social conditions, she was hoping to win the hearts of white women in the name of social change. I, however, am interested in what Grimke offers with "The Closing Door" to her community and will not concentrate on the effects the text produced on white female readers.

---

Sanger invited Grimke to publish again in the *Birth Control Review*. Grimke submitted “Blackness,” another story of infanticide based on the lynching of Mary Turner in 1918, but it got rejected. Its revised version “Goldie” was published in the November and December 1920 issues.

<sup>6</sup> All citations for “The Closing Door” come from the *Selected Works of Angelina Weld Grimke*. Ed. Carolivia Herron. New York: Oxford University Press, 1991.

<sup>7</sup> It is unclear how Agnes Milton learned about Lucy’s plight, but judging by the great number of her mother’s relatives that Lucy mentions to have spent time with in order to survive, it must have been a person from that circle to inform Agnes about Lucy’s situation.

<sup>8</sup> In *Narrative Discourse: An Essay in Method*, Gerard Genette introduces the term focalization as a selection or restriction of narrative knowledge and information. By developing degrees of focalization, Genette tries to conceptualize the difference between his term and the more traditional terms such as point of view and perspective.

<sup>9</sup> Grimke is known to rely a lot on the technique of foreshadowing in her fiction. Any of her three short stories that feature lynching and infanticide, “The Closing Door,” “Blackness,” and “Goldie,” display a copious use of the technique. Critics usually see her use of foreshadowing as an obstacle to plot development that results in unnecessary sentimentalism and a high level of predictability of narrative events.

<sup>10</sup> The theme of intellectualism in the form of reading and writing, and by extension institutional education, is not a new one in African American literature by women. It is enough to recall Frances E. W. Harper’s *Iola Leroy* with the title character’s love for books and education or Pauline E. Hopkins’s Sappho Clark in *Contending Forces: A Romance Illustrative of Negro Life North and South*, as well-educated and highly-skilled woman. These are women who want to put themselves in service to the project of “uplifting the race” while parallel to that they coin the image of the New Negro Woman. This intellectual trend, however, is hardly seen at work for fictional black infanticidal mothers.

<sup>11</sup> The fake story of Bob’s death that Joe plans to tell Agnes with the support of her husband and Lucy is concocted as a tragic apolitical incident. Bob goes out fishing in the woods, sleeps the night there in his wet clothes, catches pneumonia and dies.

### CHAPTER III

#### DARK MATERNAL VOICES, PROTEST DRAMA, AND THE MAKING OF POLITICAL SUBJECTS IN AFRICAN AMERICAN PLAYS BY WOMEN

This chapter discusses two dramas by African American women playwrights written between 1929 and 1940. In terms of literary movement divisions, Georgia Douglas Johnson's *Safe* (c.1929) and Shirley Graham's *It's Morning* (1940) belong to the Harlem Renaissance or to apply its rival and racially-flavored periodization label, The New Negro Renaissance.<sup>1</sup> Critics agree that the dramas make a significant contribution to the making of African American theatre. Female black playwrights and their plays, as Gloria Hull in *Sex, Color, Poetry*, Elizabeth Brown-Guillory in *Their Place on the Stage*, and Cheryl Wall in *Women of the Harlem Renaissance* contend, deserve serious critical attention, because their studies offer a decisive advancement in the reexamination and novel perception of the New Negro Movement and the role of black women dramatists in it.

My interest in *Safe* and *It's Morning* has little to do with the artistic approaches, aesthetic judgments, or analysis of the traditional literary elements that confirm or reject an already existing set of criteria for profiling these dramas as unique and traditional African American literary pieces. My interest lies in discussing the choice of topic, character development, and dramatization devices that allow our examining the political character of these works, and more specifically the working of the political along intracommunal (black) lines.

Parallel to that, I will trace how the issue of motherhood and infanticide as strategies for charting specific intacommunal policy intersect with the literary careers and intellectual pursuits of Graham and Johnson as representatives of the African American community of writers at the time. This second line of analysis will shed light upon the making of Graham's and Johnson's literary cultural politics and its dual purpose to gain these female writers literary recognition and propose their ideas for cultural unity and consolidation of literary communal values. The pursuit of Graham's "position of authority," to borrow her term, and the functioning of Johnson's literary salon, dubbed *The Saturday Nighters*, are interesting to investigate in order to understand the specifics of each woman's literary cultural politics as they evolved contemporaneously with and against the leading ideologies of Locke's "folk drama" and Du Bois's art as propaganda, reflected into what he calls "race drama". Both Graham's and Johnson's plays as well as their literary cultural policies reveal the coining of political subjectivities in the turbulent literary and social climate of the late 1920s and the start of the 1940s in America.

Central to my study of the political is the motif of infanticide and the infanticidal mother. Both Georgia Douglas Johnson and Shirley Graham – and to my knowledge they did this independently of each other, although a slight possibility exists that Graham might have been familiar with Johnson's project– use the figure of the murderous mother, who prefers to execute her own children instead of sending them into slavery somewhere else (*It's Morning*) or potentially losing them to an enraged lynching mob (*Safe*). Even if the acts of infanticide in both dramas happen off-stage, the audience always receives a brief but detailed graphic account of the tragic event and learns the maternal explanation for the perpetration of this horrific act. Whether it is Cissie slitting the throat of her

daughter Millie in an attempt to prevent Millie's sale down the river to a stern master with a sexual appetite for young flesh, as the plot of Shirley Graham's *It's Morning* reveals, or Liza Pettigrew's strangulation of her newborn baby boy as a fearful reaction to the prospect of lynching when her son grows up, as Georgia Douglas Johnson's *Safe* indicates, the infanticidal mothers remain adamant in defense of their action and use the same argument to justify their violent behavior. They claim that they provide safety for their children. The children are safe from the horrors of slavery and lynching when they do not have to live through it; they are safe when they are dead.

It is this maternal claim, in the first place, that leads me to the examination of Johnson's *Safe* and Graham's *It's Morning* as plays that define political subjectivities and the working of the political within the black communities. I do this through the lens of Ernesto Laclau's political theory of hegemony and emancipation. This necessitates the reading of the acts of infanticide as non-linguistic elements that help disarticulate the old concept of safety as regulated by the discursive structures of motherhood, slavery, and the practice of lynching and the articulation of the new concept of safety that has the capacity to mobilize political action and urge unification of differential positions across intracommunal lines. The climactic point in political mobilization highlights the moment of communal consensus and decision making in the direction of achieving the desired moment of communitarian unity or experiencing the sense of totality.

It is only in Toni Morrison's highly acclaimed novel *Beloved*, that we receive the most-detailed account of how decision making and communal consensus grows on a terrain wrought with controversy and full of traps of undecidability when a chilling event



such as infanticide takes place and sends emotional tidal waves across the fabric of the entire community.

Morrison's literary precursors, however, are instrumental in uncovering and charting the mechanism of the political organization of the social. When confronted with the act of infanticide, the fabrics of Graham's fictional slave community and Johnson's fictional segregated black community foreground the moment of communal ruptures that serve as barriers in experiencing communitarian fullness. These are moments that illustrate the disintegration of the old centers of communal unity by pointing out their defects and inability to sustain a collective social formation. To repeat Laclau's statement, they register the presence of an absence discernible in the structural unifying points. To compensate for this absence, attention should be turned either to the introduction of new centers or to the revision of old structural centers to boost the unifying effects that create the feeling of communitarian fullness. As we know, Laclau's term for these centers is empty signifiers. In both Johnson's *Safe* and in Graham's *It's Morning*, this empty signifier is *safety* and its morphological relative "safe." This empty signifier is not exclusively new to the discursive structure of motherhood, but it is new in ascribing to it a political function to unite not only women and mothers but as many different members of the black community as possible. It is the mothers' attempt to enter the domain of politics and the political by pushing a reinterpretive frame for the constitution of the maternal. This is the black maternal contribution to the social construction of the empty signifier *safety*.

Contemporaries of Johnson and Graham and later critics have placed *Safe* and *It's Morning* into the category of protest drama. The term itself expresses a cultural and

social awareness about the political task of such works. According to theater historian James Hatch, the genre of protest drama consists of two subgenres – antislavery plays and anti-lynch plays. Both labels could be accurately applied to Graham’s *It’s Morning*, an example of an anti-slavery drama, and Johnson’s *Safe*, a fine sample of an anti-lynch drama. We already know that the acts of severe exploitation, human denigration or sexual assault, structure the protest response of antislavery drama, according to Kathy A. Perkins, and the execution of lynching ceremonies, resulting in the loss of human life have a major impact on the dramatic action in anti-lynch dramas, as Judith L. Stephens contends. A similar characterization of antislavery and anti-lynch dramas share more in common with the Du Boisian notion of “art as propaganda” rather than with Alain Locke’s idea of “folk drama” which professed interest in the quotidian life of ordinary black people but remained disinterested in depicting racial tensions. Both Graham and Johnson were aware of the political weight they were putting in their texts. Johnson contributed to the NAACP’s anti-lynching campaign by submitting *Safe*, while Graham wrote *It’s Morning* guided by her quest for a position of authority within the field of African American dramaturgy and on the black intellectual scene. Upon closer examination of the literary construction of *It’s Morning* and *Safe*, however, it becomes obvious that they display traces of both Du Boisian and Lockean theatre ideologies to fulfill their political agenda.

#### Scholarly Criticism on Protest Drama and Graham’s and Johnson’s Participation in the Genre

Before advancing my argument, it is worth sketching out the critical work done by scholars of protest drama in general, but also more importantly, to present the existing

interpretations of Graham's *It's Morning* and Johnson's *Safe* in order to see what these readings are systematically undermining in the assessment of the political content of protest dramas written by two African American playwrights.

In his study, *A Beautiful Pageant: African American Theatre, Drama, and Performance, 1910 – 1927*, David Krasner states that African American drama in the first two decades of the twentieth century expressed its modernity in the desire to “*transform the image of black culture from minstrelsy to sophisticated urbanity*” (10). It sought to create a new positive image of racial identity, based on the principle of self-representation. Krasner views this as an attempt to establish cultural legitimacy. He concludes that “cultural legitimacy and social ordering became necessary tools in the face of racism and the demand for group redefinition” (13). Protest drama in this context is instrumental for gaining cultural legitimacy and coining racial solidarity by naming and exposing white racism. Both Graham's *It's Morning* and Johnson's *Safe* portray instances of white racism but fail to convince black critics and intellectuals, and ultimately the black community, that these are texts capable of forming a spirit of racial solidarity and collective racial awareness. The negative commentaries that these plays received had to do with the depiction of the black mother as a source of violence and the act of infanticide as a troublesome representation of who black people are. Johnson's and Graham's dramas never rose to prominence, and overall their entire careers as playwrights for a number of reasons entered a period of critical oblivion.

This trend of critical neglect prevailed for quite some time until the spread of feminist criticism in the 1980s brought back the names and works of Johnson and Graham for deserved reassessment and critical investigation. To give an illustration of

how serious the problem with critical oblivion was, it is worth noting Judith L. Stephens's observation about the genre of anti-lynch plays of which Johnson is a major representative. "There is no single study," Stephens claimed in 1992, "which focuses on the anti-lynch play as a dramatic genre and which documents its place, since at least 1858, in American theatre history" ("Anti-Lynch Plays by African American Women" 331).<sup>2</sup> Graham, on the other hand, remained in the shadow of her second husband, W.E.B. Du Bois, and as a result Graham scholarship focused on her later days of domestic and international political activism rather than tracing her steps as a dramatist and musician.<sup>3</sup>

The scant scholarship on Graham and Johnson as playwrights and protest dramatists creates research problems when it comes to their two plays that are the focal point of this study. There are only three scholarly texts that engage both *Safe* and *It's Morning* directly, and an insufficient number of articles and anthology prefaces dedicated to Johnson's and Graham's dramaturgical ventures and political themes of their art with a brief coverage of each play among other things. The latter group of sources – short studies, books, and anthology introductions – offers general reviews of the playwrights' work rather than detailed studies of particular literary pieces. Under similar scholarly circumstances, the political potential of the motif of infanticide and the figure of the infanticidal mother remain largely unexplored or severely limited to the struggle of the black people against racial oppression. The black and white dichotomy powered by the victim and resistance narrative of minority literature criticism is, in great measure, responsible for the interpretation of the two plays.

In a number of articles that examine Johnson's *Safe* and Graham's *It's Morning* jointly, the arguments take three distinct feminist types of interpretation to explain the

function of the murderous mother characters and the act of infanticide. The first type of feminist reading rests on the notion of double marginalization of women of color that renders them and their children at the bottom of the social structure with virtually no prospect for improvement of their social and economic status. This condemnatory social status, combined with the lack of prospect for the future, makes these women arrive at startling maternal decisions as an expression of their hopelessness and rejection of their social immobility. Although analytically correct, this brand of feminism tends to produce epistemological observations framed on a dichotomy that eases the readers to quickly position themselves in relation to moral justice by siding with the weaker member of the opposition. The victim/villain format controls the flow of analysis and the conclusions of this type of feminist reading. Thus, for Joyce Meier, Graham's *It's Morning* and Johnson's *Safe* "feature heroines who refuse motherhood and/or childrearing because they cannot bear the alternative of birthing and raising a child in a culture that discriminates on the basis of class, race, gender" ("The Refusal of Motherhood" 115). Meier contends that the alarmist maternal actions of the black women depicted in these plays "often relate to their realization of powerlessness as mothers" ("The Refusal of Motherhood" 118). Her version of criticism, exemplary of the victim/villain format, privileges the significance of the present historical moment in the lives of the black mothers (sexual and economic exploitation of female slaves and lynching of black males) in order to read them as helpless victims. The realization of powerlessness against discrimination and hopelessness to rectify social injustice fuels the maternal acts of violence. At this point, Meier constructs not just a victim position for the fictional black mothers in the two plays, but a stark victim position, one that has been intensified

simultaneously by the narrative rendition of the acts of infanticide and by the critical interpretation of the acts as acknowledgements of the political stasis of the maternal position. Activism is shifted in the hands of the feminist critic and the readers who, unlike the helplessness of the black mothers, have the power to expose the mechanism of oppression and create conditions for intolerance of racism and sexism. Parallel to that, echoing perhaps the approach of the playwrights, Meier creates the image of the villain in the face of repressive white patriarchal structures.

Over all, this type of criticism delivers imminent results for the (black) feminist cause by pointing to the social structures that are in obvious need of corrective policies. The drawback, however, is also evident: the emphasis on victimization equates, more often than not, the state of black motherhood with the state of powerlessness and despondency. As such, this state cannot offer any productive framework for resistance. Black mothers have virtually no access to any power point to disrupt the system, and the act of infanticide is precisely a confirmation of this political objectification and social paralysis. This type of feminist criticism clamors for a sympathetic, fair, and ethical attitude towards the victims of patriarchy and racism. As such, it is feminism with limited political vision, because it fails to register the full spectrum of political dividends, and losses of course, that black womanhood and motherhood can offer in moments of institutionally and socially inflicted traumas.

In “Disrupted Motherlines: Mothers and Daughters in a Genderized, Sexualized, and Racialized World,” highly influential black critic and playwright Elizabeth Brown-Guillory examines the motif of infanticide in black drama by embarking on the same line of feminist criticism that inspired Joyce Meier’s article four years later.<sup>4</sup> Brown-Guillory

reads Grimke's *Rachel*, Johnson's *Safe*, and Graham's *It's Morning* as literary documents that address the injustices of slavery and lynching, indict patriarchy, and most importantly, to use Brown-Guillory's critical language, reveal "the victimization of black women" (198). The black mothers in the three texts, according to Brown-Guillory, feel "voiceless" and "invisible." Their "perception of powerlessness" is linked not only to the pressure of contingency, but is also a reflection of the mothering style, values and teachings of the older generation of women. The black mothers resort to violence against their children as a result of the presence of a "damaged view of motherhood" (199) that circulates in the black community. As daughters, the infanticidal mothers have inherited or copied the damaged view of motherhood from their biological mothers or othermothers. Brown-Guillory contends that "women learn how to mother from their mothers, either biological or surrogate, and when the learning process is obstructed, feelings of hopelessness or powerlessness are transferred from mothers to daughters" (200). The critic sees the acts of infanticide as a result of "transference of negative mothering" (200) that is indicative of the dissipation of the entire black community.

Thus, Brown- Guillory identifies the problem of infanticide as a glitch in mother-daughter relationships that could be fixed by eliminating the highly problematic versions of motherhood and restoring the positive, desirable models of black motherhood to illustrate communal perseverance and preservation. From this perspective, the question of safety and motherhood concerns primarily women. It can be regulated within the smaller female community circle comprised of mothers and daughters only and does not necessitate any male intervention. Her reading of the infanticidal motif and the playwrights intentions concludes as follows: "These playwrights suggest that mothers,

with the help of othermothers, ultimately can save their daughters (and sons too) by teaching them to persevere at making a place for themselves in society, despite difficult or even impossible odds” (205).

It is debatable whether Johnson, Graham, and Grimke were trying to expose the models of damaged motherhood in their plays and direct public attention toward the benefit of practicing some positive models of mothering instead, as Brown-Guillory contends. What is more obvious is the black female critic’s desire to steer her interpretation toward what I shall call a survivalist brand of feminist criticism that celebrates the heroic maternal effort to stand against all odds. This survivalist brand of black feminist criticism, as Brown-Guillory’s argument suggests, flourishes upon approved survivalist solutions of motherhood that not only carry on victoriously the torch of resistance but also heralds the news that the dream of normal, functioning motherhood is attainable, that its achievement will make a place for black mothers and their children in American society.

Thus, similar to Meier, Brown-Guillory evokes the victim/villain format of feminist criticism, but unlike Meier, she is careful about its negative effect that this format produces in terms of mothers’ political viability. She is aware of the entrapment of political agency ascribable to the infanticidal mothers when turned merely into victims and is quick to divert in order to avoid a critical impasse. She resorts to the discussion of “bad” and “good” models of motherhood to keep afloat the idea of productive cultural hereditary models between mothers and their daughters that appear to be essential for the proper functioning of the whole community.



In a more recent study, Laura Dawkins discusses Graham's, Johnson's and Grimke's infanticidal mother figures as characters that help achieve the writers' political goal to "replace the [Christian] ideal of *mater dolorosa* [...] with the ancient images of maternal authority" (223-224). Dawkins refers to the mythical and ancient literature images of Lilith and Medea to illustrate the formidable power potential of the murderous mothers. In referencing ancient images of maternal authority, Dawkins argues that the black women writers have created mothers "who are simultaneously powerful and powerless, defeated and defiant," and in doing so, the Harlem Renaissance writers have "radically revise[d] their post-Reconstruction precursors' Christian images of African American motherhood" (224). Dawkins reads the motif of infanticide as a revisionist image of black motherhood capable of acute criticism of the servitude of the previous generation of black female writers who bow to the moral and ideological dogmas of white motherhood incarnated in the Christian view of *mater dolorosa*. The trope of infanticide, in other words, foregrounds the generational disputes between post-Reconstruction and Harlem Renaissance women writers about black motherhood. It articulates the position of rejection of racial maternal servitude voiced by the later generation of women writers in favor of an appropriative, according to Dawkins, yet annihilating maternal agency. Unlike Meier and Brown-Guillory, Dawkins acknowledges the power of the infanticidal mother but is quick to point out that this is a tragic and self-destructive power, even if it shows some subversive agency. Thus, Graham's, Johnson's, and Grimke's political accomplishment carries no further weight other than suggesting that "Western models of motherhood disempower and betray black mothers" (227). Ultimately, the infanticidal mother for Dawkins is simultaneously a victim and a villain;

neither a martyr nor a monster. Her action reveals an absence of a new discourse on motherhood, which would serve as “an alternative to the sacrificial maternity within Western hegemony” (236). Such a discourse remains a maternal utopia as the act of infanticide testifies to it.

Dawkins acknowledges the agency of the black infanticidal mother but contextualizes it in a blend of religious mythology and Greek drama. The return to ancient and mythical sources of feminine power may be within easy reach for oppressed women to imitate, a seductive thought in the critic’s mind, but all such actions offer at best is an inversion of power by favoring matriarchy at the expense of patriarchy. The problem of betting too much on formidable feminine ancient powers is, as Biblical mythology and ancient Greek literature teach us, that Lilith will always come back to snatch more innocent children and terrorize the whole society with the primordial fear of child loss. While Medea, if we take Euripides as a yardstick, will always leave triumphantly on a chariot, heading into the open skies, once she accomplishes her revenge against her unfaithful husband but victorious king Jason by killing their two sons.

<sup>5</sup> In addition, neither Medea nor Lilith can preclude the cycle of systemic violence and abuse of power that sparked their aggressive reactions in the first place. Their mythic feminine and maternal power is part of the violence and abuse rather than a tenable solution to it. Thus, by referencing the power of the black infanticidal mothers to that of the ancient mythical mothers, Dawkins is bound to speak of utopian maternal visions in the end. The search to establish a precursor connection between ancient formidable feminine power and its modern manifestations makes Dawkins experience the lure of

traditionalist feminism, if we can label her analysis this way, and then escape conveniently again into the victim/villain model.

It is with these thoughts in mind that I seek a different and hopefully more satisfying solution to the employment of the motif of infanticide, the murderous mother, and their political function in Graham's *It's Morning* and Johnson's *Safe*. My reading may also enrich the standard perception of protest dramas as obviation of interracial irreconcilable conflicts by adding the dimension of these conditions that create the possibility for strong communal unity among the members of the oppressed group. If indeed Johnson's and Graham's dramas illustrate "site[s] of struggle" as Judith L. Stephens would say, or whether they communicate a "sustained vein of struggle," as Trudier Harris would explain, they function as such due to the political intervention of the infanticidal mothers in the construction of the empty signifier *safety*. It is through the construction of such empty signifiers, Laclau argues in his theory of hegemony and emancipation, that politics and the political become possible in our lives. Both Cissie in *It's Morning* and Liza in *Safe* provide us with an insight into how black mothers participate in construction of the empty signifier *safety* through the act of infanticide and how they become instrumental in the organization of the communal space in a structure that will allow pursuit of the community's own desire for communitarian fullness.

Laclau argues that an empty signifier only emerges "if there is a structural impossibility in the signification as such, and only if this impossibility can signify itself as an interruption (subversion, distortion, etc.) of the structure of the sign" (37). That is, the limits of signification can only announce themselves as the impossibility of realizing what is within those limits – and if they can be signified in a direct way, they would be

internal to signification and hence would not be limits at all. In order to be true limits, they have to be always antagonistic. It is the exclusionary logic that introduces the ambivalence within a system of difference constituted by those limits.

With the shocking act of infanticide, we have a non-linguistic element brought into an already existing discursive structure of social relations. Infanticide is the element that is external to the structure; it is one thing that defines the structure as structure by marking its boundary. By killing their children, the infanticidal mothers point to that external element against which the constitution of the structure acquires its meaning and definition. Infanticide is also the element that redefines the subject position of the infanticidal mother in relation to the structure. The new subject position in which the infanticidal mother finds herself threatens the integrity of the established system of differential positions by annihilating, or at minimum, transforming the sanctioned subject positions within the system in a way that has the potential to subvert the system's foundation and jeopardize its smooth operation.

For example, Cissie in Graham's *It's Morning* is no longer the slave mother whose job is to multiply the master's property by giving birth to a free labor force and offering herself as free labor, but a formidable destroyer of the master's property and an overly protective mother to her child. Liza, in Johnson's *Safe*, acts in a similar fashion when strangling her newborn baby boy. She disturbs the system of controlled racial differences upon which the post-Reconstruction fabric of American society had emerged. It is from this new subject position that she questions the normalized practice of lynching in America shortly after the Reconstruction era. Cissie's and Liza's new social positionality is determined by a moment of contingency to which they actively contribute

as well. Cissie's fourteen year-old daughter's destiny is a part of a last minute arrangement made by the old master, who has gone to war and has to sell some of his most valuable property to keep the plantation in his hands; Cissie jeopardizes that deal by slitting the throat of her daughter and conveniently underlying the process of structural dislocation and dispersion of elements. This will allow for the articulation of structural signifiers, also known as nodal points, to take place in a new way.

Similarly, Liza vehemently reacts to the lynching of a young black man, who is chased on the streets to be hanged by an enraged mob for hitting his white employer. By a process of identification of what might happen in the future to her newly born son, she transforms the nature of the black maternal position in the system as well as attempts to cancel what cultural historian Grace Hale in her study on lynching, *Making Whiteness*, calls the entertainment aspect and body part extracted profit value that goes with the act of lynching.

Thus, the infanticidal mothers introduce a logic of difference that is not integrated into the social system for its proper functionality and production of totalizing effects, but rather serves as an external limit that poses a threat to the very systematicity of the racist system. The maternal interpretation of the signifier *safety* as protection in death is uttered precisely from the limit zone of the system that at once makes possible the existence of the system, with all its recognized differential values, and reminds the viewer of its condition of impossibility, of never being able to offer a full closure.

To follow Laclau's theoretical insights, it is this difference that is displayed as an external difference to the system, which in turn helps generate the logic of equivalence among the differences that make the system an attempt to preserve those differences

against an external threat. As a result they raise the logic of equivalence as an attempt to unite against the perceived external threat. It is the moment of this canceling of the logic of differences at the expense of the logic of equivalence that creates the political unity around a number of powerful empty signifiers. Graham's *It's Morning* and Johnson's *Safe* document the time before a certain logic of equivalence in regard to infanticide gets raised among the different members and groups of Cissie's slave society and Liza's era of lynching. What the two dramas foreground is the conditions under which such an equivalential logic can emerge. With the act of infanticide, the murderous mothers try to shift the focus from maternity and motherhood, something that directly applies to women, their reproductive capacities and parental duties, to the question of safety, an element with the capacity for application to all members and groups of the oppressed. This is the important condition that makes the black mothers eligible for political work and communal organization. They have already made a bet to construct their political subjectivity grounded in antagonistic exclusivity and toss a challenge among the ranks of their community for the plausible construction of equivalential chains that will inevitably deal with not just the maternal, but the communal construction of the sign *safety* whose new signified will be an expression of social unity along intracommunal lines first and above all. The key to how different members become active in negotiating the new meaning for safety lies in Morrison's *Beloved*, while her literary precursors Graham and Johnson only hint at the tremendous effort required by different participants to build such a communal consensus.

#### Shirley Graham and *It's Morning*

In a letter to Du Bois dated September 8, 1938, Shirley Graham expressed her

opinion that the problem with establishing and recognizing a true Negro art resided in the hands of black creators themselves. She declared her faithful intention to deliver such recognizable art. “Gradually,” Shirley Graham wrote, “I believe I can break through the barriers. And this is the only hope for real development of the Negro in the theatre. Some one of us must be in a position of authority. Until that happens we get no plays produced and most of our acting is turned into burlesque.”<sup>6</sup>

The letter marks her interest in theatre, where she, like a significant number of black leading intellectuals, saw the opportunity to reach black audiences in a fairly accessible format, mainly through college and community stages and performances. She aspired toward the creation of quality art work that would no longer serve the needs of white producers and audiences but would paint a realistic picture of the development of black talent in America and would represent the black community for what it is. Perhaps more importantly, the letter speaks of her confidence as a playwright and as someone who would have the lead in the formation of black theatre. This declaration is important because it comes from an aspiring female playwright with no less confidence than that of a black male leading intellectual. Indeed, Shirley Graham, much in the spirit of Du Bois’s dream of “the talented tenth,” speaks of the playwright being in a “position of authority” to discredit and perhaps erase the deceptive image of the race built through the genre of burlesque.<sup>7</sup>

The “position of authority,” at least from the time of Graham’s career as a dramatist and before her marriage with Du Bois, did not go far beyond the creation and production of a limited number of plays. She was far less successful with their publication. Only one drama was then published, despite the fact that she was quite active

in seeking publication.<sup>8</sup> Scholars agree that her biggest artistic success relates to the creation of the first black opera, *Tom-Tom*, and its production at the Cleveland Stadium in Ohio in 1932. Of course, her playwright heritage remains far less significant and less studied. As a result, Graham's position of authority for her contemporaries and later on for scholars of her work is closely associated with her skills as a composer and musician.

But in the context of this study, Graham's position-of-authority statement has a significant appeal. Graham phrased this statement in 1938, at the beginning of her academic career at Yale, where she was able to learn the craft of playwriting and directing, thanks to sponsorship coming from the Rosenwald Fund.<sup>9</sup> It is during the same two-year period, 1938-1940, while Graham was at Yale that she wrote *It's Morning*. Thus, the question of "position of authority" could be as well related to her creation of *It's Morning*. To what extent and how does this particular play become an expression of the author's position of authority? The political aspect of her position-of-authority statement in connection to her role as an artist is quite obvious as I suggested earlier.

The execution of Graham's position of authority as a playwright promises to give the Negro theatre some safety from a degrading bulesquization. Just like Cissie, the infanticidal mother, who claims to have given safety to her killed daughter Millie, Graham attempts to mother the black theatre in a protectionist manner. It is this "position of authority" as non-oppressive but rather protective and consensual in character, through adoption and recognition by other playwrights, that makes it applicable to Laclau's theory of hegemony and emancipation.

First, let's give Shirley Graham's *It's Morning* a closer look to see how the political, as conceptualized through infanticide, works in the play; then we can elaborate



on how Graham's "position of authority" does its political job in the context of emerging black theatre.

Shirley Graham opens *It's Morning* with a special note on African languages, meaning the changing of elements in African American dialects, the black biblical mode of homiletic and other expression, and those in the singing of spirituals:

The dialect in *It's Morning* is not uniform. It is not intended to be. Many American languages express different meanings by changes in pitch and volume. The most primitive of American Negroes indicate slight changes in meaning by changing vowel sounds. Also, the old type of Negro preachers used a biblical mode of expression which cannot be expressed in dialect. The song used in Scene II, "Ah want Jesus to walk wid me," is one of the oldest of the Spirituals. As are most of these older songs, it is in the minor mode. Music for the other lyrics is original and harmonizes with the theme of the play.

(Opening note to *It's Morning*)

With this opening note, Graham wants to put the emphasis on language, especially on the phonetic and tonal aspects. Vowel transformations, tone, and volume become major devices for semantic transformations. This is very similar to the Bakhtinian concept of double-voicedness that later served as a foundation to Gates's influential theory, designed specifically to locate and identify the black tradition from within language and indigenous African heritage. If Graham aims at triggering a semantic shift based on material linguistic markers, she needs a context that will best reveal the production of semantic shifts in the content of the linguistic unit. In other words, in terms of plot, she will need an event and a character that will create what Laclau calls a

“structural dislocation” to cast a spotlight on the unrepresentable within the existing discursive order, the thing that disrupts and destabilizes the symbolic order. This is precisely the function of the infanticide committed by the mother. And in order to give that structural dislocation some political meaning, there will have to be a communal response to the social effects such a structural dislocation produces. The shift in meaning based on phonetic and tonal changes should be socially palpable, grasped as a different meaning.

The second factor that Graham considers important for the conceptualization of the Negro theatre is the reference to the Biblical mode of expression, as we learn from the introductory note to *It's Morning*. The authoritative Biblical discourse is usually employed to defend the actions of black community members against white oppression. This is also the case in *It's Morning*. The evocation of the Biblical discourse argues for a timeless and universal arrangement of the structural problem caused by infanticide. Even though by religious definition the event is of sinful nature, the dead child is innocent and will be safe in the bosom of the Lord. The act of infanticide, however, is not labeled a sin, and the infanticidal mother is not defined as a sinner. However, the religious discourse cannot accommodate the redefined maternal meaning of safety as death by murder. It can only accommodate the victim of the murder. Thus, by the end of the play, Graham gradually obscures the importance of the Biblical discourse in favor of an expected civic communal debate about the future of the infanticidal mother and the meaning of safety.

The third element that Graham emphasizes in the introductory note to *It's Morning* is the role of song. She speaks of spirituals and other original songs that create the fabric of the African American culture. Graham herself has received her musical

education from a number of places and institutions as her biographers tell us. In Paris, she learned the music of different African countries; at Howard University she advanced her studies in music and then headed to Morgan State College in Baltimore to continue her education. In 1935 she received her master's degree in music from the conservatory at Oberlin College, Ohio.<sup>10</sup>

The use of music in *It's Morning* also produces an ironic message because, depending on the perspective of the listeners, it marks the moment of freedom for the slaves and celebrates the moment of safety that the infanticidal mother thought to have achieved for her daughter.

By reading Graham's position of authority through the lens of the introductory note to *It's Morning*, it becomes evident that Graham, the playwright, exploits the material aspects of the sound as they exist in language and music to establish her power as a cultural politician and black dramatist. Her vision for the development of authentic Negro theatre rests on the exploration of folk elements and speech patterns already in circulation among black people, and through these elements, she tries to create a safe medium for black drama. When coupled with the plot peculiarities and characters in *It's Morning*, Graham's safe medium becomes a mixture of Lockean "folk drama" and Du Boisian "art as propaganda." She uses both rival doctrines, but the articulation of this mixture remains a strictly feminine affair, based on the discussion of troublesome motherhood and its capacity to politicize the communal subjectivities.

The action in *It's Morning* takes place during slavery and the second year of the Civil War on the eve of the enactment of Lincoln's Emancipation Proclamation. It is the last day in December, 1862, a dating which helps Graham create a historical protest

drama, safely removed from the hot issues of her day, yet significantly pungent to address racial and social injustice. The Emancipation Proclamation becomes effective on the morrow.

Cissie, the slave mother in *It's Morning*, has just learned that in order to settle the debt incurred during the absence of her husband, who has gone to war, the mistress of the plantation has to sell some slaves to a cruel and hard master down the river. The master is ready to close the deal, provided he receives the one slave whom he desires, Millie, Cissie's teenage daughter. Cissie learns the sad news that her daughter will be taken early in the morning and returns to the cottage, a "motionless figure" with "one hand hiding her face, the other hanging listlessly at the side" (*It's Morning* 213). Her daughter is still in the fields and has no idea that she will have to leave her mother and this plantation to go serve a different master on the next day, the day she is proclaimed by Lincoln to be free.

It is in this predicament that the other slaves find Cissie, try to react on the upcoming event, and discuss the imminent mother/daughter tragedy.

Graham has opted for peculiar camp arrangement between the members of the slave community involved in the discussion of Cissie's problem. On the one hand, there is a group of two young female slaves and one older woman, who are extremely sympathetic to Cissie's predicament. The younger women, Rose and Phoebe, describe disturbing details from the business transaction between the mistress of the plantation and the villainous slaveholder, who threatened to starve the mistress to death if he did not get Millie girl. To them he is "lak a beast dat's scented fresh young meat" (*It's Morning* 214). Cissie herself was there, too, and saw how his hands "touch huh [Millie's] golden breast" (*It's Morning* 214). The older woman, Aunt Sue, provides the tragic story of Cissie's life,

which explains why now the mother stands motionless, in a state of horror etched upon her face. As a young girl, the story goes, Cissie was strong, beautiful, and slender; she “nevah walk, jus’ prance an’ run about the place” (215) until one day the overseer took advantage of her to show her who was in charge. Cissie continued to suffer the overseer’s endless humiliation; one day he kicked her with his foot while she was still pregnant.

Cissie’s painful experience with the overseer is at the very center of her current state of horror; it is the very thing that renders her weak and seems to paralyze her resistance. She is a sorrowful mother, incapable of offering protection to the child that she dearly loves. In this state, she is still a part of the differential structuration of the system, concealing rather than revealing its very paradoxical limits. She is an illustration of how the discourse on motherhood under slavery operates in its part of codified black motherhood.

On the other side of the communal division, there is the oldest female character, Grannie Lou, who, according to Graham’s introduction of characters, “is considered a little crazy” (*It’s Morning* 211). It is this old woman who taps into the repository of African American folkloristic history to tell a story of a brave woman who was in a similar situation as Cissie. If it was not for the peculiar characteristic of alleged craziness, Grannie Lou would have been the person with the highest storytelling credentials in the slave community. She is the living record of ancestral history, the oral communal archive of undocumented black experience that the members of the community can trust. The phrase “a little crazy,” however, puts in question not the cultural performance of the story Grannie Lou tells, but the authenticity of the narrative. Listeners have to evaluate individually the veracity of the story, based primarily on the criterion of trust. Is she

telling a true story or is her oral account tainted by the signs of insanity? This is the dilemma that the community members face while listening to Grannie Lou's story of the unknown black mother:

Dey say she straight from jungles/ in the far off Af'ica...She nevah say./ Dat war a 'oman – straight lak tree, an' tall,/ swift as a lion an' strong as any ox./ Da sugah cane went down fo' huh big knife,/ lak cottonstalks under the fierces' hail - / no man could wak wid huh...An' sing!/ she uster sing out in da fields...(It's *Morning* 216).

This unknown black mother possesses a combination of formidable physical strength, excellent work skills, and impressive knowledge about and use of labor tools. She is also a notable song performer. Endowed with exceptional qualities and talent, she surpasses even men. Flipping the gender hierarchy by a demonstration of excessive physical power makes this unknown black mother a potential agent of resistance and protectionism. She comes as high as possible in the hierarchy among slaves and right after white people in the social order as a whole. Her social construction is an implication of a mythical matriarch who binds community together. This is what makes this African black mother a potential model for emulation. She is like a strong magnet for feminine, racial, and cultural identification, and precisely because she has the capacity to serve as such a model, Cissie and the group of young women might find her appealing. Her power image promises to arm them with that which they lack – weakness and despondency in Cissie's case and passive pity and sympathy in Rose and Phoebe's case.

It is the story of this unknown, mythical African woman that turns out to be crucial for the introduction of the theme of infanticide in the play. Grannie Lou continues

her story:

She hab tree sons, dey black an' tall lak she,/ an' one day news comes dat dey  
sole huh sons down/ ribbah .....Dey bring good price. / She say dey nebbah go./  
Da white folks laf,/ but niggahs dassent laf – dey see her face. She don' say  
no'tin' mo', but go away,/

An' early in da mawnin' call huh boys,/ An' when dey come, she tell 'em to stan'  
close,/ An' watch da sun come up out ob da hills./ Dey sort of smile at huh an'  
look/ An' den dat 'oman lift huh big cane knife,/ She cry out sompin' in a wild,  
strange voice,/ An' wid one sweep she cut off all dey heads, dey roll down at huh  
feet – all tree ob dem.” (*It's Morning* 217)

By this time Grannie Lou's story, shaped and transmitted as a piece of folklore, addresses clearly the current situation of Cissie and her daughter. It points to a decisive but extremely controversial resolution of the conflict. The hyperbole – mother slitting the throats of her three sons with a single slash of the cane knife to save them from slavery – serves to empower Cissie in a possible execution of a similar task, but she could never outperform the strength and courage of the unknown black mother. Cissie would snap out of her motionless and depressing passivity by slaughtering her daughter with a knife, but would still be “less prominent” than the unknown black mother, who kills all her three children to protect them from slavery.

To put it in perspective of Laclau's theory, the story also concerns the introduction of a contingent act of decision against the background of undecidable multiplicity. The story, even if made up by Grannie Lou on the spot or circulating for some time in the slave communities, as Grannie Lou's folkloric presentation suggests,

functions as one more option in the field of undecidable multiplicity that Cissie may wish to consider and produce her own version of infanticide, which in itself becomes a contingent act of decision. This example complicates Laclau's theory by addressing moments of pre-fabricated and culturally induced contingent acts of decision. What later passes as a spontaneous, wild reaction has been preceded by a moment of contingent communal imaginary action, rendered by the oldest female member of the slave community. The implementation of a similar contingent action will result in widening the chain of subject positions.

Cissie, with her act of infanticide, automatically becomes an illustration of this new subject position, and, as such, it needs to be assessed in terms of its discursive function in the black and white communal spaces. Cissie will be either seen as a monster and an incorrigible sinner or a protective mother left with no options but to resort to tragedy. In this sense, what Shirley Graham offers is a rehearsal of how the black (and white) community might imminently react to infanticide, but as the ending of *It's Morning* shows, there is no interest in the tracing of a retrospective communal reaction to the event. This is the kind of thing that only Morrison does in *Beloved*.

The blood-chilling folkloric myth that Grannie Lou tells to the members of the slave community serves as well to introduce the reaction of the opposite sex in relation to infanticide. Male slaves in Graham's play represent the biblical mode of expression, the significance of which Graham stresses in the introductory note to the play. As with the group of women, men are also divided in their assessment of an upcoming infanticide. Cripple Jake, characterized as the banjo player, constructs a line of defense of the act, relying on his interpretation of the religious narrative:



**Cripple Jake.** Ah'm tinkin' bout ting-/ Hebbin is a high and holy place,/ Da chilluns done no wrong,/ Dyin' will bring 'em joy,/ Da good book say, "Lam's/ in His bosom – safe."/ While Cissie know dat/ Livin's jes a slow decay/ Wid worms gnawin' lak nits/ Into dey heart an' soul. (*It's Morning* 221)

Cripple Jake associates safety with the domain of God and not with maternal protection the way the infanticidal mother does. Cissie would not be reproached for her act because she understands the misery of life in slavery; she would only deliver her child in the safe hands of God. This means that her potential for mobilizing political activity would remain untapped. She would be acting within the boundaries of a sanctioned discourse without being able to subvert it.

The biblical mode of expression, however, finds different interpretation in the words of Uncle Dave, the slave preacher from Green's plantation. As an authorized representative of religious authority, he warns against infanticide as a possible solution to the master-slave conflict:

**Uncle Dave.** Kain't you trus' de Lawd,/ daughtah? Hit's al wid Him. Yo' kain' stain yo' han's wid da blood ob yo' own chilluns (*It's Morning* 221).

And later:

**Uncle Dave.** (*fallen on his knees*) Oh Lawd! Oh Lawd!/ Sittin' on yo' great white throne,/ wid da stars a crown o' beauty fur yo' haid,/ An' de earth a mighty footstool fu yo' feet,/

Lean down ovah da ramparts of Hebbin' dis mawnin',/ An' see us 'umble sinners kneelin' hyear./ We been prayin' so long,/ We been singin' so. (*It's Morning* 222)

Uncle Dave is concerned more with the sanctity of life and the concept of sin that is attached to blood spilling. Safety for him has no dimension beyond the realm of human life; it would be wrong to seek it in death. The second thing that stands out in Uncle Dave's speech is the fact that community as such cannot intervene effectively in this highly contentious issue. The communal actions are limited to peaceful praying; a kind of internal communal spiritual introspection and a plea to avoid the catastrophe, but hardly an active communal response.

Both Cripple Jake's and Uncle Dave's responses situate comfortably the infanticidal mother within the limits of the religious discourse. Cripple Jake tends to think of Cissie as someone who looks up to God to provide safety for her child in heaven, yet knows that Cissie will be lonely "maybe fuh a t'ousand yeahs tuh come" (221). Uncle Dave immediately casts her as a sinner and all she could do, or all they could do, is ask God to divert this terrible life prospective for Cissie.

It is after the religious communal debate constructed as a commentary to Grannie Lou's chilling story that Cissie finally intervenes with her verbal response. It comes as a partial rejection of Cripple Jake's vision that the killed daughter will be an innocent child safe in the bosom of the Lord, and as an even more aggressive opposition to Uncle Dave's interpretation of sin and spiritual disgrace:

**Cissie.** But, when da saints ob God go marchin' home,/ Mah gall will sing! Wid all da pure, bright stars,/ Tuhgedder wid da mawnin' stars – She'll sing! (*It's Morning* 221)

Cissie's verbal response, however, does not undermine the religious aspect, but instead seeks an intersecting point between it and the act of infanticide. She imagines a

special active, triumphalist role for her daughter among the saints as a ceremonial leader who takes them home under the sound of her song. It is this combination of Millie's stepping into the divine circle of power and her inspiring singing that Cissie posits as her maternal definition for safety. Thus, the daughter becomes triumphantly reborn, even if metaphorically, into a new system of life that does not make Millie a marginal subject any more, but puts her at a top position where she shares angelic power. Cissie's maternal interpretation of safety – an imagined space where her daughter is not simply under somebody's protection but is in charge of things – is the black maternal extension of the communal narrative of the unknown mother that Grannie Lou tells. Cissie becomes a co-author of communal history and fiction, and by virtue of that claims her political subjectivity.

With the act of infanticide, Cissie also seeks to disturb the existing differential positions of power between blacks and whites in real life. This becomes obvious when she by mistake takes the white soldier of the North, who has come to inform them that they are free, for a representative of the hard and cruel master who is here to collect her daughter.

Cissie carries the dead body of her daughter, Millie, covered in blood, as she meets the Union soldier at the door:

**Cissie**...See how huh red blood falls hyear in da sun,/ Hit's warm an'  
pure...Come, dip yo' han's in it/ She will not shrink away – Huh teahs will nevah/  
choke huh song nor will huh limbs grow hebbly/ wid despair. Ma girl is dead!  
(*It's Morning* 223).

Millie's safety in death, blood dripping from her body, becomes a horrid display in the hands of her mother; a sort of terror biological weapon, designed to promote fear and emotional insecurity in the eyes of the white male spectator. It is a moment of the transformation of the value of the female black body from a source of sexual pleasure and free labor to a horrifying exhibit that blocks the mechanism of economic prosperity propped up by the inhuman system of slavery.

The scene is horrifying yet for another reason. Along with the brutally slain body of the child, the Union soldier learns that he is standing in front of the perpetrator of the murder, a woman who easily could be labeled a criminal and a savage from his perspective. As such, she poses a threat to the social and economic order of the North as well.

Her maternal protest of slavery acquires a different dimension after the Union soldier appears at the slaves' cottage door as a "a messenger of glad tidings" (222):

**Soldier.** Look! Look, the day has come!/ The day for which we fought.

[...] Free! Do you understand?/ You're free! No longer slaves. (*It's Morning* 222)

With the proclamation of freedom comes as well the claim that their freedom is a white men's project. Freedom has become the political signifier that the North offers to all as a way to unite a divided nation. But the clash between the white union soldier and the infanticidal mother voices a communal concern and foreshadows potential future disturbances in racial relations. We might say that the initial maternal claim to save her daughter from slavery by death has been modified to "We are free but we are still not safe." Cissie's cruel invitation to the messenger to dip his fingers in her daughter's blood

is a response both to the system of slavery as well as a concern to the system of democracy that hopefully will ensue.

In the end, Cissie is alone, holding her dead child, community members and soldiers withdrawn. She looks into her child's face and speaks quietly, "Hit's mawnin'" (223). The mother's last words are highly ambiguous; they could mean that the morning of safety has indeed come for her daughter or that the morning of mourning has also come.

Shirley Graham, similar to Georgia Douglas Johnson, opts for an ending that leaves the infanticidal mother in isolation from the black community. The mother knows that she has done the right thing to protect her own child, even if this comes at the expense of her isolation. It is this isolation, caused by a shocking contingent act of decision, – infanticide – that opens the space for the new subject position she occupies.

What Graham achieves in terms of communal dynamic in relation to hegemony is to highlight the logic of difference within the black community as illustrated by the split in the women's group and the partitioning of the men's group over the issue of infanticide. This is a community that still has not deliberated on a possible consensus of how to reach for the infanticidal mother rather than shun away from her and the question of safety that she painfully raises. In other words, with the intensification of the logic of difference, it is the logic of equivalence that does not receive its development.

#### Georgia Douglas Johnson and *Safe*

Compared to Shirley Graham, Georgia Douglas Johnson wrote more dramas. In fact, she was the most productive black woman playwright of the period. She wrote close to thirty plays, some of them explicitly political in content, while others aimed to

represent an authentic African American literature and average folk life. Similar to Graham, Johnson was a multifaceted talent: she wrote poems, plays, short stories, and music. Despite this proliferation of artistic talent, scholars paid most attention to her poetry, and as a result she became known as “the lady poet” of the New Negro Renaissance. Although Johnson was included as a playwright in Alain Locke’s important anthology *Plays of Negro Life: A Source-Book of Native American Drama* (1927), she was having a hard time publishing her dramas. Towards the end of her life Johnson created her *Catalogue of Writings* with a synopsis of twenty-eight plays divided into four categories: “Radio Plays,” “Primitive Life Plays,” “Plays of Average Negro Life,” and “Lynching Plays.” Most of the twenty-eight plays in Johnson’s catalogue, scholars (Judith L. Stephens and Claudia Tate) tell us, remained unpublished in her lifetime. There was no interest among literary scholars to uncover, study, and/or publicize her work. It was not until 1989 when Kathy A. Perkins published in her book, *Black Female Playwrights: An Anthology of Plays Before 1950*, four of Georgia Douglas Johnson’s plays considered probably her best drama accomplishments with preserved manuscripts that would allow their publication. In 1990 Elizabeth Brown- Guillory edited *Wines in the Wilderness: Plays by African American Women from the Harlem Renaissance to the Present*, where three plays by Johnson appeared, and one of them was *Safe*. This was the first official publication of the play.<sup>11</sup> In 1998 Kathy A. Perkins and Judith L. Stephens co-edited *Strange Fruit: Plays on Lynching by American Women*, where *Safe* was reprinted along with the other two lynching dramas by Johnson which appeared in Brown-Guillory’s anthology. It was Judith L. Stephens, a scholar with deep interest in Johnson’s work, who published the twenty-eight dramas by Johnson in *The Plays of*

*Georgia Douglas Johnson: From the New Negro Renaissance to the Civil Rights*

*Movement* in 2006. This is the first published collection of Johnson's dramatic work, organized to follow the drama divisions of her *Catalogue of Writings* and documenting her plays as they evolved over the course of a decade. The anthology contains as well Stevens's newly-discovered Johnson dramas that were previously thought irretrievably lost. This is the most representative collection of Johnson's lynching dramas, totaling six one-act plays and two original versions of *A Sunday Morning in the South*.<sup>12</sup>

In the introductory article to *Strange Fruit*, "Lynching Dramas and Women: History and Critical Context," Judith L. Stephens defines lynching dramas as a unique American genre. "A lynching drama," in Stephens' words, is "a play in which the threat or occurrence of a lynching, past or present, has major impact on the dramatic action" (3). In the same article, Stephens claims that there is no full-length study on the genre and its place in American theater history. Broadly speaking, these plays "represent a distinctly American experience shaped by the African American struggle for survival and the simultaneous existence of interracial conflict and cooperation that has characterized the black/white relations throughout American history" (4). The interracial aspect of survival, conflict and cooperation, however, goes unnoticed under the scope of Stevens's definition.

"In *Anti-Lynch Plays by African American Women*," Stephens develops "a critical framework for the study of the anti-lynch play as a site of struggle against dominant racial and gender ideologies of late nineteenth- and early twentieth-century America" (329). She develops a critical approach based on feminist theatre theory and black feminist theory, insisting on destabilizing the centrality of any of the three critical

categories – class, race, gender – thus examining their intersecting point and balance. This approach helps Stephens study the anti-lynch play as a site of historical struggle against an order dominated by white male positions of authority and white male ideology. Stephens discusses only one of Johnson’s plays, *A Sunday Morning in the South*, from the perspective of intersectionality.

“In Art, Activism, and the Uncompromising Attitude in Georgia Douglas Johnson’s Lynching Plays,” published in 2005, Stephens examines six of Johnson’s plays. This study probably remains the most comprehensive on Johnson’s lynching plays thus far. In it, Stephens views Johnson both as “an outspoken advocate of the anti-lynching movement and a central figure in the lynching drama tradition” (“Art, Activism” 87). Stephens emphasizes the increasing sophistication in using black theatre as a form of protest and argues that Johnson uses irony, music, and the figure of the black family as artistic strategies and as a unique approach to theatre as social protest. Johnson was interested in dramas that “explored the effects of racial injustice on families and communities” (89) and the dramas, thus, became documents of “Johnson’s racial consciousness as well as her rage against lynching” (“Art, Activism” 89). Although the focus is seemingly on the formal aspect of Johnson’s dramas, the formalist features receive a political interpretation of their meaning and deployment.

The intersecting points between class, race, and gender that are instrumental for Stephens’s theorization of Johnson’s lynching dramas imply a critical interest in the category of subject positions and difference as decisive factors in the examinations of the sites of struggle where black women playwrights get actively involved. The concept of subject positions appears in Laclau’s theory of hegemony and emancipation, too, but the



stress is no longer on the celebration of postmodern difference that axiomatically fail to construct a meaningful whole, but rather on the movement away from fixity that leads Laclau's theoretical insight into the realm of the concept of subject positionality. This is precisely the concept that best applies to the figure of the infanticidal mother in Johnson's drama *Safe*.

Another point in Stephens's analysis that is of interest in this present study is the observation that the figure of the black family is an important strategy for expressing social protest via art. While Stephens is correct in her observation that the black family is directly affected by the racist practice of lynching and even goes on so far as to suggest that the family also fulfills a metaphoric function in representing the black community, she does not discuss the hidden potential for the political subjectivity of the members of the family. Furthermore, in *Safe*, Johnson does not limit the tragedy exclusively to the members of the Pettigrew extended family but involves the characters of a female neighbor, the doctor who helps deliver the baby boy – the innocent victim of infanticide. This expansion of community members entering the domestic space of the family is important for the articulation of the empty signifier *safety* in a broader social space.

Georgia Douglas Johnson wrote *Safe* circa 1929 while living in Washington D.C., the second cultural capital of the New Negro Renaissance competing with the famous and well-known Harlem neighborhood of New York. The action takes place in an unspecified Southern town in 1893. Although the year is an early one from the actual late 1920s anti-lynch campaigns sponsored by NAACP, it is a reference to one of the gloomiest periods in American history for lynchings. Between 1882 and 1899, the annual number of lynchings was over a hundred with concentration of vigilante activities in the former

Confederate states.<sup>13</sup> In 1896, the Supreme Court handed down the controversial decision on *Plessy v. Ferguson*, which led to the institutionalization of segregation and disenfranchisement. To look at such a traumatic moment in history that constructs the racial relations in the country in yet another hierarchic model, based on vigilante justice and spectacular public exhibit of punishment executions and erasure of civil rights, is certainly good material for Johnson's social protest drama. The year that she chose for the dramatic action of *Safe*, 1893, stands conveniently close to the 1896 *Plessy v. Ferguson* judicial turning point in American history that set the tone for racist relations for decades to come. The name of the lynched black character in the play, Sam Hosea, and to a certain degree the plot line, invoke one of the most horrific and sensational lynchings in the South that took place in 1899.<sup>14</sup> No critic of Johnson's *Safe* has explored the connection between the lynching of Sam Hose in 1899 and the fictional events in the play might, but upon closer examination, it becomes obvious that the play becomes a female playwright's political commentary on interracial and intraracial relations under an assumed maternal perspective on the years leading to this infamous lynching and beyond, stretching into the first decades of the twentieth century.

The setting for *Safe*, is the home of the Pettigrews where expectant mother Liza Pettigrew is sewing some small white garment for the baby. Her mother, Mandy Grimes, does the chores in the kitchen, while Liza's husband, John Pettigrew, is sitting in the living room, reading the local newspaper. The first piece of disturbing news comes when John reports the news he has just read in the newspaper that Sam Hosea was caught and put in jail. Sam Hosea's "crime" appears to be related to a dispute that he had with his white employer over wages. In the heated debate, Sam Hosea, a black worker, reportedly

was slapped by his boss, and in response, he hit his employer back. A brief discussion about the family background of Sam Hosea takes place, where the audience learns that in the absence of a father he was brought up by his mother. The family worries how Sam Hosea's mother might have reacted to the news of his detention as they keep building on details from his childhood to paint a portrait of a well-behaved person. Liza remembers how his mother was taking Sam regularly to the church and describes Sam as "a nice motherly sort of boy" (*Safe* 155) at the age of seventeen or so.<sup>15</sup> The seemingly normal reference "motherly sort of boy" gains considerable force later on when Liza, by process of maternal identification, sees herself as a mother of Sam too.

Several moments later, Hannah, the neighbor, appears at the Pettigrew home and brings even more disturbing information on the Sam Hosea case. The authorities have released him from jail, but now a bigger trouble looms large as she heard that a mob is formed downtown to make him pay his due that evening. Liza is upset by the negative development of the event but does not, at first, associate directly the news of mob gathering with the threat of a lynching:

**Liza:** I been settin here thinking bout that poor boy Sam – him working hard to take kere of his widder mother, doing the best he kin, trying to be a man an stan up for hissef, and what do he git – a slap in the face. (*Safe* 157)

Liza assesses Sam Hosea's life and labor efforts primarily in relation to his mother. For her, Sam's masculinity and transition to manhood is measured according to the degree of responsibility and affection he shows to his mother, similar to the way she took care of him when he was a small boy. This devoted mother-son connection is the highest ranking social relationship that is of interest to the expectant mother.

When Liza learns from Hannah that Sam will not get away with just a slap in the face but a much more terrible punishment organized by the lynch mob, she anxiously expresses her maternal desire to have a girl and not a boy:

**Liza:** What's little Nigger boys born for anyhow? I sho hopes mine will be a girl.  
– I don't want no boy to be hounded down and kicked round – No, I don't want to ever have no boy chile! (*Safe* 157).

This publicly expressed preference for the sex of the child is entirely determined, on the one hand, by a specially perceived mother-child bond that replicates the discursive norms of motherhood – a loving, caring, and protective maternal attitude that is in the best interest of the child. On the other hand, it is an *imposed* choice as a direct consequence of lynching and its most common victim – the black man.

What becomes unbearable for a devoted mother is to see her child suffer undeservedly in the hands of violent civil “justice” deliverers concerned with the preservation of the existing racial relations of difference. Liza's explicit wish to have a girl is a chance for her to experience the joy and the special bond that the dominant nineteenth-century discourse on motherhood promises every mother. The public announcement that she wants a girl is an affirmation of the power of that discourse and an open endorsement of it, even if that endorsement is achieved at the expense of a sexist compromise. The desire of experiencing the full benefit of motherhood is stronger than an attempt to confront and expose the corrupt premises of other dominant discourses, namely those of race relations and legal norms. Liza's modification of the discourse on motherhood carried out under the banner of maternal concerns contains clearly overt sexist tones at this point. It becomes a mirror image of the discourses on motherhood in

cultures that explicitly state a preference for the sex of their babies (India, China). The power of the mother as expressed through the wish to have a girl is reminiscent to that of an appeased and maybe satisfied mainstream cultural consumer with little respect for the rights of the newborn. At this point, Liza defends her position under the veneer of maternal compassion that hides the otherwise problematic sexism expressed by the wish for a baby girl.

The reminder that Liza's wish conveys a somewhat abusive maternal power comes in the form of a religious retort that it is sinful to pick and choose what kind of child God has in mind for the expectant mother. It is Liza's mother, Mandy, who reminds her of that. Thus, a generational maternal disagreement takes place over the idea of the mother's role and powers in social life. Mandy, created more like a flat character, defends her devoted yet highly submissive model of motherhood, capable of elevating the maternal mission to a level that threatens the subjectivity of the mother. Her advice to Liza, the expecting mother, is to think of nothing else but to give a safe birth to her child. "You got to born him safe!" (159) is Mandy's definition of maternal duty at this stage.

As the mob advances towards the Pettigrew's house, chasing Sam Hosea, the noise and shrieks in the streets stir troubling emotions among the Pettigrew home occupiers and guests. To avoid attracting attention to their home, they turn off the lights and draw the curtains to hide in the dark. All this has a heavy emotional toll on the expecting mother. She walks up and down the room, restlessly in anticipation of something tragic. As the roar and noises intensify, she hears Sam Hosea's despondent cry for help and mercy outside directed both to his executioners and his mother. "Don't hang

me, don't hang me!" Sam Hosea's voice rises, "I don't want to die! Mother! Mother!" (*Safe* 158). The helplessness of Sam's final words is engraved upon Liza's mind.

Sam Hosea's cry for his mother is that impressionistic moment which triggers the process of identification. Liza imagines this cry to be the cry of her own child as well and feels the need to act as if she were Sam's mother. In an extreme state of agitation, she poses the maternal question to her own mother, "Did you hear him cry for his mother? Did you?" (*Safe* 159). Thus the question of maternal reaction at the moment for making a decision under the pressure of contingency is brought into the maternal public space. By the time Liza acts on her decision, the question of maternal protection and responsibility will surpass the maternal social circle and will enter the broad public domain, provoking reactions among various members of the community.

As Liza shakes and trembles while introducing her maternal response, Mandy, her mother, is adamant when instructing her expecting daughter, "Born him safe! Born him safe! That's what you got to do" (*Safe* 159). It is an uncompromising instruction – almost a maternal order – that delineates the behavior of the expectant mother in terms of submission and performance of a sanctioned maternal duty. Liza repeats hysterically her mother's words, "Born him safe! – safe" (*Safe* 159) and disappears into the other room. The sarcastic and infuriated tone of that repetition aims to undercut the normalized maternal practices by insisting that there is something wrong with the discursive value of the signifier *safety* in relation to motherhood. It doesn't have the disruptive force of an empty signifier yet, but it signals a key element in the discourse on motherhood that can be disputed.

As Liza enters into labor, neighbor Hannah fetches the doctor and John returns home from his surveillance mission in the neighborhood, confirming that the hanging of Sam Hosea took place, sending a shock of terror throughout the members of the black community. So, at the moment when Liza gives birth to her baby, both family and community members are in the house, and they all witness Liza's final maternal decision on the dispute regarding safety that she previously had had with her mother.

When everybody expects to see the newborn, the doctor walks out of Liza's room to make a grimly, terrifying report on what happened immediately after Liza gave birth to a healthy baby:

**Dr. Jenkins:** And she asked me right away, "Is it a girl?"...And I said, "No child, it's a fine boy," and then I turned to wash my hands in the basin. When I looked around again she had her hands about the baby's throat choking it. I tried to stop her, but its little tongue was already hanging from its mouth – It's dead! Then she began, she kept muttering over and over again: "Now he is safe – safe from the lynchers! Safe!" (*Safe* 161)

Dr. Jenkins' account of the maternal infanticide informs family and community members of Liza's decision that eliminates for Liza the terrain of undecidability in regard to maternal duties and responsibilities structured by the act of lynching. By choking her baby boy to death, Liza coins her own maternal definition for safety. Like all the mothers in the texts that we have been analyzing, Liza makes the claim that the best protection a mother can give her child under moments of extreme oppression is in death. Both the act of strangulation and the verbal explanation of the meaning of the infanticidal act are provocatively thrown into the discursive fabrics of several dominant discourses. It is not

only the discourse on motherhood that gets radically altered, nor the discourse on lynching that gets a critical blow by replicating the cause of death – strangulation – as closely as possible, but also the discourse on race relations as a whole, which, as currently structured, undermines the state of freedom promised to everyone by regulating safety standards exclusively for the white population and its lack of such for the black population.

As in Shirley Graham's *It's Morning*, it is the infanticidal mother in Johnson's *Safe* who has the last word. The playwrights' choice for an ending is strikingly similar in both cases. Based on the standard elements that form the curve of dramatic action, one might say that the play lacks a denouement. Instead, it ends on a second climax, the infanticide of the newborn, which not only foregrounds the first one, the lynching of Sam Hosea, but also equalizes the topics of infanticide and lynching by linking them to the concept of safety. It could be said that Johnson, as does Graham, demonstrates what today we theoretically label a feminist solution in the way both conclude their plays. It is important that we hear last from the infanticidal mother and not any other character. This is precisely the moment of verbal designation of the infanticidal mother as a political subject with a different agenda from the mainstream maternal subjectivity available to other women. But the solution to have the infanticidal mother speak last and make her claim about safety is not only a feminist strategy in the attempt to refine the discursive structure on motherhood. Rather, it is marked by a split produced by the ambition to serve as a response to the lynching problem as well. On the one hand, it is strictly feminist because it is a mother who deals actively with the issue of motherhood; on the other hand it is more than a feminist solution in its attempt to leave the sphere of its own



particularity and aim at some trend of universality by offering a provocative response to a social issue outside the domain of the feminine and the maternal. The infanticidal mother claims to have constructed a possible unifying function through her action, and the effect of this action forces the active mobilization of the black community against a violently oppressive social practice such as lynching.

To put it in Laclau's terms, this is her attempt to hegemonize the social space of the black community. But this does not mean that the attempt will necessarily result in hegemony. It is up to the members of the community to weigh that option.

If the audience of Johnson's drama hears last from the infanticidal mother before the curtains fall, the readers of Johnson's drama hear last from the playwright. In the concluding stage note, Johnson turns her attention precisely to the members of Liza's extended family and the representatives of the community:

*(John falls down on a chair sobbing, his face in his hands, as Mandy, stooped with misery, drags her feet heavily toward the closed door. She opens it softly and goes in. The doctor stands, a picture of helplessness as he looks at them in their grief.) Safe 161*

It is a complete reversal of emotional experiences between the family and community members on the one side and the infanticidal mother on the other. If previously it was for Liza to "crumpl[e] up on the chair shivering, her teeth chattering" (158), "stand[...] stooped over in the opening of her bedroom door" (159), "walk up and down the room restlessly" (158) or "hysterically disappear[...] (*Safe* 159), now it is the husband, Liza's mother, and the doctor who are in a similar agitated position. Would John become another Halle or Paul D, to recall some of *Beloved's* main characters? Would Mandy

behave like Morrison's Baby Suggs in *Beloved*? Would the doctor, similar to Stamp Paid, the Underground Railroad activist in Morrison's novel, understand the repetitive maternal muttering about safety at all? These are all questions that Johnson's stage note poses for us, the contemporary readers of her play, who read and compare it with the '80s twentieth century grand rendition of infanticide in African-American literature that Toni Morrison gave us in *Beloved*.

It is not triumphalism of the infanticidal black mother that Johnson offers in selecting the action and the final words of her character to provide an ending of her drama. In fact, judging by the reaction of the family and community members, Johnson may be on her way to turn Liza from the protagonist in the anti-lynch drama into an antagonist of a protest drama. Yet the evidence remains inconclusive. What remains significant, without doubt, is that Johnson presents her characters and readers with a new situation of undecidability – does the maternal claim on safety has any grounds or not? Should the infanticidal mother be punished for her homicidal act or not? These are the questions that the now shocked, sobbing, and helpless family and community members, as well as affected readers, will inevitably have to answer.

In 1936 Johnson submitted several of her lynching plays to the Executive Secretary of NAACP, Walter White, for possible production by the Youth Council of the organization. *Safe* was among them. The plays were rejected with the council's judgement that "they all ended in defeat" and "gave one the feeling that the situation was hopeless despite all the courage which was shown by the Negro characters" (qtd. in Stephens 90). It is likely, the council saw *Safe* as a failed protest drama, incapable of offering a reasonable model for resisting the lynching ideology and practice. It is not

difficult to imagine, given the directions of politics advocated by the NAACP's Youth Council, why *Safe* got rejected. To the members of the council, infanticide demonstrates racial defeatism, perhaps even a form of surrender to the white dogmas as expressed through the practice of lynching. The kind of safety that the NAACP's Youth Council had in mind is clearly tied to the expression of some non-dubious moment of victory, a winning strategy that might serve as a moment of political mobilization and encouragement for the black community. The figure of the infanticidal mother cannot provide a good basis for identification either. It seems that the council – similar to what the school of socialist realism was trying to achieve with proletariat literature – was interested in shaping racial and communal consciousness based on vibrant politicized literary characters who do not fall into the groove of disillusionment and frustration but find strength to come out as positive activists, if not winners, in the dramatic racial clashes shaped by acts of lynching. To draw a comparison, the members of the council behave in a similar fashion to the community members in Morrison's *Beloved*, only instead of a fictional character it is a real black woman playwright and her art that get isolated and rejected.

Johnson replied to the council's objections by refusing to rewrite the plays with her argument that the plays "would lose their greatest dramatic moment...and a play depends so largely upon this" (qtd. in Stephens 90). Critic Judith L. Stephens interprets Johnson's response to NAACP Executive Secretary Walter White as a proof of "her artistic integrity as a playwright and her dedication to her own vision of theatre as social protest" ("Art, Activism" 90). Several lines down, Stephens adds another possibility for Johnson's refusal to revise the dramas which has to do with the influential school of

realism as practiced in the 1930s. Relying on theatre expert Brenda Murphy and her important study, *American Realism and America Drama*, Stephens concludes, “By hesitating to give her plays ‘positive’ endings in which a lynching is defeated, Johnson was forcing her audience to confront the reality of lynching by employing the current style of theatrical ‘realism’ in which a social problem is baldly portrayed and left unresolved” (90). Johnson’s concern not to lose the greatest dramatic moment in her plays, *Safe* included, were they revised to meet the political agenda of the NAACP, can certainly be viewed in the context of a broad, interracial-encompassing context such as the literary movement of realism; however, Johnson’s insisting that the audience engage with the problematics of lynching while denying them a proper denouement ascribes that realism not as much to an aesthetic or a defining realist characteristic but to a greater political function – the task of realistic representation, executed adamantly by Johnson’s emphasizing traumatic social *cul-de-sacs* that need to be collectively processed.

Georgia Douglas Johnson’s biographers report that between 1935 and 1939 she submitted several plays to the Federal Theatre Project (FTP), a government sponsored program designed to facilitate the production of plays as part of President Roosevelt’s Works Project Administration (WPA), one of the many national agencies of the New Deal era designed to relieve the economic burden of the Great Depression. One of the plays that Johnson submitted was *Safe*.<sup>16</sup> The result, as with NAACP, was negative. In a document, dated June 20, 1936, and issued by the Bureau of Research and Publication at the Theatre Federal Project, one reviewer explained his motives for rejection as follows:

Leaving aside such questions as the authoress’ negative, timid, and even false philosophy, this play lacks conviction and feeling. The story is told so casually

and factually that it becomes little more than amplified but unconvincing statement that the sight of a lynching drove a Negro mother crazy. (photocopy of original document in Effinger's biographic entry on Georgia Douglas Johnson in *Twentieth- Century American Dramatists: Third Series*, 185) <sup>17</sup>

For this FTP reviewer, it was the lack of conviction and feeling that marks the play's failure, even though one might argue that in fact there is too much feeling, up to the point where the line between drama and melodrama gets blurred. The second objection is that the events are told "so casually and factually" that they fail to produce the "right" dramatic effect of moving deeply the audience and reaching perhaps for their compassion and empathy. An interesting comment is that the reviewer qualified the play as "little more than amplified." The amplification, as the context suggests, is in reference to what made the black mother go violent while infanticide is clearly not credited as acceptable protest drama strategy.

The second reviewer of *Safe* criticized Johnson's lack of realistic framework and plausibility. The comment reads:

An extremely dramatic, tragic piece. But the glaring weakness of utter exaggeration is too bright – and it fails not because the idea is not dramatic, but because it follows from an absurdity – that they lynch Negro boys 'Down South' for defending themselves from thieves. In fact, the crime that produces lynching is vastly fouler. (Fletcher in *Harlem Renaissance* 30-31) <sup>18</sup>

For this reviewer, "the glaring weakness" of the play comes from the unrealistic cause for lynching that Johnson depicts in her play. Financial dispute between a white employer and a colored worker cannot be the "adequate" reason for lynching a black man. In the

reviewer's eyes, this reason for lynching is historically and culturally incorrect in its representation of the South. Acknowledging realism as the play's operative mode could only be possible if the representation corresponded to the accepted, populist, and moralist version that lynching is a punishment for sexual abuse of white women. This is the "historically accurate" explanation authored by the South and endorsed by the nation. Any other explanation would make lynching absurd, and as the comment suggests, impossible to implement. The "utter exaggeration" and "absurdity" are related only to the act of lynching, eclipsing the second act of violence – infanticide – inflicted by the black mother.

The third reviewer does not fixate on the topic of lynching the way the second one does, nor does he accuse Johnson of "negative, timid, and even false philosophy" the way the first commentator has it. His review is the only one to contain favorable comments and some kind words for Johnson's artistic effort. This praise, however, does not make the evaluation of the play good enough for an FTP sponsored production:

In this play about lynching, Miss Johnson just begins to show the horror of this national shame. I wonder why she is not brave enough to show the whole truth. [...] She reaches great dramatic climax, but still, I believe she could show the suffering and anxiety of these poor people in a much greater way, but her efforts are to be commended because it is truly a nice piece of work for a little theatre. (Fletcher in *Harlem Renaissance* 31) <sup>19</sup>

It is difficult to interpret what exactly the reviewer had in mind when claiming that the playwright is "not brave enough to show the whole truth." Which suffering and anxiety should Johnson show on stage for her audience? Is it the lynching of Sam Hosea or the

murder of the baby? Or maybe both? There are two contenders for the category of *dramatic climax* in *Safe*. It could be argued that the play has two climaxes that have to do with undeserved and cruel loss of life. If we accept that the reviewer's comment applied to the scene of infanticide and its underutilized dramatic potential by making it an off-stage, well-reported event, the reviewer is the only one out of three not to turn a deaf ear to the episode of infanticide in the play.

The FTP reviewers read *Safe* not as a protest drama, but rather as a present day historical drama which failed to approach the problem of lynching adequately or misrepresented the violent phenomenon and its origins to the American public.<sup>20</sup> The FTP readers appear to be more interested in the effects that a similar play might produce upon the nation, having in mind Johnson's realistic conception, which they found to be deviating from the norm of verisimilitude, a foundational criterion of the philosophy of realism. They are disturbed by the "utter exaggeration," "absurdity," lack of "conviction and feeling," "amplified" statements, and the author's "negative and false philosophy." In short, they don't see these troubling amplifications and exaggerations as excesses that can transfer a political message for a social change. Nor do they see the infanticidal mother as a conduit for social politics.

Thus, Georgia Douglas Johnson had to suffer a double blow of rejection in regard to her play *Safe*. The NAACP, the cultural and activist body of her own black community, objected to the defeatist ending of the play while FTP, the governmental body for theatre sponsorship, was disappointed in the conceptualization of her art. Neither the black institution in the face of the NAACP, nor the white-sponsored FTP approved of Johnson's talent as a playwright and her capacity to deliver important social messages.

Critics have placed these black and white institutional rejections in the context of complicated gender relations. As Bower puts it, Johnson “was unable to convince her own people of her worth as a playwright” because “NAACP executives and other members of the black patriarchy constantly ignored her worth,” and we might add, she was unable to impress the male literary experts of the government project either.<sup>21</sup> These rejections are a good illustration of the tenuous relationships between male writers and representatives of organizations and female writers of the period who sought to make a space for themselves by competing for limited subsidies for stage productions and publication opportunities with their male colleagues. Johnson was no exception in this respect but rather fitted the standard rule. What distinguishes her from other female playwrights is her determination to defend the integrity of her written work and refuse to do the suggested rewrites to suit the requirements of reviewers in order to receive recognition and publicity.

But if we read the institutional rejections in the context of racial and national politics, then in the eyes of NAACP and FTP representatives Johnson’s *Safe* offers no unifying function for the members of the black community, nor for the nation as a whole.

From this perspective, Johnson’s refusal to revise the play is an act of defense of her own political agenda as a playwright, formed upon the introduction of the maternal as an agent for social change. In fact, Johnson was running two versions of the maternal, one dark and despondent expression of maternity in *Safe* and another more upbeat and encouraging version of motherhood, which she practiced as a manager of her literary salon. It is the oscillation between these contradictory versions of protective maternal gestures practiced in art and real life that Johnson seeks to explore the capacity of her



political subjectivity. If the dark maternal version of infanticide brings urgently the signifier *safety* forward for consideration, the soft maternal version of protection and survival undercuts only the immediacy of the consideration but retains the necessity for such a consideration under the pressure to craft African American art and literature in a truth-telling, self-representational mode. Thus, the refusal to revise *Safe* could also speak of Johnson's refusal to give up neither the dramatic nor managerial strategies of mothering members of the black community, writers, artists, and intellectuals of all walks of life – or the community as a whole – when trying to secure its cultural awareness and sense of belonging to a recognizable African American cultural heritage.

#### Georgia Douglas Johnson's Literary Salon

At the time when Johnson turned to dramaturgy and submitted her plays for publication or production, she was also running a literary salon at her home in Washington, D.C. The organization and hosting of the literary sessions created some sort of leadership position for her that must have empowered her to take a defensive stance in relation to the submitted plays. As we have already learned, the rigorous exchange of several letters between Johnson and the NAACP's Executive Secretary, Walter White, ended in Johnson's motivated refusal to comply with the recommendations of the NAACP for revision. Even though there is no evidence that similar correspondence in defense of literary content and artistic vision took place between Johnson and the FTP, the fact remains that *Safe*, along with the other submissions, did not get rewritten. The motivated refusals to compromise with literary content, artistic principles, and by deduction, the political message of *Safe* and the other plays constitutes an act of personal

literary activism that clashed conceptually with the NAACP's anti-lynching activism and the FTP's cultural vision for the social function of dramatic art.

Johnson's instance of personal literary defense activism, in other words, might be partially a product of the experimental literary laboratory at her home. The distinction between the NAACP's anti-lynching activism and Johnson's personal literary defense activism is important, because it is through the latter that we get a glimpse of Johnson's position and political strategies to resist racism in one of its most violent forms of expression – public lynching.<sup>22</sup>

Johnson began arranging informal literary meetings in her house in Washington D.C. somewhere around 1925. She referred to her literary salon as the *S Street Salon* or the Half-Way House in her letters. A third popular name for Johnson's literary establishment was the *Saturday Nighters Club*, while the participants became simply known as the Saturday Nighters.<sup>23</sup> The idea of a literary club, of course, is not new; it is enough to think of the eighteenth-century Scriblerus Club, the famous nineteenth-century Garrick Club, or the modernist version of club-like activities in the Parisian coffee houses at the beginning of the twentieth century where writers would get together to discuss their experimental ways of representing reality. Discarding old literary dogmas that can no longer support the stability of the existing order and their substitution with innovative literary approaches that reflect the desire for deeper, more convincing, and “accurate” policies of representation has always been one function of such literary informal institutions. In this respect, the *Saturday Nighters Club* was no exception, given the stormy debates in the 1920s among African American writers, cultural ideologues, and critics about the issue of self-representation and constitution of African American

literature.<sup>24</sup> But Georgia Douglas Johnson's literary club also had other functions. In addition to the weekly readings and discussions of various samples of African American poetry, prose, drama, and occasionally combined musical and literary performances that inevitably must have touched on the topic of (self-)representation, Johnson's literary salon served as a meeting ground for both famous and fledgling writers. Knowledge, feedback, encouragement, and stimulating thoughts could be passed from one generation to next, thus ensuring intellectual growth and artistic confidence among the young generation of writers.<sup>25</sup>

On Saturday evenings, Johnson's hospitality and home environment drew a great number of literary men and women. Among the visitors of her salon are prominent figures such as Langston Hughes, Jean Toomer, Countee Cullen, Jessie Faucet, Zona Gale, Alain Locke, Angelina Grimke, Lewis Alexander, Wallace Thurman, Anne Spencer, James Weldon Johnson, Mae Miller, Mary Burrill, Willis Richardson, Arna Bontemps, William Stanley Braithwaite, Kelly Miller, Chandler Owens, Mae Howard Jackson, Charles S. Johnson, Gwendolyn Bennett, Alice Dunbar-Nelson, Clarissa Scott Delaney, and many others. Occasionally even Zora Neale Hurston and W. E. B. Du Bois appeared at Johnson's home.

Georgia Douglas Johnson opened her literary salon shortly after the death of her husband, Henry Lincoln Johnson, who, with the coming of the Taft administration, was appointed a Recorder of Deeds for the District of Columbia. In her influential book *Color, Sex, and Poetry in the Harlem Renaissance*, Gloria Hull associates the death of Johnson's husband and the opening of the *Saturday Nighters Club* as the beginning of the second period of Johnson's artistic career, which was "certainly a major one" and one marking a

“turning point” (164) in her intellectual development once the stifling conservative outlook and judgment of her creativity was no longer a factor in her life.<sup>26</sup> Hull assesses the second period of Johnson’s career in the following way, “She moved from her husband’s death in 1925 to full participation in the Harlem Renaissance as cultural nexus, prize-winning dramatist, and mature poet. Thus she contributed more than either Dunbar-Nelson or Grimke to the achievement-oriented era of the New Negro” (*Color, Sex, and Poetry* 180). Johnson turned to drama under the influence of some of the visitors of her salon and in addition to the organization of her literary society. Her first attempt at drama, *Blue Blood*, received an honorable mention in the 1926 literary contest organized by the *Opportunity* and was produced by Du Bois’s Krigwa Theatre. The following year, her one-act play, *Plumes*, won first prize in the *Opportunity* contest.

Hull gives Johnson a well-deserved credit, given the scope of activities and literary interests of Georgia Douglas Johnson. Experimenting with different literary genres as well as organizing literary discussions speaks volumes about the intellectual courage and productivity of this female writer. Hull’s label, “cultural nexus,” positions Johnson not just as a major female literary representative of the New Negro Renaissance, but as a figure who had a say in the ideological and cultural articulation of the Black Renaissance movement. The term “cultural nexus” appears also as an explication of the name that Johnson invented for her literary circle – the Half-Way House – as a way to name-conceptualize the significance and function of its cultural work. Johnson thought of it this way, “I’m half-way between everybody and everything and I bring them together.”<sup>27</sup>

In terms of geography, being half-way between everybody has to do with the ability to provide a meeting ground for writers from the South and the North. Of course, the idea of a half-way location does not just speak of physical geography, but rather of a cultural and political geographies that illustrate the face of the segregated and mostly rural South and the democratic pretence of the industrialized North. The black writers of the South and the North inevitably demonstrated these regional differences through the thematic choices of their work and the philosophies they professed as a result of their geographic sites and the contingent socio-economic and regional factors that influenced their experiences. Some critics treat this openness to literary representatives of the South and the North as an instance of Johnson's national consciousness. Her literary salon, the argument goes, is what validated the New Negro Renaissance as not just as a regional phenomenon limited to Harlem and New York. Johnson's Washington, D.C. Half-Way House turned the movement into a national concern. Johnson's words of "bring[ing] them together" could definitely support such a claim. Bringing the Southern and Northern literary intelligentsia together displays an important political ambition of Johnson's cultural politics as practiced via friendly and informal gatherings at her home. It is a political ambition that tries to score a certain unifying effect among the members of the black literary and artistic community. Johnson herself elaborates further on her role as a cultural nexus. The Half-Way House is "a place where anyone who would fight halfway to survive could do so" (qtd. in Stephen's *The Plays of GDJ* 17). Even though the stipulation to fight halfway remains general and enigmatic, it still carries a dual meaning. There is the literal message in the form of an invitation to writers, both North and South, to make use of Johnson's hospitality and stop by her house for stimulating discussions

and intellectual enrichment. It is a well-known fact that a lot of attendees of her literary salon were experiencing economic hardships. Johnson was aware of their financial difficulties and did not hesitate to describe the trips to her half-way location metaphorically as a “fight.” However, her words could be also read as a political challenge for talks, compromises or maybe even third positions emerging among the supporters and practitioners of the different views on what makes African American literature distinct.

Even if Johnson’s statement serves only as a pointer to some vaguely identified political platform for cultural unity, it represents well the author’s ambition for managing and directing the course of a black literary and cultural ideology that counts heavily on raising the equivalential logic among the black representatives of art and literature. Attending the meetings of the Saturday Nighters is the first crucial step in that direction, while the geographic and regional diversity of the attendees and their work would guarantee the expansion of equivalence based on sharing the same literary culture of color and tradition.<sup>28</sup>

There is another thing about Johnson’s statement that should not go unnoticed. It pertains to the strategy of implementing and sustaining the half-way cultural policy. Johnson qualifies it as a survivalist strategy. The point of having “a fight halfway” is to survive, and by implication, not to surrender to outside definitions of cultural specificity backed by the system of white literary patronage. Johnson understood the generation of power in these intercommunal contexts as something that benefits the patrons above all and causes the patronized to conform and adapt to the cultural expectations and taste of the patrons.

It is through the domestication of literature and literary debates that Johnson was hoping to guarantee the survival of the bold attempts for self-definition of this literature of color. As with *Safe* and her other plays, the political questions enter the domain of the home to seek a protective and survivalist outcome of their resolution. Scholars of her literary salon refer to Johnson's place as "a refuge from the interracial hostility" and a "sanctuary" where she "offered a rare, liberating combination of honest and open fellowship and rich intellectual exchange" (McHenry 252). Thus, the domestic space becomes a "safe space" (McHenry 268) for acquiring literary maturity, and by extension, "[t]he literary community that Johnson created in her home through the Saturday Nighters was safe and supportive" (McHenry 275). To this one should add and the relatively long time, almost a decade, during which Johnson was able to run her literary salon even if in the thirties the signs of stagnation and irregularity of meetings were already present. This aspect of continuity should not be underestimated for the perception of her home as a safe space or the definition of her literary mission as a supportive and mentoring enterprise.

To explain the literary salon mission, scholars have adopted terms that emphasize Georgia Douglas Johnson's culturally political image. As mentioned before, Gloria Hull interprets her as a "cultural nexus." Judith L. Stephens sees her as a "community builder," "cultural sponsor" and an "artist activist."<sup>29</sup> And Elizabeth McHenry speaks of Johnson as a "gifted organizer" and "literary mentor."<sup>30</sup> These terms equate the importance her work, even if informal, to that of the male leading intellectuals of the New Negro Renaissance. Johnson, however, chose to highlight her role in the literary salon in gendered terms. She calls herself a "revolving hostess" who tries to offer

“contactual inspiration” to her visitors.<sup>31</sup> The title hostess might seem belittling, as Hull observes, and the contactual inspiration might look like a less labor intense and more leisurely intellectual occupation, the fact remains that Johnson opted for a feminine introduction of her work as a literary hostess. Critics agree, this feminized image of a cultural and literary facilitator is an imported strategy from her early years as a poet. Her first three published books of poetry, *The Heart of a Woman and Other Poems*, *Bronze: A Book of Verse*, and *An Autumn Love Cycle*, built Johnson’s reputation as “the foremost woman poet of the race.”<sup>32</sup> And if her poetry avoided, for the most part, politicization of racial issues and confrontation with the powers of the day in favor of promoting a soft and affective feminine side, detached in a Victorian-like fashion from the problems of social injustice, her involvement with the literary salon gave a different shine to Johnson’s literary-celebrated femininity. The spiritual, personal experience of love and affection, or lack thereof, gives way to the expression of maternal devotion, protective and nurturing gestures toward the members of her literary salon.

Correspondence documentation points to Johnson’s maternal policy towards the attendees of the *Saturday Night Club*. She was especially fond of her maternal patronage of young male writers. “Indeed I am rich in sons,” Johnson wrote boldly in a letter to Jackman.<sup>33</sup> The young male writers reciprocated to this mother-son bond. In Hull’s words, “she called the younger men her ‘sons,’ and they referred to her as ‘mother’” (*Color, Sex, and Poetry* 187 - 188). Johnson’s net of maternal affiliation spread as far as embracing even one of the major ideologues of the New Negro Renaissance, Alain Locke. After the death of Locke’s mother in 1922, their friendship grew and Johnson became something like a second mother to him.



This type of protective mothering is both reminiscent of and distant from the model of black mothering that Patricia Hill Collins defined in her seminal study on African American female experience as othermothering.<sup>34</sup> The above presented evidence suggests that Johnson willingly took the role of othermother at her literary salon. In this sense, Johnson is a conduit of the black historical tradition of mothering that shaped the African American communities under slavery and persisted later on as a distinct communal model of mothering as opposition and alternative to the white model of motherhood. According to McHenry, Johnson's maternal model of hosting was "also a part of the feminine posture [Johnson] adopted" and "was a way for her to ensure that she would remain at the center of the literary community and maintain contact with the vibrant intellectual world to which she would not otherwise fully belong" (*Forgotten Readers* 277). McHenry's reading lays stress on the personal benefit that Johnson tried to extract from her maternal hosting and feminine posturing. The salon becomes a vehicle for propelling the artistic career of a black female writer in the highly competitive renaissance period of black literary production and male-controlled institutional outlets for the channeling and dissemination of black literature. The Half-Way House served to secure Johnson with steady access to the leading black intellectuals and writers and also presented her with a chance to rise to the status of a similar intellectual and creative prominence herself.

If we shift the focus from personal benefit and career building to how Johnson's specific position gets charged with the performance of unifying effects, then we are in the sphere of Laclau's hegemony and its political construction: the absorption of a social position that does more than signal a sheer differential value. The adoption of another

mother role in this case becomes laden with political value, essential for aiming at a hegemonic position of power. The road to such a potential hegemony goes through the deployment of the survivalist black practice of othermothering.

Johnson's othermothering goes beyond the perpetuation of a collective tradition of survival via communal mothering. Sociologist Patricia Hill Collins points out that both bloodmothers and othermothers were involved in transmitting knowledge to their children about "how to survive the interlocking structures of race, class, and gender oppression while rejecting and transcending those same structures" (*Black Feminist Thought* 124).<sup>35</sup> However, there is more to the black othermother survivalist and rejectionist formula when coupled with Johnson's literary agenda and artistic ambitions. It seeks to transform the original physical aspect of survival into a culturalist model for survival, growth, and group identification. As Collins contends, "Black women's experiences as othermothers provide a foundation for Black women's political activism" (*Black Feminist Thought* 129).<sup>36</sup> The parameters of this political activism, as the examination of Johnson's literary salon activities indicates, are not limited to black antagonisms in a field of crisscrossed with race, gender, and class variable power dynamics, but are generated by maternalistic attempts to structure hegemonic frames of collective being. This is at the core of Johnson's literary and cultural political activism. It claims to organize a black space for creative expression in an organic, uncorrupt way. Thus, Johnson's maternalistic cultural sponsorship at her salon, as an expression of her literary political activism, claims a function that surpasses the narrow domain of mothering and spills over into the domain of black cultural politics, already marked as a

masculine enterprise. This claim is precisely the attempt to politicize the function of othermothering by making it appear as a unifying center of black cultural life.

The domestication and the maternalistic protectionism that the New Negro Renaissance project met in the face of Georgia Douglas Johnson turned it into a cultural rival position to those of Du Bois and Locke. It uses the inertia of Du Bois's art-as-propaganda position to give itself its political sheen and it also tries to balance and tame the doctrinal clash between Du Bois's political art and Locke's folk art position without dismissing Locke's search for authentic or traditional black art elements.<sup>37</sup>

In terms of assessing Johnson's literary output in the years when she was also managing the *Saturday Nighters Club*, contemporaries saw her poems and plays as explicitly feminine and even feminist in subject and style. Alain Locke, while reviewing one of Johnson's volumes of verse, wrote that the author is a representative of the school of "modern feminist realism," rediscovering the Sapphic vein of love and joy for life (Foreword to *An Autumn Love Cycle*, xviii). In the late 1970s, critic Erlene Stetson examined briefly the poetry of Georgia Douglas Johnson, relying on a black feminist approach. The more contemporary interpreters of Johnson shifted their attention towards her drama, but continue to view Johnson's dramatic art as an instance of "black feminist cultural performance" (Stephens in "Politics, Aesthetics, Race, and Gender") or apply a theoretical framework that combines black feminist criticism and feminist theatre theory for analytical purposes (Stephens in "Anti-Lynch Plays by African American Women"). This approach is especially valid and valuable, not only because it serves to examine the work of a black female author, but also because Johnson was quite emphatic on the use of female characters for her dramas. "Almost without exception," Gloria Hull claims, "the

female characters are center stage” (*Color, Sex, and Poetry* 174). This is obvious from the first collection of Johnson’s drama of published and unpublished texts that Judith L. Stephens prepared in 2006 in her book, *The Plays of Georgia Douglas Johnson*, to enrich the field of black dramaturgical studies and promote in particular the long overdue attention to Johnson scholarship.

The stress on the feminist aspect of Georgia Douglas Johnson’s literature and the feminist approach towards the academic presentation of her work, both from her contemporaries and later critics, carve a niche to raise the logic of feminist difference to a degree where it serves the agenda of (cultural) feminism in general or black (cultural) feminism in particular. The reading of Johnson’s lynching drama *Safe*, however, as well as her literary salon activities that span close to a whole decade, indicate that, even if we accept the feminist stance in her literary and intellectual career, we see how her feminism does not stop at the boundary of women’s issues, female marginalization, gender equality, the question of black versus white motherhood or maternal parental rights – issues that make the very fabric of feminism and its sister branch, black feminism, but spills over into the domain of other social groups and their interests through the political organization and creation of power centers within the black community. One such power center revolves around the empty signifier *safety* and the two poles of its protective maternal feminist interpretation. The first pole is strictly tied to the domain of drama and art, where safety is taken to a radical extreme through stretching the field of synonymy for this lexical unit to embrace the signifier *death* as well. The second pole is a reflection of the public role as a literary sponsor that flourished under the banner of Johnson’s reconciliatory and unifying half-way approach. *Safety* then takes a softer tone of

trimming the edges of rival doctrines for cultural distinction and pushes towards recognizable cultural identification, guaranteed by the maternalist protective approach of a female New Negro writer. The second meaning of *safety* carries always the risk of failure to organize literary and cultural communal unity revolving around a loose compromise doctrine, even if the compromise has a protective blanket over it to ensure the best nurturing environment for its development, while the first meaning of *safety* will always mobilize communal attention to the issue of safety through its shocking temporary content which urgently presses the need for redefining its crushing content. This polarity is what the back and forth movement between fiction and reality indicates when it measures Johnson, the dramatist, with her play *Safe* and Johnson, the cultural sponsor, with her *Half-Way House*.

\* \* \*

Compared to Angelina Weld Grimke's "The Closing Door," Shirley Graham's *It's Morning* and Georgia Douglas Johnson's *Safe* move the problem of infanticide and its connection to the political signifier *safety* definitively forward into the black social space. The infanticidal tragedy, with all the accompanying social repercussions, is no longer contained in the circle of family relations or femininity and motherhood, but is presented to a considerably larger social base, along with the verbal maternal articulation of safety. The value of the maternal signifier *safety* poses a serious challenge to the members of the black community, which they cannot solve at once. Toni Morrison's *Beloved*, speaks in length about the time-consuming process of a similar communal enterprise and the stages accompanying the formation of the consensual acceptance of *safety* as a viable political signifier.

---

## NOTES

<sup>1</sup> Scholars have long weighed the advantages and disadvantages of the two terms and their ability to serve as fair designators for African American art and literature between 1920 and 1940, and as valid categories for analysis. The label Harlem Renaissance accentuates a specific geographic location, Harlem in New York, as the epicenter of black artistic and cultural prosperity. As such, it fails to acknowledge the fact that there were other important centers of black artistic creativity such as Washington, D.C. and Chicago. The second label, New Negro Renaissance, is derived from the title of Alain Locke's seminal anthology, *The New Negro* (1925), acknowledged as a foundational text of the movement as well as his introductory essay that defines the ideology of the movement, its goals and ambitions. This name solves the problem of privileging geographic locals over ethnic and racial conceptualizations of art, but inevitably it points out to Locke's doctrine first before it credits rival interpretations. For the purpose of this analysis, the term New Negro Renaissance might be more appropriate, given the fact that neither Shirley Graham nor Georgia Douglas Johnson lived or created their work in Harlem. Their dramas never had the commercial success and circulation of the Harlem-based productions. Furthermore, Georgia Douglas Johnson's literary activity took place exclusively in Washington, D.C. while Shirley Graham's career is more variable in terms of geography.

It should be noted that scholars of the Harlem Renaissance or the New Negro Movement as well as Shirley Graham's biographers are not in agreement over whether Graham technically fits into that period. For example, the Gale companion to Harlem Renaissance, *The Gale companion to Harlem Renaissance*, published in 2003 in three volumes, does not contain an entry on Shirley Graham. In *The Cambridge Companion to the American Women Playwrights* (1999), critic Judith L. Stephens writes her chapter on the Harlem Renaissance and the New Negro Movement by putting Graham in a section at the end of the essay titled "Sister Playwrights." Given the commonality in topic and the essence of political message of Graham's *It's Morning* and Johnson's *Safe*, it is reasonable to claim Graham as a Black Renaissance writer.

<sup>2</sup> Judith L. Stephens remains a pioneer and most prominent scholar of protest drama and more specifically anti-lynch drama. It is her claim that anti-lynch drama forms a distinct American genre, with over a 100 plays creating the body of the genre. She is also the current leading expert on Johnson as a playwright. Her book, *The Plays of Georgia Douglas Johnson: From the New Negro Renaissance to the Civil Rights Movement* (2006), contains several newly recovered dramas by Johnson.

<sup>3</sup> A good source to illustrate this trend in the Shirley Graham scholarship is Gerald Horne's *Race Woman: The Lives of Shirley Graham Du Bois* (2000).

<sup>4</sup> Elizabeth Brown-Guillory's "Disrupted Motherlines: Mothers and Daughters in a Genderized, Sexualized, and Racialized World" appeared in her book, *Women of Color: Mother Daughter Relationships in the 20<sup>th</sup> Century Literature* (1997). Chronologically, it precedes Joyce Meier's article, "The Refusal of Motherhood in African American Women's Theatre" (2000). Although Meier does not list *Women of Color* in her bibliography, she cites two other sources authored by Brown-Guillory one of which is her influential study, *Their Place on Stage: Black Women Playwrights in America* (1988). It is through playwright, critic, and editor of a literary anthology Brown-Guillory that the idea of infanticide as a result of black mothers' perceptions of powerlessness, invisibility, and voicelessness gains ground in the criticism of Grimké's, Johnson's and Graham's dramas. Brown-Guillory is definitely a leading expert in the study of African American theatre and the role of women in its formation and growth. She is the editor of *Wines in the Wilderness: Plays By African American Women from the Harlem Renaissance to the Present* (1990) which had the first official publication of Georgia Douglas Johnson's *Safe* and included Shirley Graham's *It's Morning* as well. She is also the editor of *Middle Passages and the Healing Place of History* (2006), a collection of critical essays as well as the author of twelve plays produced across the US.

<sup>5</sup> It is interesting to note that one of the many rewrites of Euripides's *Medea* is done by leading Harlem Renaissance author Countee Cullen and first published in his book, *The Medea and Some Poems*, in 1935. Cullen kept the same name for his drama, *Medea*, as the original Greek text. As far as plot, he adheres to the Greek source and makes Medea leave triumphantly after the implementation of her cruel revenge. The biggest transformation is perhaps the linguistic one by giving it a folk feel. See Lillian Corti's "Countee

---

Cullen's *Medea*" (1998) for further information. There are interesting discrepancies between the way the black women playwrights of the period represent infanticide and Cullen's version of the same problem.

<sup>6</sup> In W.E.B. Du Bois Manuscript Collection, dated September 8, 1938.

<sup>7</sup> W.E.B. Du Bois published his essay, "The Talented Tenth," in 1903. In it he developed the idea of black exceptionalism, arguing that a small number of exceptional black men are capable of bringing out the best in the race. These were men of high intellect, knowledge of the world, and great talent, possessors of seer's vision who have risen among black Americans to lead them in their quest for cultural, political, and social prosperity. Du Bois called them the "talented tenth." It is obvious that Shirley Graham was familiar with Du Bois's essay and the idea of a small black elite in charge of cultural, social, and economic prosperity. What should be noted is Graham's bold insertion into the Du Boisian male elite dream by claiming a similar leadership position for black women.

<sup>8</sup> See Alesia Elaine McFadden's dissertation *The Artistry and Activism of Shirley Graham Du Bois: A Twentieth Century African American Torchbearer* (2009).

<sup>9</sup> Graham had learned some dramaturgical skills in Chicago prior to her years at Yale that may have proved insufficient for her development as a dramatist. Yale provided her with better knowledge of the genre and support for the production of her plays. Her advisor was also quite supportive, giving her a lot of freedom for artistic exploration and assistance with completing the production of the plays the way Graham envisioned them rather than adjusting the projects to cover up for some production problems.

<sup>10</sup> I have used Kathy A. Perkins's biographical entry on Graham in her anthology *Black Female Playwrights* and McFadden's *The Artistry and Activism of Shirley Graham Du Bois* to introduce these biographic details of Graham's life.

<sup>11</sup> Shirley Graham's play *It's Morning* made its second appearance in the same anthology. The other two lynching dramas by Johnson included in the same anthology are *A Sunday Morning in the South* (1925) and *Blue-Eyed Black Boy* (c. 1930).

<sup>12</sup> *A Sunday Morning in the South* is one of Johnson's most discussed dramas. She wrote two versions of it – a white church version and a black church version – in an attempt to maximize public awareness against lynching and political activism in favor of the Wagner-Van Nuys Anti-lynching Bill (1938-1940) that never got passed in Congress.

<sup>13</sup> See Rayford W. Logan's *The Negro in American Life and Thought: The Nadir 1877 -1901*. (New York: Dial Press, 1954).

<sup>14</sup> In 1899, Sam Hose, born Tom Wilkes, was executed by a lynch mob in Coweta County, Georgia. He had a heated argument over wages with his employer and in the ensued physical conflict, after being threatened to be killed, he hit and murdered his white employer. Soon after the incident, rumors started that he also raped his employer's wife and assaulted their children. The lynch mob cut off Hose's ears, fingers, and genitals, removed the skin from his face and burned him alive. Later, reportedly, Hose's knuckles appeared for sale in a grocery store. The case was widely discussed in black and white newspapers and magazines. It is possible that Johnson alludes to this case in *Safe*. She changed only a letter in the name of the lynched victim, Sam Hose became Same Hosea, and she kept the dispute over wages between worker and employer in the drama. The victim of the lynching in *Safe*, however, did not kill his white employer but only hit him in self-defense.

<sup>15</sup> All citations for *Safe* are from Judith L. Stephens's anthology *The Plays of Georgia Douglas Johnson*.

<sup>16</sup> According to Winona Fletcher, one of the earliest contemporary biographers and scholars of Johnson's work, Georgia Douglas Johnson submitted at least five plays to the Federal Theatre Project ("From Genteel Poet to Revolutionary Playwright: Georgia Douglas Johnson." *Theatre Annual* (1985): 41-64.) Judith L.

---

Stephens, the most current and influential scholar on Johnson's life and dramaturgy, has identified in her book *The Plays of Georgia Douglas Johnson: From the New Negro Renaissance to the Civil Rights Movement* (2006) the exact plays that Johnson submitted to the FTP. There were two historical plays, *Frederick Douglass* and *William and Ellen Craft*, that Johnson offered to the attention of the FTP as well as three lynching plays, *Blue-Eyed Black Boy*, *Safe*, and *Blue Blood* p.25. Johnson's literary contribution to the NAACP, however, did not end with the rejection notes of her plays. In 1938, Stephens claims, Johnson was asked again for the NAACP's anti-lynching campaign. This time, she presented *And Yet They Paused* and *A Bill To Be Passed* p. 37. The plays that were thought to be lost, Stephens personally discovered them among the NAACP papers in the Library of Congress in 1999 as we are informed in her article, "'And Yet They Paused' and 'A Bill To Be Passed': Newly Recovered Lynching Dramas by Georgia Douglas Johnson," published in the *African American Review* in the same year informs us.

<sup>17</sup> John Barissa, FTP reader.

<sup>18</sup> Charles Gaskill, FTP reader.

<sup>19</sup> C.C. Lawrence, FTP reader.

<sup>20</sup> One of the FTP readers wrote a comment for the playwright to "Rewrite it!" and added that he recommended it "with reservations." *Safe*, however, remained rejected in the file of the FTP Playreader Service.

<sup>21</sup> In Marta Gilman Bower's study *Color Struck" Under the Gaze: Ethnicity and Pathology of Being in the Plays of Johnson, Hurston, Hannsberry, and Kennedy* (2003), p. 34. Bower claims that the NAACP rejection of Johnson's work took its toll on her psyche. Along with her "scattered writing" and "chaotic house" that speak of fragmentation and repressed identity, Bower draws the conclusion that Johnson suffered from mania and nonfunctional neurasthenia, a state that accompanied her for the rest of her life (34).

<sup>22</sup> Critics who have studied Georgia Douglas Johnson's activism have not yet examined the connection between her anti-lynching literary (and nonliterary) activism and her literary salon involvement. In her groundbreaking study, "Art, Activism, and Uncompromising Attitude in Georgia Douglas Johnson's Lynching Plays," Judith L. Stephens discusses Johnson's activism mainly in terms of her literary output. Johnson contributed to the anti-lynching struggle with the biggest number of anti-lynching plays than any other black playwright wrote, and in doing so, she also consolidated her position as the primary source for the study of the new dramatic genre, as Stephens defines it, the lynching play. Stephens claims that Johnson is an integral part of the making of the tradition of (black) lynching drama. Although Stephens documents and analyzes well the rejection and the ensued drama between NAACP and Johnson, Stephens does not read Johnson's written defense and absence of revision as a form of activism, too, nor does she link it to the context of the literary salon. The critics who pay attention to Johnson's literary salon tend to examine it separately from her career as a writer or tie it exclusively to her work as a poet. Marta Effinger's biographic study on Georgia Douglas Johnson in *The Twentieth Century American Dramatists: Third Series* (2002) is a good example of the first approach. Gloria Hull's *Color, Sex, and Poetry: Three Women Writers of the Harlem Renaissance* (1987), Claudia Tate's "Introduction" to *Selected Works of Georgia Douglas Johnson* (1997), and Elizabeth McHenry's *Forgotten Readers: Recovering the Lost History of African American Literary Societies* (2002) are excellent illustrations of the second trend.

<sup>23</sup> *Saturday Nighters Club* was also the name that was widely adopted to popularize the activities of the club inside and outside Washington, D.C. Gwendolyn Bennett used that name in her "Ebony Flute" column dedicated to African American artistic achievements and published in *The Opportunity: Journal of Negro Life*. Her message from October, 1926, reads, "We who clink our cups over New York fire-places are wont to miss the fact that little knots of literary devotees are in like manner sipping their 'cup of warmth' in this or that city of the 'provinces.' Which reminds me that I have heard Georgia Douglas Johnson say that there is a Saturday Nighters Club in Washington, too" (qtd. in Hull 165).



---

<sup>24</sup> It would be sufficient to name just a few of the rival views of the time to illustrate the debate about the literary representation of African American characters and topics that evolved into different doctrines about the function of African American literature. Exemplary here are George S. Schuyler's "The Negro Art-Hokum" first published in June 16, 1926 in *The Nation*, where the author argues, contrary to the New Negro Renaissance project, that no distinct "Negro art" exists because black people in America are simply Americans. That the word "African" is used to define black art as distinct and separate from American, for Schuyler, is nothing more but a marketing mechanism for selling products. The following week, Langston Hughes responded on the pages of the same magazine with "The Negro Artist and the Racial Mountain," where he criticizes the urge of the race, something that he sees in Schuyler, to identify with whiteness. He believes in the particular racial experience that helps create a distinct cultural art different from American art. The now classic doctrinal clash between W. E. B. Du Bois and Alain Locke demonstrates another side to the debate about what constitutes African American art and literature. The argument is not about whether African American art and literature exist as a separate category, but rather, what makes that art and literature African American. Du Bois advances his thesis of art as propaganda and claims that a return to the history of slavery is an essential experience to use, while Locke emphasizes the development of current, every-day topics to portray best the life of the New Negro, but excluding topics of racial clashes and racial divisions. A third kind of approach, best exemplified by the poet Countee Cullen, was the idea of eliminating race and creating art for art's sake. Critics of Georgia Douglas Johnson's poetry agree that in her early books of verse, she aspires towards raceless art by choosing Victorian romantic topics of love and femininity.

<sup>25</sup> Even though the connection and forms of interaction between the different generations of visitors to Johnson's literary salon and her exact relationship to many of them remains largely unexplored, there is some evidence to speculate about her attitude toward that young generation of writers. The absence of such detailed studies precludes us as well from knowing the evolution of the artistic outlook of this New Negro Renaissance woman.

<sup>26</sup> Hull's periodization of Georgia Douglas Johnson's career is based on both literary development and events in the personal life of the author. The first period is exclusively related to Johnson, the poet and the housewife. It is marked with success and recognition of Johnson's work, despite the fact that at home she had to deal with a husband who disapproved of her "escapades" into the world of literature. The second period begins with death of her husband, which frees Johnson to exploit her literary and intellectual pursuits to the fullest. This is also the time for genre experimentation, communal cultural organization, and political activism. It is marked by both decline and success of her literary career. The third period begins in the early 1940s, after the fading of the New Negro Renaissance movement, and continues up until her death in 1966. It is a time of financial struggle and a number of failed attempts to publish the work that she has accumulated throughout the last decades of her career. Although she remains involved as a member in numerous organizations – The Writers' Club, The Professional Writers' Club, The American Society of African Culture, the National Song Writer's Guild, the Writers' League Against Lynching, the Poet's Council of the National Women's Party, the League of Writers' Club – she does not display signs of community activism or active involvement in political issues. See Gloria Hull's "Georgia Douglas Johnson" chapter in *Color, Sex, and Poetry* (1987): 155 – 211.

<sup>27</sup> See "Georgia Douglas Johnson, Noted Poet, Author, Dies," *Baltimore Afro-American*, May 28, 1966.

<sup>28</sup> The word *regional* in this sentence is in reference to literature. As such, it stands to reflect the peculiarities and characteristics of the literature of a given region, evoking a specific cultural awareness and historical sense of belonging as key ingredients in shaping a given regional outlook and literary practice.

<sup>29</sup> In *The Plays of Georgia Douglas Johnson*, Judith L. Stephens uses the labels "community builder" and "cultural sponsor" and clarifies that Johnson "practiced an informal brand of community building" to suit the transformation of her home into a site of literary and artistic activity. See "Introduction" to *The Plays of Georgia Douglas Johnson*, p. 16. The labels "artist activist" and "sponsor" are operative terms in Stephens' article "Art, Activism, and Uncompromising Attitude in Georgia Douglas Johnson's Lynching Plays." See p. 91.

---

<sup>30</sup> See Elizabeth McHenry's chapter "Georgia Douglas Johnson and the Saturday Nighters," in her book, *Forgotten Readers: Recovering the Lost History of African American Literary Societies*, pp. 266 – 267.

<sup>31</sup> In a letter to Charles S. Johnson from December 1946, Georgia Douglas Johnson describes her duties toward artists as follows, "Tomorrow I have two friends in to spend the day. Both have heart trouble. Both travel toward the West, as who doesn't. Each shall have her lounge for the day and I shall be the revolving hostess. I am already excited with the prospects of the day" (qtd. in Hull 187). Johnson put the phrase "contractual inspiration" on a bunch of manuscripts marked "Ready for Publication." One of the manuscripts was titled "Literary Salon." See item 9 on the list at the Moorland Spingarn Research Center, Howard University.

<sup>32</sup> *The Heart of a Woman and Other Poems* (1918) is Johnson's first published book of poetry, which gained her recognition and even became a small commercial success. In it, the poet retains distance from racial issues by privileging romantic issues tackled from a woman's perspective. Critics of Johnson's poetry associate this collection with the genteel tradition and see Johnson as a poet that demonstrates Victorian sensibilities. With her second collection of poems, *Bronze: A Book of Verse* (1922), Johnson enters the terrain of racial debates, but sections of it preserved the feminine perspective and outlook of her verse, only this time, it was black womanhood and motherhood that she displayed interest in. *An Autumn Love Cycle* (1928) was published after her partial disillusionment as a dramatist. In it Johnson returned to the well-familiar personal and lyrical notes of her early poetry.

<sup>33</sup> Letter to Jackman, December 26, 1942.

<sup>34</sup> See Patricia Hill Collins's *Black Feminist Thought: Knowledge, Consciousness, and the Politics of Empowerment* (1990), where she examines the various types of motherhood within the African American communities and argues that othermothering did not die with the abolition of slavery and the dismantling of the slavery economy, but persisted throughout the reconstruction era and into the modern day.

<sup>35</sup> Although Patricia Hill Collins makes this particular statement with the black (other)mother-daughter relationship in mind, her whole analysis suggests that both female and male children were receiving the same treatment.

<sup>36</sup> Patricia Hill Collins discusses community othermothers and political activism primarily under the auspices of the nineteenth-century doctrine of "uplifting the race" and its modern expression, as Collins sees it at work in the twentieth century. Community othermothering has the purpose of bringing people together "so that vulnerable members of the community will be able to attain self-reliance and independence essential for resistance" (132), Collins argues. Collins associates othermothering as community activism which often requires personal self-sacrificial acts from the black women in order to perform their communal political function. On the other hand, however, motherhood – whether bloodmother or othermother – remains a symbol of feminine and feminist transformative power shaped by the expression of ethics and personal accountability towards the integrity of the black community. Thus, Collins supports an extremely optimistic view about the potential of black othermothering. Its mission is empowering and instrumental for the functioning of strong African American communities. She acknowledges African American mothers, both biological and communal, as overly protective, but reads this characteristic only within a survivalist and empowering framework of maternal action.

<sup>37</sup> Johnson was inevitably well-familiar with the two competing doctrines for black theatre development that Howard University professor Alain Locke and the one that the most prominent black scholar and intellectual Du Bois had been advocating. Locke's "folk drama" tries to separate politics from art by insisting on depicting the everyday casual life of the Negroes while avoiding topics of racial clashes and disputes. By putting emphasis strictly on art, he promotes the development of authentic African American art characteristics, including the use of vernacular and expressivity. Du Bois, on the other hand, puts a huge emphasis on the role of politics and political goals accomplished through the means of art. His "art as

---

propaganda” thesis encourages the treatment of racial problematics produced by past or current imbalances of power relations and oppressive situations that result in social, economic, and cultural disadvantages for the black segment of the American population. Johnson’s artistic credo, and in particular the examination of her drama *Safe*, shows that she sought some sort of midway between the two leading theoretical doctrines of the day by neither dropping the strong political charge nor the common folk everyday tragedy. *Safe*, thus, remains a document that testifies to the intracommunal disputes on the form and content of African American drama, and, in general, the art that were taking place in the second and third decades of the 20<sup>th</sup> century in Harlem and Washington, D.C.

## CHAPTER IV

### TONI MORRISON'S POLITICS OF CULTURAL DIFFERENCE

This chapter examines the cultural politics of difference and the role of political art as reflected in Toni Morrison's critical prose and select interviews published in the period between 1974 and 1997. Both the interviews and the pieces of literary and intellectual criticism provide a valuable insight into the evolution, growth, and significance of the author's cultural politics of difference and political dimension of art and become documents with relevance to the sphere of African American literary studies, American literary studies, feminism, and political studies. The examined documents cover an extended period of Morrison's career as a writer, intellectual, and thinker, spanning from the formative period of her writing production to the zenith of her career that brought her domestic and international fame by winning the Nobel Prize in Literature in 1993, and the period after where she remains a vital and influential presence on the literary and cultural horizon. The key texts for analysis, listed in chronological order, are "Rootedness: The Ancestor as Foundation" (1984), "The Site of Memory" (1987), "Unspeakable Things Unspoken: The Afro-American Presence in American Literature" (1989), *Playing in the Dark: Whiteness and the Literary Imagination* (1992), Nobel Lecture (1993), and "Home" (1997). They are the most representative documents of Morrison's critical legacy to indicate her view of method, form, use of language, organization, and function of African-American literature in the 80s and 90s in the light of its political goals and aspirations. The majority of the selected texts appear on the

pages of the *Norton Anthology of African American Literature* but also in the *Norton Anthology of American Literature*, and various other anthologies. This is a clear institutional sign of Morrison's influence and canonical status in relation not only to fiction, where without doubt her greatest strength lies, but also in relation to her critical output and brave intervention into the sphere of textual and ideological designs for a specific minority literature.

The aim of this chapter is to examine the content and changes of Morrison's cultural politics as documented in her nonfiction before, during, and after the time of publishing *Beloved*. Since the empty signifier *safety* is of primary interest to us, we shall be able to trace how Morrison shapes its meaning for a little over two decades to theorize and imagine the development of African American literature through its lens.

\*\*\*

Critics have long noticed Morrison's tendency to become a cultural spokesperson of black people and their art. For example, Furman, in *Understanding Toni Morrison* (1996), claims that Morrison aims "to express a cultural legacy" (3) which he associates with tribal storytelling traditions, ancestral presence, and the capacity of one to endure. He discusses Morrison's cultural legacy entirely through the prism of ethnic traditions and the skillful arrangement and interpretation of such elements in the hands of a gifted writer such as Morrison. He is right in assessing Morrison's influence and achievement through this lens. "There is little doubt," Furman writes, "that Morrison's fiction and literary criticism about the black experience in America has contributed to an expansion and redefinition of the American literary canon" (2). Although he acknowledges Morrison as writer of a specific cultural legacy, saying, for instance, that "her novels are

instruments for transmitting cultural knowledge, filling a void once occupied by storytelling” (4), he is quick to situate her work in the context of American literature, making her contribution to the expansion of the canon of a universal character. Morrison’s work, in other words, is just another way to shape the idea of what it means to live in America. Even though Furman suggests that there is a connection between Morrison’s fiction and nonfiction and one could be read through the clarifying lens of the other, he barely dwells on Morrison’s critical prose. It is in the last chapter of his book where he chooses to discuss *Playing in the Dark* as an example of Morrison’s literary and social criticism. Furman notes that her central project is the concern with the way literature reflects a racialized society. He pays attention to Morrison’s term American Africanism and the way it boosts Morrison’s project for reading America’s literature in terms of imagined racial identities as structural and ideological mechanisms for making whiteness and shaping the characteristics – individualism, masculinity, historical isolation, etc. – of a national literature. Furman, however, avoids comments as to how and what Morrison’s book *Playing in the Dark* does for the development of African American studies and literary criticism, nor does he comment what its significance may be for the obvious expansion of Morrison’s career as a critic, intellectual, and cultural ideologue. He praises her for shunning Africanism and just at the very end affords a mild criticism of Morrison’s study concerning her glaring omission of the presence of other minority groups, such as Indians, whose literary and cultural achievements were also used for canon building in a similar fashion as African Americans’ cultural production. Furman fails to shed light on Morrison’s cultural legacy when it comes to his brief inclusion of Morrison’s Nobel Prize lecture in the concluding chapter of his book. He

examines Morrison's treatment of language mostly as a testament to her artistry and ability to weave stories that connect generations. Ultimately for Furman, it is the fiction that makes Morrison an invaluable American cultural asset.

In *Fiction and Folklore* (1991), Trudier Harris tracks down the folkloric patterns in Morrison's fiction. Unlike Furman, she expresses no interest in placing Morrison in the ranks of the American literary canon but rather insists in viewing Morrison as an integral part of the African American literary tradition that is shaped by folklore. For Harris, Morrison creates a "literary folklore" (7). Her work is not a matter of simple incorporation of folklore into fictional narratives, but an attempt for reconceptualization and restructuring of folkloric patterns. Harris positions Morrison in the ranks of experimental African American novelists, such as Toni Cade Bambara and Paule Marshall, who experiment with the novelistic form to expand on the folk tradition. Like Furman, Harris is primarily interested in Morrison's fiction.

Both Furman and Harris are interesting because they represent the two major splits in terms of critical preference to claim Morrison as an American author above all or to claim her exclusively as an African American author. In the first case her work is measured as a contribution to the nation's literature or to multiculturalism that again leads to the idea of what it means to be American. Specific ethnic and cultural elements are clearly identified usually in a complimentary way, but their overall reading ends up in the context of the different voices that shape American literature. Studies in this mild nationalistic vein that first thrives on difference but then quickly reconciles difference in the name of something bigger and more embrative in scope are Karla Holloway's and Stephanie Demetrakopulous' *New Dimensions of Spirituality: A Biracial and Bicultural*

*Reading of the Novels of Toni Morrison* (1987), Denise Heinze's *The Dilemma of "Double-Consciousness": Toni Morrison's Novels* (1993), Herbert William Rice's *Toni Morrison and the American Tradition: A Rhetorical Reading* (1996), and, of course, Jan Furman's *Toni Morrison's Fiction* (1996) .

Representative studies that reflect the second trend in Morrison scholarship that claims her work exclusively as African American, a reflection of a strong tradition and a great example of cultural resistance against white supremacy, include Elliott Butler-Evans' *Race, Gender, and Desire: Narrative Strategies in the Fiction of Toni Cade Bambara, Toni Morrison, and Alice Walker* (1989), Marilyn Sanders Mobley's *Folk Roots and Mythic Wings in Sarah Orne Jewette and Toni Morrison: The Cultural Function of Narrative* (1991), Trudier Harris' *Fiction and Folklore: The Novels of Toni Morrison* (1991), Barbara Hill Rigney's *The Voices of Toni Morrison* (1991), Gurleen Grewal's *Circles of Sorrow, Lines of Struggle* (1998), John Duvall's *The Identifying Fictions of Toni Morrison: Modernist Authenticity, Postmodern Blackness* (2000), Karla Holloway's *Passed On: African American Mourning Stories* (2002), Lucille Fultz's *Toni Morrison: Playing With Difference* (2003), Andrea O'Reilly's *Toni Morrison and Motherhood* (2004). These studies emphasize the concrete elements of difference that identify the presence, and development, of an African American literary tradition, or explore the strategies that Morrison employs for the construction of a usable African American identity as a woman writer.<sup>1</sup>

No matter which trend in Morrison scholarship these studies reflect, it is obvious that the extent to which these studies imply the specifics of Morrison's cultural politics of difference has been measured primarily through the lens of her fiction, while including



her nonfiction mostly as a support element in analyses that explain the kind of fiction she excels in and the complexity of its cultural construction with or without the web of intertextuality it weaves with other (sub)cultures.

It is only in the 1990s that scholars turned attention to Morrison's nonfiction itself to examine it as a separate category for cognitive mapping of Morrison's multi-faceted achievements and public presences. The expansion of the study of Morrison's nonfiction will provide a much needed insight into the framing of her cultural politics and its significance for her fiction, artistic credo, literary critical thinking, and community-oriented outlook. The new framing of Morrison's presence helps us see her not only as a writer but also as an intellectual, theorist, and literary celebrity with enormous political influence in the shaping of the African American communal and institutional agenda.

The critical examination of Morrison's nonfiction exists primarily as accounts of single or an extremely limited number of her most influential non-literary texts and their functions rather than the perusal of the larger number of these texts and the connections they might reveal to illustrate the growth of Morrison's political position in regard to African American literary and critical discourse. The existing limited studies trace the role and influence of Morrison as a critic, intellectual, and cultural commentator as well as define her biggest contributions to literary theory and literary composition. Schur claims that it is after the publication of *Beloved* that Morrison "inherited" from other black writers, notably James Baldwin, the role of "a spokesperson for African American literary and cultural critics" (211). For Wallinger, Morrison's literary criticism is "a contribution to the debate over the revision of the canon" (116) that was taking place in the 1980s and 1990s. The greatest value of Morrison's criticism, however, "lies in its

playfulness” (122), Wallinger concludes. Ludwig reads Morrison’s nonfiction as an instance of social criticism where in a context of pragmatics, her work “connects language and the human beings who use it in a framework which puts at the center of intellectual activity embodied minds rather than some kind of textualist grammatology” (125). He defines Morrison’s use of language as a movement from specific political areas into her own realm of writing and classifies this move as “a pragmatist approach to language” (130). The aspect of her linguistic pragmatism that Ludwig values is “its fundamentally egalitarian and empowering image of dialogic interaction” (132). McBride offers a poststructuralist Morrison who successfully deconstructs the writer/scholar dichotomy in order to gain “author-ization” (162) in critical literary discourse.

Cast in the roles of spokesperson, canon revisionist, deconstructionist, linguistic pragmatist, or rhetorical player, Morrison consolidates with her nonfiction the political presence of her persona and the political primacy of her work. To repeat, scholars draw these conclusions based on a limited number of Morrison’s critical texts.<sup>2</sup> Attempts to do the second type of comprehensive reading of Morrison’s nonfiction, relying on a large representative sample of text, are virtually nonexistent or at best of extremely limited nature, given the prominence of Morrison and her stellar literary accomplishments, academic career, and public profile. This chapter is an attempt to fill this void and offer an addition to these initial but far from exhaustive attempts to read the writer’s politics of literary theory and practice as a cultural position of identifiable African American difference and explain its hegemonic potential for collective unity based on cultural/literary identifications that offer safety for the members of this community.

\* \* \*

Dwight McBride's detailed reading of Morrison's "Unspeakable Things Unspoken" is among the deeper scholarly investigations of Morrison's nonfiction in terms of how it shapes her cultural politics of difference and how she negotiates the shift from writer to critic. His essay "Speaking the Unspeakable: On Toni Morrison, African American Intellectuals and the Uses of Essentialist Rhetoric" shows preoccupation precisely with the political maneuvers of Morrison's nonfiction, an issue that this chapter aims to tackle too, with an explicit emphasis on the rhetorical devices that Morrison employs to deconstruct the author/critic dichotomy and claim in this manner a legitimate critical voice for herself. As the poststructuralist move in Morrison's essay helps her obtain the position of a critic, a second move – that in the direction of strategic essentialism – takes place in order to solidify the African American cultural discourse and empower Morrison's intellectual leadership by expanding the territorial presence of cultural being from the realm of literature into the realm of academia. Her closing statement in "Unspeakable Things Unspoken" has long become an evidence for that. "[A]s far as the future is concerned," Morrison claims, "when one writes, as critic or as author, all necks are on the line" (34). By equating the role of writer and critic in terms of responsibility to the process of canon building, she already participates into the formation of a hegemonic subjectivity the way Laclau speaks of it.

The pursuit of hegemonic presence, as McBride's reading of "Unspeakable Things Unspoken" suggests, comes from the clever rhetorical use of strategic essentialism. This is no novel strategy when it comes to its deployment as a way of self-determination of oppressed groups of people. We know it from Spivak already while McBride turns it into a narrow argument to fit the needs of a specific group of people.<sup>3</sup>

In his view, Morrison's application of rhetorical strategies is not only "common among African American intellectuals, but politically indispensable as well" (758). McBride examines closely Morrison's use of the first person plural pronoun "we," the role of anecdotes, and metonymic enlistments as key strategies for political legitimization of African American interests. These are all strategies that pertain to the description of a collective experience shared by members of the African American community. It is the task of African American intellectuals, McBride argues, to continue to learn strategies for essentializing, because it is the very existence of the category "African American" that is at stake with the poststructuralist threat to treat "race" and "experience" as unstable and unreliable categories for analysis. Thus, McBride embraces strategic essentialism and justifies its use by Morrison on grounds that it authorizes voices to tell their experience as authentic and to bear a direct relationship to that experience as something that unites the people who share it. In McBride's words, essentialism is an indispensable tool for three reasons:

It permits us to hold up the possibility of a unity, albeit fictitious, that makes our burdens more manageable because the load is shared. It empowers us to be able to speak (through the discourse available to us) about the oppressive material and political manifestations of a racialized hegemony on our lives. And, finally, for our purposes in literary studies, it makes possible the development of a critical discourse that centers these concerns in the study of our literature. (774)

The moment of unity and the moment of empowerment to speak are both attributable to the experience of white racialized hegemony enforced upon the lives of the black people. The construction of a critical discourse to aid the growth and study of identifiable African

American literature of resistance and commemoration of “racial” experience becomes openly a political task. Structured around the axis of opposition to white oppression and collective trauma, it justifies the reclaiming of racial essentialism as a key element in the construction of a racialized discourse to provide the language for expression and legitimize the speech primarily as political. The development of such a discourse as a political entity is not any different from that of already established white academic discourses of revision and resistance marked by their long term of academic residency, claims of scholastic relevance and true knowledge, and catchy display of ambitions to rectify social injustices. We are all familiar with the invasion of politics into all contemporary identity theories – feminism, Marxism, postcolonial studies, multiculturalism and the possible combinations they enter – with their increased awareness that they are precisely political from the moment of their inception and into the present where they modulate, change, or fine-tune political objectives to sustain their discursive viability and keep their agency as long as possible in the academy and outside it. In this sense, McBride’s political fervor and strong defense of Morrison’s use of strategic essentialism is no surprise.

There is another very important element in McBride’s analysis of Morrison’s essay that should not go unnoticed. His assertion is that “Morrison occupies the language of the discourse available to her and locates her liberating possibilities from inside that discourse through her deployment of racial essentialism” (759). The deployment of racial essentialism leads not simply to resistance but to liberating possibilities. This last result suggests an advanced level of political strategizing in regard to content inclusion and efficacy of applicability of essentialist discourse. Ultimately, McBride concludes, and

here he leaves the narrow Morrison thread of his observation to make a bigger statement relevant to African American literary studies as a whole, claiming that strategic essentialism is an indispensable tool. McBride writes:

It allows us to speak categorically in a discourse that seems to demand and respect labels. It enables us to speak to and about a people whose individual lives may be markedly different, but who nonetheless suffer from a common form of racial hegemony. It permits us to hold up to the possibility of unity, albeit fictitious, that makes our burdens more manageable. [...] And, finally, for the purposes in literary studies it makes possible the development of a critical discourse that centers these concerns in the study of our literature. (774)

One can conclude that McBride views the working of the African American critical discourse as a counter hegemonic enterprise the way we know it from Laclau's theory of hegemony. The demand and respect for labels is not only an exercise to request recognition from the other but above all, an expression of desire to fix meaning that protects one's collective journey to emancipation. The talk of unity that is possible among the markedly different individuals in the group is a talk about canceling differences through an operation of essentialist cultural equivalence. And it is the cultural equivalence that guarantees the hegemonic format of the African American critical discourse. Morrison's "Unspeakable Things Unspoken," to build on McBride's observations, is one of the best examples of a similar hegemonic output.<sup>4</sup>

McBride's essay becomes valuable because it demonstrates the awareness in the ranks of African American intellectuals that the African American critical discourse has to be politically constructed in order to accomplish its bigger emancipatory goals as well

as gain a broad public and institutional recognition. And it is with this awareness, to search for the political construct of the writer's nonfiction, that McBride reads one of Morrison's most influential pieces of critical prose. With his argument in mind, I want to continue the examination of Morrison's nonfiction for the constitution of her racialized discourse and how it is equipped in terms of implementing its political unifying function within the black community. The hegemonic capacity of Morrison's version of the cultural politics of difference, as in her best novel *Beloved*, goes through the power of creating cultural and artistic meanings with political significance with the help of the empty signifier *safety*.

Morrison's cultural politics of difference is based on the idea of the role of history, language, folkloric tradition, depiction of race, and the construction of subjectivity and identity that recognizes the placement and positionality of discourses and the contextual character of knowledge. It is the articulation of these specific elements listed above and the strategies for their deployment in the context of Morrison's cultural politics of difference and the African American literary and theoretical discourse that mobilize the communitarian points of unity so vital for the preservation and development of culture and literature of difference with a resulting empowering sense of identity and communal belonging. This sense necessitates the rejection of interracial and intercommunal cultural hegemonies and the institution of the soothing murmur of their intraracial and intracommunal cultural substitutes.

At the core of Morrison's cultural politics of difference, structured on the principle of group cultural hegemony, lies the reconceptualization of the genre of the novel in service of community interests with a definitive pledge to speak the unspeakable

in order to fill in the historical gaps that were either forcibly or willingly produced by previous generations of black writers. A different dimension of this reconceptualization is the rejection of the individualistic art for art's sake approach to writing in favor of a tenacious social construction of literature where the reader has an active role in the making and reception of the literary act. The reader of African American literature, just like the writer, has a share in consolidating the group interest. To have the reader work with the author is to build a reader-writer community on a dialogical principle where literature is both the medium and mode of communal cultural communication.

Morrison's novelistic and artistic approach requires also the experience of difference without hierarchy in relation to white models of literature and the careful handling of class and gender differences within fictional representations of the black community necessary to promote longevity and continuity of African American unity based on cultural achievements and the communal experience of these achievements. Morrison actively works for the advancement of subjects asserting a specific positive African American cultural identity that both gives the edge of a cultural struggle for unconditional recognition of minority literature and provides the safe context for a protectionist theoretical background for the resonance and strengthening of black literature's political ambitions.

The second segment in Morrison's cultural politics of difference is her linguistic approach. Although not a big fan of the phonetic transcription of African American Vernacular English, some of its conversation techniques and rhetorical tendencies to disrupt Standard English grammatical structure find their place as linguistic methodology for reflecting the specificity of the African American culture. Morrison is known to go to



radical extremes when it comes to the manipulation of language and its power of representation. It has been tested to show both the limits of knowledge and the emancipation capacity of its content and structure.

The respect for and inclusion of tradition, folklore, and ancestral heritage is another distinct aspect of writer's cultural politics of difference. Morrison always makes room for the presence of orality, elders, myth, music, or other folkloric elements to mark culturally the tissue of her fiction. Coupled with the power of her imagination, this becomes a technique for reconstructing communal history in the absence of sufficient records. She refers to this aspect of her cultural politics as "literary archeology" and remains loyal to its practice even in her most recent novels, *Mercy* (2008) and *Home* (2012).

The last but not least important significant pillar of Morrison's cultural politics is her bold entry into the discourse of literary criticism with her theory of Africanist presence against which Americans build a national literature, on the one hand, and the rejection of certain schools of literary criticism, more specifically the black feminist criticism and white models of critical thought, as adequate tools for the examination of African American literature, on the other hand. Here we see Morrison both as a progressivist and innovator when it comes to the Africanist theoretical slant and a conservative and traditionalist when questioning the validity and efficacy of black feminist theory or white theories for literary analysis. The preference for a non-white traditional framework of literary criticism and one deeply grounded in an African America cultural context that does not stimulate internal splits caused by class and gender perspectivism is Morrison's gesture toward the universal along intracommunal lines. It

appears that Morrison welcomes the political potential of critical literary discourses that display hegemonic characteristics to ensure the stability and growth of distinct African American literary expressions.

To create unity on a cultural principle and identity expressed on the basis of a shared culture, Morrison faces the task to arrange the significant segments of her cultural politics and display them in an order that creates a safe environment for the practitioners of African American cultural identity. It also means to offer not only a culture and literature of consumption but a culture and literature of social inclusivity and participation with the extras of comfort and security brought by the literary interaction. Morrison strives to offer culture and literature as home.

In the light of this hypothesis, to return to McBride's statement that Morrison deconstructs the writer/critic dichotomy to make space for her authoritative entry into the world of criticism or to Ryan's statement that "Morrison constructs her role as artist-teacher" (152) where as a result she claims discursive authority, we can say that the implementation of her cultural politics of difference depends on the active operation of the writer/reader/critic triad invented by Morrison to satisfy her political interest, and by extension African American literature's interest, in self-determination, intracommunal cohesiveness, and strategic location in the context of literature produced in America.

\* \* \*

In an interview given to the co-editors of *Black Creation*, when asked to comment on Larry Neal's programmatic essay "The Black Arts Movement" and his assertion that art is politics and vice versa, Nobel Prize-winning author Toni Morrison states that "all good art has always been political" and equates the function of an artist with that of a

politician (*Conversations with Toni Morrison* 3). She denies the assertion that the political plight of the black artist turns art into soap-box rhetoric by insisting that if indeed art becomes soap-box, it is not because it is too political but because the artist is not good at accomplishing it. This puts a great deal of pressure on the artist not only in terms of personal achievement and career establishment, but primarily in terms of public responsibility and the ability to unite a group of people behind common goals and objectives. Morrison does not specify what these goals and objectives might be but finds it sufficient to agree with the interviewees' interpretation of political artist as a "message bringer" and expands on calling such an artist a "witness bearer."

In this trajectory - from a message bringer to a witness bearer - one could not help but notice the elevation in duty that Morrison imagines for a black political artist that rises up to a moral demand to ask for justice by presenting evidence in the name of those whose interest is being (artistically and politically) represented. Unfortunately, Morrison does not conceptualize any further the idea of art as politics and the artist as politician at that time of her career. Though the interview was given in 1974, with Morrison having completed only two important novels, *The Bluest Eye* (1970) and *Sula* (1974), she never withdrew or criticized the statement about the close connection between art and politics. Even if initially the notion of the political remained critically and conceptually underdeveloped and mostly associated with the practice of bearing witness and message delivery, Morrison kept expanding upon it in later critical work.

Ten years after the first official endorsement of the fusing art and politics, and with a considerable prominence of her literary presence, Morrison wrote "Rootedness: The Ancestor as Foundation" where she reiterates her previous position that the work by

a black artist must be political and explicitly admits to the political character of her own work. Morrison writes:

If anything I do, in the way of writing novels (or whatever I write) isn't about the village or the community or about you, then it is not about anything. I am not interested in indulging myself in some private, closed exercise of my imagination that fulfills only the obligation of my personal dreams – which is to say yes the work must be political. It must have that at its thrust. That's a pejorative term in critical circles now: if a work of art has any political influence in it, somehow it's tainted. My feeling is just the opposite: if it has none, it is tainted. ("Rootedness" 2290).

Three things should be noted here that give specificity to Morrison's interpretation of political art. First, the political art is governed by the interests of the community. There is an implicit critique of the personal or individual as foundation of political acts. Writer's interests should be put in service of the group. Second, there is a subtle reminder that writing can never be about you, the reader, but about you as part of the village or the bigger social structure. It is also instructional in terms of how the reading process should unfold – always in the direction of the communal. Third, the assumption that political writing is untainted is translatable into a claim about the relation of truth to politics. It is only through the mobilization of the political art that truth-claims can be produced. They should be reflective of some communal state where both writer and reader surface above all as communal subjects.

The importance of community over individual is tackled even from a generic perspective. In the brief genre overview of African-American literature, Morrison

indicates that the autobiographical form is classic in Afro-American literature because of its capacity to turn the writer into a representative of the lives of the tribe/the group. The personal again has to give way to the communal. It matters only in its capacity to represent in a most convincing and powerful way some sort of a universal state, a way of life characteristic of the community as a whole. And if this is the case, it always has to stifle some of its unique characteristics.

In the brief paragraph dedicated to the significance of the autobiographical form as the fundament of Afro-American literature, Morrison even manages to draw a distinction between the classic and the contemporary autobiography trends where the latter demonstrates the loss of the communal aspect. To her, the contemporary autobiography is about the “I,” its individual struggles, personal achievements and capabilities to survive on its own. Clearly, this sounds as a reactionary response to the brand of individualism extolled by the makers of the American literary canon who see individualism as a distinct feature of American national literature, an identifiable marker of difference in comparison to European and other national literatures. The literary pursuit of individualism as appraisal of self-management is what Morrison considers “inimical [...] to some of the characteristics of Black artistic expression and influence” (2286). The particularism of representing distinct individualism that trumps collective interests constitutes a danger to the existence and expressivity of Black art, and this, the logic goes, necessitates the practice of literary policy and approaches that will guarantee the communal life-line and collective experience packaged in recognizable forms of expressivity that will mark one aspect of African American literature.

In “The Site of Memory,” Morrison repeats the claim that the genre of autobiography in the form of slave narratives constitutes her literary heritage. She emphasizes again the ability of a personal story and special example to be put in service of the race and adds a second function of the slave narratives that stretches to a universal dimension. The slave narratives had to persuade the reader that black people are human beings and they too deserve God’s grace and the abolishment of slavery. Since the legal status of blacks in the South is the same, individual slave stories lose a great deal of their uniqueness and serve as good representatives of the group. As Morrison observes, the genre of slave narratives plays out an intricate interracial political maneuver, seeking to convince white readers that humanity stretches beyond the boundaries of one particular race and God’s grace is for all human beings. Humankind and humanity raised as a universalistic platform becomes the political road to launch specific group demand of the oppressed. Thus, the function of the autobiographical stories in terms of representation becomes dual – they have to be able to illustrate, through personal example, the life of the slave community and they have to connect to the larger community of whites by invoking the concept of shared humanity where moral religiosity could operate in favor of the oppressed once the shared-humanity argument gets accepted.

It is the pursuit of the second goal – the appeal to shared humanity – that forced slave narrative writers to compromise with content issues, according to Morrison. She observes that writers avoid “put[ting] emotional pressure on the reader” (2292) by means of language selectivity and withdrawal of sordid details. In other words, the narratives were designed to seek sympathy on the basis of sentimentality through a refined and censored approach to information that would allude to disreputable incidents but would

not offend and scandalize the readers through graphic representation. Morrison gives an example of this trend by citing a phrase indicative of writers' intentions to keep a good tone, "But let us drop a veil over these proceedings too terrible to relate" ("Site of Memory" 2293).

By veiling the truth about their experience, Morrison claims, the writers of slave narratives failed to provide access to their interior lives. And the access to interior lives is important not in terms of casting some heroic individualism, as previously noted, but in terms of establishing and assessing the true nature of the oppressive existence. In this context, Morrison defines her mission as filling in the narrative gaps by providing access to the interior life of the oppressed. Her job is "how to rip that veil drawn over 'proceedings too terrible to relate'" ("Site of Memory" 2293). Ripping the veil suggests a revelation of truth hidden behind the mask of sentimentality and good manners and a confrontation with painful reality. Providing access to the interior lives of the characters means also to strategize a possible exit from the universal of the shared humanity regardless of skin color and opening the possibility to channel it into the universal of shared group experience made possible because of skin color. The refusal of promoting interracial hegemonic attempts is entirely in favor of specific black attempts built exclusively on experiential and cultural principles as we shall see later on.

To accomplish an act of truth-telling, Morrison relies on her own recollections, the recollections of others, and on her literary imagination. The writer's memory of an ancestor guarantees the link to the memory of the community upon which the cultural representation of the community lies. It is a journey in the past ambitiously laden with the task to return to a place where communal history can be articulated in a truthful way.

Morrison labels this kind of work “literary archeology” where “on the basis of some information and a little bit of guesswork you journey to a site to see what remains were left behind and to reconstruct the world that these remains imply” (“Site of Memory” 2294).

Morrison’s label – literary archeology - implies that fiction can be elevated to the status of a scientific discourse, a form of social history where knowledge of the cultural and social resides as an accurate and trustworthy record about a group of people. Furthermore, the principle of literary archeology relies on African American tools such as patching up to make the whole or quilting from pieces of different shape and color intensity in non-geometric, life-like patterns.

If the major principle that Morrison employs in fiction is based on reconstructing the past by gathering some scattered fragments, then it is the representation of the gathered fragments as a whole that opens up space for a productive political return to the past. The power resides in the reconstruction of elements that give the opportunity for freedom to be articulated in a new way via cultural means.

Thus, the entrance into the interior life of the people is also the entrance into the interior of the writer’s political view, to the sites of power and cultural ambitions and to the cultural imaginary produced as an effect of assembling the fragments and ascribing them political meaning while making the whole. There is tremendous pressure on the writer to inscribe culturally the signs as both emancipatory in nature and as items that traverse the road to what Morrison calls in “The Site of Memory” “our original place” (2297), and the aspect of that remembering is emotional. Morrison sees the implementation of such protective policy become operable through the genre of the novel.



In “Rootedness” Morrison claims that Black people lost music as an art form that is exclusively theirs. It has no capacity to represent culturally black people any more because it has become a mode of expression available and used by others. In a sense, this is Morrison’s confession that black music now functions as a universal (black and white) art form but also an opportunity for her to boost the function of the genre that she knows best to fill in the created political and cultural vacuum.<sup>5</sup> In the absence of an *exclusive* black music art form, Morrison assigns the novel the task to represent black art and defend its interests.<sup>6</sup>

Morrison makes the case for the genre of the novel to represent African American cultural interests based on the fact that it might be the best medium to recreate the conditions of storytelling as ancestral tradition that indicates a clear path to the past, to cultural roots and identification mechanisms. Clearly, Morrison ascribes to the genre of the novel a political unifying function – one that will restore the sense of cultural heritage and cultural unity and will help articulate African Americans as a distinct cultural group. Furthermore, the ancestral tradition works as a proven mechanism tested in time for positive identification and a sense of belonging to highly functional social forms of existence.

To accomplish this political unifying function, Morrison introduces the elements that in her opinion convert the novel into an African American artifact. These are elements that will constantly espouse the peculiar character of the African American novel. They serve as the markers for cultural identification; the very foundation upon which the communal spirit will thrive giving black people a sense of belonging to a particular cultural realm identifiable as a comfortable and a safe place that bears the

pretense to articulate a stable or fixed identity that (re)positions African American culture as always different from other cultures and as loyal and empowering to its practitioners. In Morrison's view, one of these elements is the ability to combine print and oral aspects in such a way that the written creates the illusion of a story being told or heard.

Morrison also relies on the authority of the religious discourse to describe the function of the author whose job is to employ skillfully the oral components just in the same way "a Black preacher requires his congregation to speak, to join him in the sermon, to behave a certain way, to stand up and to weep and to cry and to accede or to change and to modify – to expand on the sermon that is being delivered" (2287). Once again the role of the author is given a public function to organize the community through affective and participatory modes and the narrative power generated by speech and sound effects should retain its unquestionable authority similar to that of the sermon.

In terms of social responsibility, it is the author who must "provide the places and the spaces so that the reader can participate" (2287). Morrison speaks of the need of author and reader to co-operate and do some intellectual and cultural work together even if the major design for reader's moments of interference is directly channeled by the writer. The highlight of this author-reader doctrine is the preference for an active communal response or the formation of a strong communal voice that comments on the action as it unfolds. This is formally the job of the chorus, a term that Morrison borrows from ancient Greek literature, to indicate the social weight and literary responsibility of the reader as a community member.<sup>7</sup>

To make room for the chorus, to have the conditions for communal response and tone of her work, Morrison pays special attention to language. In "Rootedness" Morrison

insists on the absence of adverbs that qualify and describe the action. This is one characteristic of her prose. The strength of expression should be in the construction of the sentence; it should come from its structure rather than the reliance on qualifiers of action. The absence of adverbs and qualifiers is a gesture toward the blockage of passing easy ethical, moral, and developmental assessments of confrontation with problematic social events. Stripped of its qualifying aspects, this action-oriented prose promotes active engagement with the surrounding world. It trims syntactic positions of degree and kind by reorienting and condensing their power into the verb and noun to focus the attention on the action and passing on the responsibility to the reader to interpret the qualifying aspect of the deeds.

In “Unspeakable Things Unspoken,” Morrison develops a clearer version of her understanding of the African American language. For her, language is a primary tool for cultural and racial identification. She writes, “The most valuable point of entry into the question of cultural (or racial) distinction, the one most fraught, is its language – its unpoliced, seditious, confrontational, manipulative, masked and unmasking language” (11). One way to produce a materiality of language with rebellious and authority-ousting functions that will counter the established linguistic order that provides the identity of the oppressor, as the quote suggests, is to modify the traditional syntactic structure of the language of authority and rule (Standard English) and substitute it with structures that constantly cripple the correct order of enunciation, structures that obviate difference (African American language). Thus meaning-making patterns are constantly undermined as legitimate mediations of truth about otherness. However, it is the relational aspect of the Standard English to that other language that will guarantee the existence and

specificity of the African American linguistic version. There is a pattern of determinism that defines the African American language as that which the rules of Standard English do not allow it to be.

African American literature has also documented another linguistic technique of resisting standard American English. A lot of writers have expressed preference for using the vernacular either for the purpose of creating realistic characters, primarily to satisfy a literary goal, or with the more political orientation in mind, to invoke and strengthen the black cultural territorialization and sense of communal unity based on a linguistic principle.<sup>8</sup>

Morrison, however, has expressed a different view when it comes to the function and usage of the vernacular in her writing. In “Home,” she states, “My effort to manipulate American English was not to take Standard English and use vernacular to decorate it, or to add “color” to dialogue. My efforts were to carve away the accretions of deceit, blindness, ignorance, paralysis, and sheer malevolence embedded in raced language so that other kinds of perception were not only available but were inevitable” (7). Furthermore, the vernacular as transcription of black speech is almost absent from her work. Her illustrations of raced language at work rarely come on phonetic and morphological level but rely instead on syntax, semantics, and story telling patterns. *Beloved*, however, offers some playful and curious experimentation with the vernacular and the sound as we shall see in the next chapter.

One beneficial moment in the function of racialized language is the task to reveal the interiority of African Americans by means of offering the reader a form of linguistic identification of how it feels to be positioned as an object in the system. As Morrison

points out in her stylistic analysis of the opening paragraph in *Beloved*, “The reader is snatched, yanked, thrown into an environment completely foreign, and I want it as the first stroke of the shared experience that might be possible between the reader and the novel’s population” (32). In other words, language loses the edge of its sword as a weapon against foreign cultural occupation and shifts to forging a political alliance with the reader based on a common goal to overcome disorientation together as a team of people to whom physical and psychological threat is represented as linguistic instability and mental challenge of some sort. Morrison explains that her practice of language is “a search for the deliberate posture of vulnerability to those aspects of African-American culture that can inform and position [her] work” (“Unspeakable Things” 33). It is the deliberate posture of vulnerability that puts both characters and readers in relations to power that makes them dependent or victimized – a linguistic location with tremendous unifying potential for contemporary and diverse reader audiences. The moment of unity is an effect of the struggle of comprehending and orienting amidst the presence of linguistic uncertainty.

In her Nobel Lecture, Morrison contemplates the power of language. Through the method of allegory that both masks and reveals the present, Morrison engages the topic of language as an instrument through which power is exercised. An old, blind and wise woman gets approached by some young people who try to test how wise she is. One of them holds a bird in his hands and asks the old woman whether the bird is dead or alive. The old woman answers that she doesn’t know, but she knows that the bird is in their hands. Morrison quickly reveals to her readers that the old blind woman represents, in fact, Morrison herself as a writer, the bird stands for language, while the young people

are the readers who have to bring their responsibility to language as well. As a writer, she worries that her control over language is only partial, that language is also agency and writing becomes an act with consequences. Thus, the instrumentality of language is by no means servile to the writer's intentions. It cannot ensure correct representations and unquestionable assertions of power. This is undoubtedly a shift from an early comparison in "Rootedness" to the work of the writer as that of a preacher. The writer should make use of language's instrumentality with the following in mind, "Language can never 'pin down' slavery, genocide, war. Nor should it yearn for the arrogance to be able to do so. Its force, its felicity is in its reach toward the ineffable" (Nobel Lecture 270). To make language "reach toward the ineffable" is to push language beyond the certainty of its descriptive limitation and toward signification processes its descriptive units may offer in the crosscurrent of various discourses.

The movement toward the language of the ineffable comprises also of the non-verbal elements that contribute to the construction of the unspeakable. Morrison specifies, "whether it laughs out loud or is a cry without an alphabet, the choice word, the chosen silence, unmolested language surges toward knowledge not its destruction" (Nobel Lecture 271). In this higher task given to language as language surging toward knowledge, Morrison seeks a certain safety in perception and cognition despite the fact that the ineffable itself torments us with its unsafe policy of resistance to symbolization. Morrison's language of the ineffable rivals perhaps the discovery made by the glimpses into the Lacanian real where it casts the immanent presence of trauma. In terms of cultural politics, the linguistic move toward the ineffable has the function to validate and secure the positionality of the subjects of trauma and oppression and suspend possible

easy judgmental passes coming from those who have not confronted the horror. The linguistic gesture toward the ineffable is also the production of the condition necessary to introduce undecidability and its later inevitable compression into some form of hegemony capable of satisfying a group's sense of morals and justice.

The "word-work," as Morrison calls her work with language, is generative because "it makes meaning that secures our difference, our human difference – the way in which we are like no other life" (Nobel Lecture 271). But to secure difference, both contextualized and historicized, as the content of the lecture suggests, is to maintain a relational aspect to other differences that have to be handled with respect. The process of recognizing differences can either go through an agreement on the egalitarian nature of differences or through tolerance of differences in an attempt to engineer new forms of sociality.

The next element that makes the African-American novel identifiable is the presence of what Morrison calls "discredited knowledge." These are the elements indicative of Black people's cosmology – superstition and magic – as a way of knowing the world. This knowledge is discredited, according to Morrison, only because its practitioners were discredited. The option to include "discredited knowledge" in her work is one more way to signal cultural allegiance and form oppositional epistemological patterns accessible to everyone in the community.

Morrison insists that the African American artistic presence is entirely the domain and responsibility of the African Americans. In "Unspeakable Things Unspoken," she sounds adamant about it:

We are the subjects of our own narrative, witnesses to and participants in our own experience, and, in no way coincidentally, in the experience of those with whom we have come in contact. We are not, in fact “other.” We are choices. And to read imaginative literature by and about us is to choose to examine the centers of the self and to have the opportunity to compare these centers with the “raceless” one which we are, all of us, most familiar. (9)

To be the subject of one’s own narrative is to claim authority in the writing of history. This also means to embrace perspectivism that pushes your own being as the focal point of knowledge distribution.

Given the context of the cultural production of African American art, Morrison seeks both to undo the white hegemony related to epistemology and create a competing center for explication of history and identity powered by a distinct category of people. To honor the distinct character of African Americans, Morrison invites the reader to examine the centers of this African Americanness. But to examine the centers of the self, as critical theory teaches, means to affirm some sort of fixed identity that speaks of difference and attempts to essentialize it at the same time. Morrison insists that experiencing race is responsible for the production of this cultural difference that becomes the core for articulating an African American self.

Thus, Morrison aims to establish another kind of hegemony that will operate not interracially but intraracially. It is an attempt to shift the power center of the racialized discourse along intraracial lines – the safest position for producing a broad communal consensus for Morrison’s literary political project. It is also an attempt to escape the antagonistic limbo of the white/black dichotomy as constructed by some white



interpreters and sustained, but for a different purpose, by some African American critics of the Western canon.<sup>9</sup>

Morrison considers the “raceless” argument as invalid. In “Home,” an essay published later in her career and long after the establishment of race studies in academia, she states that the world in which race does not matter or where that world is imagined as free of race hierarchy is, in fact, an Edenesque, utopian place – a dreamscape that is posited as ideal but possible only if situated in a protected preserve. In short, a controlled place of existence that offers a more refined form of imprisonment. Thus, race matters, and Morrison wishes to think of such a world “as something other than a theme park, or a failed and always failing dream, or as the father’s house of many rooms” (3). She wishes to think of it as home. By setting a house/home dichotomy, Morrison attempts to explain how and why a raced world matters, how it differs from a racist world, and how it could be put to serve her political goals as a writer.

In her metaphorical approach towards race – race as house, race as home – Morrison strives to delineate two branches of racialized discourse, both employed to imagine their optimal arrangement of social relations and public space. Race as house is the metaphor for the racialized discourse of the master, and this master’s house offers only confining spaces for its racial inhabitants. In a similar vein, the racialized discourse fueled by scholars and intellectuals advancing the idea of a raceless paradise designs a house with no windows and doors for its subjects. Morrison wishes to domesticate the racial project by turning the house into a home – an uneasy task that she experimented with in *Beloved*.

She becomes a proponent of a racialized discourse that gives agency to the black people. The working of such a discourse relies heavily on the writer's awareness as "an already-and always-a raced writer" ("Home" 4) whose task is to "eliminate the potency of racist constructs in language" (4). Morrison admits that this is not an easy task. Unlike the determination that she expressed about language in "Unspeakable Things Unspoken" as being rebellious and seditious, in "Home" she admits to the difficulty to manipulate language in relation to being free and situated at the same time. In "Home" she reflects about the language of the African American racialized discourse that articulates race as home. And she admits that the search for such language is constantly on her mind. Questions of language and habitation remain in her thoughts as "aesthetically and politically unresolved" (5). But the general political goal of transforming the house of race into a home for race remains as a long-term objective.

Central to this long-term objective is the premise that difference as race should avoid participating in a model of racial hierarchy. The task, as Morrison defines it, is to create a "narrative language that insists on race-specificity without race prerogative" ("Home" 5). This puts her thought closer to the camp of multiculturalists who defend the idea that cultural differences in kind and degree are incommensurate and deserved to be expressed as they seem fit by their practitioners. Morrison is quick to note that to build an intellectual and spiritual home for race, one needs to come up with creative responses to exile, the devastations, pleasures, and imperatives of homelessness as demonstrated by globalism, hybridity, feminism, migration, contingency, interventions, assimilations and exclusions ("Home" 5). The metaphoric state of homelessness, according to Morrison, is a product of historical and temporal phenomena, of economic, social and cultural

doctrines and ideologies that espouse the lack of essential elements as building blocks of identity politics and threaten to erase by mixed practices (hybridity), divisive practices (feminism), or assimilative approaches (globalism) the existence of comforting zones of ethnic cultural stability. It is under the threat of theorized and practiced cultural dissolution of essential being that the political goals of African American literary and cultural discourses should be shaped. Hence the proclamation and existence of autonomous, independent African American theoretic and literary projects capable to stand as guarantors of cultural sovereignty.

Morrison claims that to design a racial home is to have a safe place for the African American community. She attempts to bring “safety and freedom outside the race house” (“Home” 10). As we have noted earlier, the race house is the place of oppression organized by the rules of white patriarchy. The race house is the place where a specific brand of racist and racialized discourse gives meaning to the social relations between black and white people. It is a place where blackness needs to be tamed and domesticated to fit the parameters of general societal orientation toward stability and governable existence, a place where American Africanism works to resolve white anxieties rather than highlight them. It is a place where, to follow Laclau, white cultural horizons get projected.

The race house, both in its racist and anti-racist versions, privileges above all the architects of the proposed types of “racial security.” Race as hierarchy and racialization as the awareness of socially constructed perceptions of race share the same political goals in terms of demanding social justice and revision of social arrangements in the name of better existence. Morrison’s intervention into the racialized discourse rejects both racism

and racelessness as productive ways of measuring the existence of the other. To turn the race house into home requires, in Morrison's view, an articulation of safety (and freedom) acceptable to the prospective inhabitants of the new place called *home*.

Race as home is the line of racialized discourse that Morrison as writer, intellectual, and politician wants to offer to the world. The domestication of race, the cultivation of race as home becomes a gender-coded project where Morrison relies on a maternal approach to imagine a protected space for a culture of difference and its practitioners. In her fiction, she has already explored the expansion and limitation of extreme maternal protection that permeated the fabric of her fictional communities. *Beloved* and *Sula* testify to that discovery. It is first there that Morrison explores the maternal factor for the semantic shifts in the signifier *safety*, as triggered by infanticide, and its applicability for a broader social project that would validate its presence beyond the boundary of maternal discourse. It is now woven into the intellectual and critical discourses, as evidence in "Home" suggests, protecting racialized language and literature in service of African American cultural interests. Thus Morrison's maternal mission in relation to black literature is "to suggest contemporary searches and yearnings for social space that is psychically and physically safe" ("Home" 10). The psychic and physical safety that she earns to establish for a body of literature is her way to seek communitarian unity and mobilization of communal spirit among African Americans. It is a culture-sponsored moment of identification with communal values and cognitive empowerment displaced from a social place of oppression (race house) and articulated the maternal way in an attempt to build a new social space (home) of protection and safety. Some critics have interpreted this maternal protectionist approach toward black literature as the

infantilization of literature. And even though such readings may present a valid argument, they miss the point of why it is necessary to orient politically African American criticism as a safety net for the expression of intellectual, cultural, and literary freedom.

In the operation of this racialized maternal discourse, Morrison imagines safety as an expandable boundary. The home is place with windows and doors wide open, capable of spreading “a kind of out of doors safety” (“Home” 9) that illuminates the writer’s social imaginary realm and perception of how a similar place would ideally function for communitarian projects.

Morrison’s representation of this out of door safety is framed as a story of a sleepless woman who could always rise from her bed and just sit or walk down a lampless road without fear. In this scenario, the woman might visit another woman’s house and help soothe a crying baby. When the baby calms down, the two women might sit and chat for a while until it is time to go again home or just walk farther undisturbed.

This image of a community of women bound by maternal acts of care for babies and being able to walk fearless and undisturbed in a racialized space becomes Morrison’s central metaphor for safety. Safety is an expression of maternal love and solidarity among women and an expression of unperturbed mobility in social situations. This image is classifiable as highly romantic, perhaps a glorified version of essentialized (black) femininity and motherhood, but it becomes important because it names black women and mothers as agents and benefactors of social change. And if we combine this active role of black women and mothers with another famous statement of Morrison’s nonfiction arsenal that seemingly stands in opposition to the gender-coded politics of “Home,” namely the statement that black feminist theory has no value because it leaves out black

men, then we witness how Morrison names black mothers and women as potential hegemonic agents of her cultural politics of difference that claims difference for the whole group and not just a concern for the plight of black women.

Morrison's interpretation of safety in "Home" indicates that she values it first as a political strategy for group consolidation and then as a cure. Morrison's rejection of the idea of having to submit to the standard of the other as an instrument for identity formation is part of this strategy. Safety, for her, could be implemented by making a choice of one's cultural allegiance and making room for this cultural allegiance to exist among others. Morrison concludes that "the new space" for safety "is formed by the inwardness of the outside, the interiority of the 'othered,' the personal that is always embedded in the public" (12). This new signification for safety embraces the existence of cultural blackness and transforms it into an option to publicize the interiority of one's being as a cultural choice.

The central frame of reference of Morrison's theory on safety becomes the open-endedness of a culture of unprivileged difference. "In this new space," according to Morrison, "one can imagine safety without walls, can iterate difference that is prized but unprivileged, and can conceive of a third, if you will pardon the expression world 'already made for me, both snug and wide open, with a doorway never needing to be closed'" ("Home" 12). And here lies the biggest paradox of Morrison's theory of safety in service of a specific cultural difference only. Once this prized, unprivileged safety expands its social and cultural territory by virtue of its open-endedness, it has the capacity to hegemonize beyond intracommunal lines, but as it does so, its limit of comfort and protection of one cultural group will be abolished in favor of some shared

(third) cultural space that is no longer exclusively African American. But this version of safety as home of open-endedness is the end goal of Morrison's social imaginary. It can only come as an outcome of the process of applying her cultural strategic essentialism first, and as it turns out, it comes to be de-essentialized down the road to home.

As a participant and defender of African American cultural discourse, Morrison points to the role of literary criticism as a way of securing and promoting identifiable African American literature. In "Unspeakable Things Unspoken," she suggests several developments for a literary theory that will truly accommodate African American literature. The first thread of this African American literary theory should be "based on its culture, its history, and the artistic strategies that the works employ to negotiate the world it inhabits" (11). Another possibility lies in the examination and reinterpretation of the nineteenth century American canon for "the ways in which the presence of Afro-Americans has shaped the choices, the language, the structure – the meaning of so much American literature" (11). A third trend is the examination of the contemporary and non-canonical literature for an Afro-American presence. Combined, the three trends of the proposed African-American literary theory aim at delineating a tradition, from past to present, that articulates the African American presence as a steady factor on the American literary horizon. It seeks to document the elements, techniques, and linguistic parameters of the African American presence. And it strives to produce a claim of ownership, of marking a specific area of literary tradition as exclusively African-American.

In fact, Morrison's engagement with criticism does not start with the publication of "Unspeakable Things Unspoken." Her first influential essay, "Rootedness: The

Ancestor as Foundation” already contains hints, directions, and suggestions about the function of literary criticism, only the boldness of the claims relate primarily to the critical models for reading Morrison’s fiction. With several major novels under her belt, *The Bluest Eye* (1970), *Sula* (1974), *Song of Solomon* (1977), and *Tar Baby* (1981), and having sparked serious critical attention toward her fiction, Morrison writes:

My general disappointment in some of the criticism that my work has received has nothing to do with approval. It has something to do with the vocabulary used in order to describe these things. I don’t like to find my books condemned as bad or praised as good when that condemnation or that praise is based on criteria from other paradigms. I would much prefer if they were dismissed or embraced based on the success of their accomplishment within the culture out of which I write.

(“Rootedness” 2288)

Even though the statement reads a little vague as to what in the critics’ vocabulary or which specific critical paradigms might receive Morrison’s label of dislike, it is obvious that she targets the hegemony of white male criticism and its cultural criteria for assessment of her own work and group culture. The measurement for success of one’s culture, Morrison unequivocally insists, should come from within this very same culture. This is a maneuver that seeks to establish the safety net for a specific cultural criticism that will cushion her work comfortably in the terrain of African American tradition and vice versa; her fiction itself will feed and strengthen intellectually and politically the tradition itself. In this mutually beneficial value exchange of fiction that belongs to a tradition and a tradition that has its fiction, Morrison articulates a significant part of her mission of difference as a tool for cultural independence. Morrison insists that Black



literature is not about or by Black people whose language is known for dropping the g's. It is about "something very special and identifiable" (2288) and part of her job is to bring that special and identifiable aspect of the African American art work while the job of an African American critical paradigm, we may speculate as we read her essay, would be to endorse these special and identifiable aspects and pass them as true markers of difference. In this respect, Morrison's view on the role of criticism shares a great deal of commonality with other leading African American critics. Indeed, the coined leading theories of African American descent document work with folklore, music genres, and myths as central tropes for critical reading of black literature.<sup>10</sup>

In "Rootedness: The Ancestor as Foundation," Morrison launches a specific attack on another brand of criticism. This time the target is not white male criticism, as the logic and context of the day would suggest, but for many and perhaps quite unexpectedly given Morrison's inclination to depict strong female characters in her fiction, the target is Black feminist criticism. Morrison explains that she does not have to say much about Black feminist criticism except that "there is more danger in it than fruit, because any model of criticism that excludes males from it is as hampered as any model of criticism of Black literature that excludes women from it" ("Rootedness" 2290). I wish to suggest that the danger that Morrison sees in applying black feminist criticism stems from the fact that it may potentially create a split in the black community along gender lines that would weaken the construction of a unified cultural community generated by a strong sense of traditionalism.

Morrison conceptualizes her outlook on criticism at a time when it was essential to both produce viable black literature and maintain its high profile by constructing

adequate critical frameworks for positioning it institutionally on the map of America's literatures. Black feminist criticism needs to be stifled in order for the collective to speak on behalf of African American cultural interests. These interests could be best defended if fragmentation along communal lines could be contained. Morrison seems to be in favor of a hegemonic arrangement of African American literary criticism that would narrow down the critical interpretive positions to numbers that ensure the protection of cultural interests for the whole community.

If in "Unspeakable Things Unspoken" Morrison lays the stress on identifiable African-American literature and the development of literary criticism that will boost the study and preservation of this literature, in her book-length study, *Playing in the Dark*, Morrison tackles the issue of literary criticism from a different perspective which nonetheless aims again to secure the African American presence as an influential subject of literary studies. The strategy in this case is to deflect attention from African American literature and criticism and orient the critical gaze toward the formation of American national literature from an introspective angle. Morrison proposes the contemplation of black presence as key to any understanding of American national literature. She coins a specific term – American Africanism – for this black presence. It is a significant other presence that, either real or fabricated, helps construct the notion of Americanness. Morrison explains her term and its function as follows:

[...] I use it as a term for the denotative and connotative blackness that African peoples have come to signify, as well as the entire range of views, assumptions, readings, and misreadings that accompany Eurocentric learning about these people. As a trope, little restraint has been attached to its uses. As a disabling

virus within literary discourse, Africanism has become, in the Eurocentric tradition that American education favors, both a way of talking about and of policing matters of class, sexual license, and repression, formations and exercises of power, and meditations on ethics and accountability. Through the simple expedient of demonizing and reifying the range of color on a palette, American Africanism makes it possible to say or not say, to inscribe and erase, to escape and engage, to act out and act on, to historicize and render timeless. It provides a way of contemplating chaos and civilization, desire and fear, and a mechanism for testing the problems and blessings of freedom. (6-7)

Morrison emphasizes the fact that Americanness has been always coded normal, organized, progressive, civilized against the invented Africanist presence. In this sense, American Africanism becomes the constitutive outside for whiteness. American Africanism cannot be separated from the cultural canonicity of white literature or the making of whiteness in literature. It is through what Morrison calls “the techniques of ‘othering’” so common in American literature that whiteness both acquires meaning and seeks to establish its ideology as a hegemonic epistemological center and at the same time reveals its own insecurities about its core status and function, speaks of its secret desires, discloses its longings, alludes to its terrors and perplexities.<sup>11</sup> To examine whiteness through the prism of American Africanism is to affirm the relational character upon which whiteness claims its identity both as specific and universal. This is also to give enormous credit to the representation of the black presence both as a sign of formation and a critique of whiteness. This dual function of Africanism makes it possible in political terms to reify the notion of Americanness but also dismantle it by

undermining the very categories such as individualism, innocence, conquering heroism, and potent masculinity that make Americanness and define American character and identity.

Africanism as a formative sign of Americanness offers the introduction of a pervasive cultural rationale for conquering and subjugating the African American people. “[T]he process of organizing American coherence through a distancing Africanism,” Morrison writes, “became the operative mode of a new cultural hegemony” (*Playing in the Dark* 8). As such, the new cultural hegemony professes the discursive power of whiteness. The attempt to destabilize this cultural hegemony rests upon the poststructuralist premise of the mutability of the sign. Africanism as a sign of instability and anxiety reveals a mechanism for disarticulating the white hegemony by focusing on the effects of racism on those who perpetuate it rather than on those who are its victims. It is with this notion of African Americanism that Morrison gets credited by scholars as a founder of whiteness studies and her book, *Playing in the Dark*, as a programmatic document for critical inquiries into the making of whiteness.<sup>12</sup> And more importantly, for the purpose of this study, the exploration of American Africanism as an invented or fabricated black presence becomes Morrison’s major tool for making room and legitimizing the need for African American studies and literary theories that will assert a different type of explanation of the black presence. While African Americanism with its introspective critical gaze on whiteness keeps in check white epistemology, time is secured for African American models of criticism to grow fairly undisturbed by the pressure of outside influence. The introspective gaze provides the conditions for both whiteness studies and African American studies to focus on how discursive elements get

assembled along intracommunal and intraracial lines without missing the intercommunal and interracial encounters.

Morrison observes that the word “American” is deeply associated with race. In the United States, her argument continues, “American means white, and Africanist people struggle to make the term applicable to themselves with ethnicity and hyphen after hyphen after hyphen” (*Playing in the Dark* 47). The state of hyphenised existence is reminiscent of Du Bois’s state of double consciousness where “two unreconciled strivings” reside in one dark body.<sup>13</sup> Morrison views the process of being both different (black) and the same (American) as a struggle, with painful consequences. The marker that represents the continuity of this struggle and the uneasy task of negotiating two types of identity is the hyphen. The way to reduce its tyrannical power over the process of subject formation is to destabilize the position after the hyphen and orient subjectivity efforts into black traditionalist cultural and critical discourses of difference. The mission of such discourses requires an independent and self-articulating development.

Morrison’s other accusation against the power grip demonstration of American Africanism has to do with the fact that it shapes history and context for whites, while it offers “history-lessness” and “context-lessness” for blacks.<sup>14</sup> It is possible to remedy the horrendous effects of such temporal and historical absence by applying alternative ways of knowledge that could come with the support line of independent African American literature and theory oriented to the practice of acts of cultural safety and acts of resistance to foreign dominance to keep its potent communal binding alive.

The independent development of African American studies and literary theories provides an environment rife with opportunity for intracommunal hegemonic moves.

Similar to the functioning of the new cultural hegemony based on American Africanism that Morrison describes, the autonomous black theories are not exempt from forging their own African Americanism. The insistence that certain core elements not only make African American literature and culture identifiable but also act as *effective* tools to counter dominant white paradigms is one way to detect the Americanism at work. Through the prism of Americanism, Americanness can be reduced to an unstable and defeatable cultural position or it can represent its legal endorsement of civil rights and equal citizenship. It is with these two significations of Americanness in mind that African Americanism legitimizes its actions, demonstrates its celebratory nature, and affirms the power of its provocative disruptive function in relation to imposed dominant discourses.

As a sign of resistance, African Americanism denotes its relation of connectedness to the oppressive racist structures as well as the optimism for crippling those oppressive structures. As a sign of safety, it provides the protected critical space for discussion and appreciation of African American art and literature. It has the capacity to fill the universal void within intracommunal lines and erect a chain of equivalence for the members of the black community as the practitioners and consumers of African American literature and art.

In “From Phillis Wheatley to Toni Morrison: The Flowering of African-American Literature,” Henry Louis Gates, Jr. and Nellie McKay examine the history of African-American literature and claim that its literary merits were constantly put into question because its days of infancy were governed by Enlightenment skepticism and the stifling pressure of the institution of slavery. This historical context had a peculiar effect on African American writers with their work often assuming the role of synecdoche to

represent the ethnic whole, signify black existence, or judge whether the group deserves full entitlement to a full range of citizen rights. Gates and McKay conclude that “because of the perilous stature of African Americans in American society, their literature has suffered under tremendous extraliterary burdens” (99). Often times, as this literature sought to progress and strive to set itself on a track of independent development, its leading authors intervened in ways to help alleviate some of the extraliterary burden and argued for its own specific development, goals, and identifying characteristics.

To accomplish these goals, talented black writers had to switch gears often between fiction writing and rigorous critical defense of African American literature. Notable examples here are the critical essays of the New Negro Renaissance poet James Weldon Johnson with his editor’s introduction to the iconic anthology, *The Book of American Negro Poetry* (1922), Langston Hughes with his essay, “The Artist and the Racial Mountain” (1926), or modernist and novelist Richard Wright with “Blueprint for Negro Writing” (1937). They all serve as ardent documents on the role of black writers, the function of African American literature, and its specific artistic contribution without being detached from the political aspirations of this literature. The forging of dual writer/critic identity is a crucial link in the making of African American literary criticism as a defense mechanism against white literary and cultural hegemony and a decisive step in the articulation of a critical safety net for dissemination and proliferation of African American literature beyond the level of community service and toward an independent placement on a national level.

Even if this movement started as a primarily male endeavor, black women writers joined the dual writer/critic tradition with a definitive stance and line of their literary

criticism. Toni Morrison is no exception here, but rather a perfect illustration of a prevalent behavior among African American leading artists seeking to confer both literary and critical powers of their work. Through a series of essays, interviews, lectures, and a book-length study, Morrison becomes actively engaged in the trend of dual allegiance to both fiction and criticism. She is especially productive in the battle of institutionalizing African American literature and recognizing this literature on a national level as a substantial part of the nation's literary canon. Her critical mode displays both nurturing and combative characteristics as it seeks to accommodate the cultural interests of African American literature, its practitioners, and consumers. She offers an interpretive pole for identifying and reading the literature of her own people.



---

## NOTES

<sup>1</sup> The listings of studies in the previous two paragraphs are of book size only and by no means exhaust all book size publications of Morrison's fiction. The selection criteria that I apply here is to include books that offer comprehensive studies of Morrison's novels by one author regardless of the themes and theoretical approaches. The authors of these books develop and situate Morrison in particular cultural contexts. The other distinct group of book publications on Morrison's fiction follows the format of essay collections on one or more novels and offer in general a far greater variety of different theoretical approaches and critical perspectives that may also tackle the problem of cultural situatedness of Morrison's literary texts but remain limited in scope. Consider, for example, Barbara Solomon's *Critical Essays on Toni Morrison's "Beloved"* (1998), Andrew William's and Nellie McKay's *Toni Morrison's "Beloved": A Case Book* (1999), Henry Louis Gates, Jr's and Anthony Appiah's *Toni Morrison: Critical Perspectives Past and Present* (1993), Harold Bloom's *Toni Morrison: Modern Critical Views* (1990).

<sup>2</sup> "Rootedness: The Ancestor as Foundation" (1984), "The Site Of Memory" (1987), "The Unspeakable Things Unspoken" (1988), and *Playing in the Dark* (1992) are among the most commented on and referenced texts of nonfiction in Morrison scholarship.

<sup>3</sup> Gayatri Spivak first introduced the concept of strategic essentialism in her essay "Deconstructing Historiography" where she proposes "a strategic use of positivist essentialism in a scrupulously visible political interest" (13). Building on Marx's and Gramsci's notion of class-consciousness, she treats subaltern consciousness as an emergent collective consciousness. To obtain this level of collective consciousness, the oppressed need to strategically adhere to an essentialist notion of consciousness to achieve their political goals. In order to bring forward their group identity, people have to rely on essentialist (or traditionalist) explanations of who they are in order to situate themselves as radically different from other groups of people, especially against the collective identity of the oppressors. Spivak labels this kind of collective essentialism positivist because of the highly increased chance it offers the group to achieve their political targets. Spivak envisions the application of strategic essentialism only temporarily while being aware of the risk that goes with the implementation of this strategy to fix identity and facilitate the subordination of groups even though the political intention was initially to emancipate them.

<sup>4</sup> Several years after the publication of "Speaking the Unspeakable: On Toni Morrison African American Intellectuals and the Uses of Essentialist Rhetoric" (1993), McBride contributed to *The Cambridge Companion to Toni Morrison* (2007) with "Morrison, intellectual" where he again measured Morrison's intellectual contribution as something that defies the common division between artist and scholar. See p.162. In addition to the compressed version of his already familiar reading of "Unspeakable Things Unspoken," he included Morrison's Nobel acceptance speech from her nonfiction collection of texts to speak of Morrison's deconstruction of traditional academic binaries such as writer/critic or writer/historian.

<sup>5</sup> We should clarify that the view on black music functioning as an art product that transgresses the realm of black culture in order to offer universality across racialized lines is exclusively Morrison's. Critics such as Huston Baker, Henry Louis Gates, Jr., or Joyce Joyce would most definitely disagree with the statement even though they give different weight to the importance of music in the shaping of African American culture. Baker builds his vernacular theory on the trope of blues as a "matrix" for African American artistic production. Henry Louis Gates, Jr. views music as one tool out of many for the process of demonstrating how *Signifyin(g)* works. Joyce Joyce insists on music being an integral component of the Afro-centered identity approach that she favors. No matter the differences in how privileged black music is for gaining insight into African American culture, the above mentioned critics embrace music as a trope for doing African American literary studies.

<sup>6</sup> The position that Morrison takes in regard to the genre of the novel as a potent form of claiming African American cultural identity versus doubts in the ability of music to achieve this is slightly misleading if one takes into consideration the content of Morrison's fiction. *Song of Solomon* (1977) and *Beloved* (1987) are great illustrations of how music defines African American characters and their cultural consciousness. For

---

this reason, I am inclined to read the statement as a protectionist move of professional interests on behalf of Morrison rather than a complete rejection of music as a viable expression of black art.

<sup>7</sup> According to Patrice Pavis, the Greek chorus is a homogenous group of performers that suppresses the individual in its compositional arrangement and delivers a collective comment on the dramatic action. See *Dictionary of the Theatre*, p.53. Its reaction is representative of the general population. The chorus performed either in song form or in words spoken in unison. The uniform performance creates the effect of communitarian core or center of social unity displayed as a result of collective assessment of ongoing events. In this context, Morrison's work could be perceived as that of a coryphaeus, the leader of the chorus, hidden behind the curtain of the literary text but revealed on the stage of her nonfiction performance.

<sup>8</sup> The use of black vernacular for resistance and identification purposes did not remain confined to the world of literature and culture, but grew out to be an educational goal supported by the proponents of ebonics. It became a type of linguistic policy constructed around the idea of language of home and community as the best tool for knowledge acquisition. One example here is the controversial decision of the Oakland, California school board in 1996 to offer students some instruction in the African American Vernacular Language known also as "Ebonics."

<sup>9</sup> Since in this study I am interested primarily in the African American attempts to delineate black and white lines of existence, I bring to attention two black female critics' visions of preserving the lines of color as an expression of cultural division and different aesthetic values. Literary critic Joyce Joyce is a well-known practitioner of the Afro-centered approach. In *Warriors, Conjurers, and Priests: Defining African-Centered Literary Criticism* (1994), she insists that both writers and critics should stay centered in the best Afro-centered traditions to survive what she calls the "serpent's bite" or the white hegemony (3). Barbara Christian is another scholar that illustrates a similar trend but from a different angle. In her strongly debated and anthologized article, "The Race for Theory" (1987), she questions the power of theory for the study of African American literature. Christian perceives literary theory as a coercive hegemony that holds black literature hostage to concrete interpretations and limits its freedom for meaning making. Her theory-free stance received severe criticism especially from the camp of Afro-centered literary critics such as Michael Awkward, who were quick to note that her approach misses taking into consideration the level of deep understanding that the Afrocentered critical frame brings to the reading of African American literature.

<sup>10</sup> In *From Behind the Veil* (1979), Robert Stepto counts on the historical and linguistic call-and-response aspect of the African American tradition to examine the progression of the African American narrative as a series of revisions that seek to complete the "pregeneric myth" of Afro-America based on the quest for freedom and literacy. In *The Signifying Monkey* (1988), Henry Louis Gates, Jr. develops his theory of *Signifyin(g)* using the central folkloric figure of the signifying monkey to emphasize the rhetorical power of African American English over Standard American English. Houston Baker advances the figure of the blues as the code to understanding African American literature in *Blues, Ideologies, and the Afro-American Literature* (1984). Cheryl Wall's *Worrying the Line* (2005) employs the folk expression "worrying the line" known as a device in blues for altering the pitch of a note, changes in word order, or repetition of phrases to examine how African American literary texts subvert the conventions of literary tradition in an attempt to forge a connection to the past.

<sup>11</sup> Inspired by James Snead's *Figures of Division: William Faulkner's Major Novels* (1986), Morrison lists six common linguistic strategies for "othering." Economy of stereotype, metonymic displacement, metaphysical condensation, fetishization, dehistoricizing allegory, and patterns of explosive, disjointed, repetitive language are the common strategies for shaping Africanist presence. See *Playing in the Dark*, p. 67 – 69.

<sup>12</sup> Although Morrison is not the first African American to point to the Africanist presence in American literature, her study *Playing in the Dark* is credited with initiating a line of research known as "whiteness studies." Among the first representative titles of this academic brand of criticism, include Eric Sundquist's *To Wake the Nations: Race in the Making of American Literature* (1993), Kenneth Warren's *Black and White Strangers: Race and American Literary Realism* (1993), Grace Hale's *Making Whiteness: The*

---

*Culture of Segregation in the South, 1890 – 1940* (1998), and Valerie Babb's *Whiteness Visible: The Meaning of Whiteness in American Literature and Culture* (1998).

<sup>13</sup> See Du Bois's first chapter in *The Souls of Black Folk* (1903) titled "Of Our Spiritual Strivings," p. 9.

<sup>14</sup> See *Playing in the Dark*, p.53

## CHAPTER V

### SAFETY, SETHE, STH, SOUND: BLACK MATERNAL POLITICS AND THE QUESTION OF COMMUNITY CONSENSUS IN TONI MORRISON'S *BELOVED*

This chapter intends to cast a light on the working of the political in Morrison's fiction, and most notably her most popular, Pulitzer Prize winning novel *Beloved*, through the lens of Laclau's theory of hegemony and antagonism. Written in 1987, the novel becomes a testimony to Morrison's devotion to the task of the black artist. In her words, an artist "is not a solitary person who has no responsibility to the community" (Interview with Christina Davis 231). On the contrary, being an artist, for Morrison, is a communal experience and as such it must be in favor of the collective. Her second important declaration is about the artist's work that should be "unquestionably political and irrevocably beautiful at the same time" ("Rootedness" 345). The two statements clearly position Morrison as a practitioner of literary and cultural politics with specific expression, although not necessarily identical to the politics of her nonfiction, in her most celebrated novel *Beloved*.

Sidetracking the theme of aesthetics, this analysis aims at following the organization of the political through the issues of infanticide and safety in *Beloved*. It extends to the question of how and why the lines of infanticide and safety intersect and what the result of this intersection is in terms of personal and communal responsibility and construction of community consensus primarily along intracommunal and intraracial lines. Unlike Grimke's "The Closing Door," Graham's *It's Morning*, and Johnson's *Safe*,

which just bring to the forefront the necessity for an upcoming communal address and social debate about the horror and pain of infanticide, Morrison's *Beloved* depicts the phases of such a communal debate, with all its contradictions, complications, and compromises that lead to the intracommunal consensus as the most beneficial outcome for community growth and expression of political orientation.

Such a consensus begins with a stark confrontation with a maternal destructive force, an incident of brutal, panicky, and sporadic violence perpetrated by the black mother against her own blood – her almost two-year old daughter. From the point of view of the black mother, the murder is the best way to protect her child from the institution of slavery. However, what she believes to have executed as an act of safety turns into a dreary spectacular performance in front of a passive audience. To elevate the community to the level of viable political engagement, Morrison designs a correctional repeat of the traumatic scene in the narrative where the viewers turn into performers – a move calculated to boost the much-so-needed agency in the hands of the black community. In between these two crucial scenes, we learn about the discursive movements of the signifier *safety*, its different proponents and their political moves for hegemonized communal existence.

As with the previously examined texts, the topic of infanticide will confirm again the status of the discourse of motherhood as a political instrument in African American literature. Claudia Tate's extensive study on domestic allegories and political desire in African American's women literature has already traced the utilization of predominantly black and female maternal discourses for political purposes, noting that the politicization of black mother's voices happened straight from the inception of black feminine texts

such as Jacobs's *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl* (1861) and Wilson's *Our Nig* (1859). The task is to see how *Beloved* contributes to this thread in women's black literature.

The intricate connection that the black mother in *Beloved* establishes between infanticide, an issue against which the domain of motherhood is regulated, and safety, an issue with broader discursive circulation, makes it possible to hear in *Beloved* a number of voices within intersecting discourses competing to lend meaning to safety. In such a context, both the infanticidal mother and her act of infanticide will have to compete with a number of discursive articulations of safety, each one with a claim to have found a working solution to the problem of infanticide and social divisibility in general.

Morrison, similar to her New Negro Renaissance precursors, counts on non-verbal and verbal discursive elements to grant political subjectivity to the black mother and produce the tropological link between infanticide and safety resulting in sufficient subversive effects able to reveal the production of safety as an empty signifier. But unlike Grimke, Graham, and Johnson who rush to shorten the distance between the nonverbal explosive element (infanticide) and the verbal explanatory element (the maternal claim of safety), Morrison postpones the time for making this connection by delving in fragments into the characters' antebellum past and pre-history of Sethe's isolation before she obviates the voicing of her maternal claim about children and safety. Morrison significantly elaborates on the visual aspect of infanticide as spectacle and even sets up a repeat of the same gory spectacle with a significant change to get things right this time. The repeat appears also as a modern condemnation of the nineteenth century cycle of sensationalist cultural forms that Americans consumed and the effects of sensationalism in the production of racial and cultural stereotypes.

In addition to the unfolding of the visual spectacle – or maybe better call it dark maternal carnivalesque – in the case of *Beloved*, Morrison, unlike Grimke, Graham, and Johnson, extends substantially the use of the verbal discursive elements and their way of complicating the maternal claim on safety.<sup>1</sup> The complication of the claim is as much a function of the complex social relations among the characters as is a function of the writer's linguistic skills and convoluted rhetorical maneuvers. Morrison's fame as a high rhetorician shines when we discover piece by piece, with the help of characters and narrators, flashbacks, shifts in focalization, suspense mechanisms, and pliable language the construction of an intricate linguistic chain that speaks of maternal and feminine interpretation and assessment of safety. In addition to infanticide as a new referent for safety, the linguistic chain, *safety-Sethe-sth*, serves the black mother in *Beloved* to explain and assess, in a situation of social isolation, her act of infanticide. Each member of the maternal linguistic unit deconstructs the previous one and thus symbolically subverts the previous one and the signified represented by its signifier. In this chain, even the name of the mother, Sethe, becomes an important signifier for safety that brings both the doer and the action to the public attention. The alliterative quality of the linguistic chain holds the maternal confession together and, similar to a poetic disturbing line, reminds us of the depth of the social confrontation with infanticide.

Besides the maternal signification on safety, there are communal constructions of safety articulated in a number of different discourses. There is Paul D and his use of safety borrowed from the discourse of masculinity; there is Stamp Paid and his activism in the Underground Railroad that helps him embrace an interpretation of safety as it circulates in the discourse of freedom and humanity, and there is Baby Suggs's

“unchurched” articulation of safety as she revises the spiritual and religious discourse and offers her quasi-religious version. Infanticide clashes with all these discursive referents for safety, and Sethe becomes an opponent to all the subjects that profess some type of normative or community-approved safety.

As the narrative progresses and the details of the past and present crisscross and mingle to reveal the destiny of characters and events, the need for a community consensus and the demonstrative search for cultural “formula” as a binder become evident. As we know from Laclau, the charisma of such binders (empty signifiers) lies in the fact of delivering a political promise, a new social imaginary, capable to close the gaps and restore systemic order.

Sethe’s infanticide is a moment of crisis, a structural dislocation with antagonistic effects that spotlight the compromised centers of authority and the experience of Sethe’s pure antagonism.<sup>2</sup> The agony of these internal splits and their relation to maternal politics make Morrison’s Sethe a much more elaborate political subject as well as a subject of politics than Grimke’s, Graham’s, and Johnson’s infanticidal mothers.

Unlike her New Negro female literary ancestors, Morrison explicitly puts the emphasis on the collective strategies and resources for handling the moment of crisis within the black community by acknowledging the challenge for social transformation imposed from within. The communal as an axis of politics is, of course, a trademark of Morrison’s fiction and critical prose. Whether it is in *The Bluest Eye*, *Sula*, *Song of Solomon*, or *Jazz*, it is through the resources of the community that fundamental searches for identity and desires for stability get answered. Morrison admits to the power of this factor in “Rootedness,” claiming that if her writing “isn’t about the village or the



community or about you, then it is not about anything” (2290). In this sense, there is a higher collective interest to guard and politicize before the individual longing for freedom and self-definition, and there is the acknowledgement of the strength of collective strategies for social rerouting with more beneficial results.

Not surprisingly, in the end, it is a group of concerned women who intervene not only to save Sethe from Beloved but to tame the polysemic bumpy rides of *safety* by relying on the power of the sound. Thus, they articulate a new element to the maternal linguistic chain on safety, a modification that makes it not only maternal but communal, with effects on all other discursive interpretations of safety. It also temporarily closes the semiological open-endedness of the signifier *safety* once it gets (re)integrated into the discourse of African American songs. It is through the power of the sound that Sethe undergoes her bi-cultural emancipation from the marginal zones of black and white discursive pegging and makes her safe return to a restored communal social and cultural form of life. What this means is that important elements of the African American culture, such as the sound, are rearticulated in their cultural context, due to critical contingency and open spaces for emancipation and enrichment of cultural knowledge. Such a stretching of elements that perform as if to rise above their specific context and strategize for a brighter future allows for the articulation of new social imaginaries.

Sethe’s infanticide is an act with multiple meanings. It is a metaphor for a violent social protest, a sinister parody of the sensational cultural form of the freak show, which thrives upon a polarized interpretation of racial and cultural differences, and a reason to (re)validate black cultural forms for achieving communitarian universalism. The dismemberment of the child’s body, the scattered chaotic thoughts of the infanticidal

mother, *Beloved*'s oddities, all find artistic representation in the novel through the fragmentary nature of the narrative and the constant interplay of literal and figurative meaning, as critics observe. These narrative elements illustrate well the dual political goal: social and literary genre protest. Thus, the question of safety spreads to the construction of the genre of the novel as a safe space with its capacity to offer a sample of communal unity through cultural means. *Beloved* itself reveals its concerns about the safe perception of its generic power to speak convincingly in defense of African American cultural interests as Morrison's vision of the genre of the black novel dictates.

The analysis in this chapter will also be an attempt to fill a void in the scholarship on *Beloved*, despite the fact that this is one of Morrison's most critiqued novels with a wide spectrum of theoretical approaches applied to the text. The large number of critical readings are psychoanalytical, feminist, new historicist, deconstructionist, postmodernist, and postcolonial in nature, or any combination of the above listed approaches and their elements.<sup>3</sup> A separate extremely influential group of critical readings are the African American traditionalist interpretations that insist on the value of alternative systems of knowledge, aesthetic and communal sensibilities that foreground African American cultural difference.<sup>4</sup>

Interestingly enough, the question of safety and its relation to the political side of the African American literature has not been explored. Safety is a word that appears with a high frequency throughout the novel; in fact, it is in the vocabulary of every major character until it receives broad public coverage as well. It is associated with social positionality and subjectivity, spaces, communities, motherhood and femininity, masculinity, race, freedom, human rights, and cultural forms. It is this scope of

referentiality and convenience to be exploited by a wide range of subjects and collective formations that makes it so attractive for political usage and interest defense. Its signification both limits and constitutes the parameters of subjectivity and social constructs. By extension, it limits and constitutes the boundaries of the narrative and its readability. It speaks of how African American literature by women sought to situate itself safely within and against various other literatures that bear the name American in their nominal form.<sup>5</sup>

To my knowledge, the only study that addresses the problem of safety in Toni Morrison's *Beloved* is Andrew Schopps's "Narrative Control and Subjectivity: Dismantling Safety in Toni Morrison's *Beloved*" (1995). As the title of Schopps's study suggests, he is interested in the narrative practices and writing strategies that Morrison employs to dismantle textual safety. He argues that the numerous disruptions in the narrative trigger a suturing process, based on the tension of established identifications between reading subjects and speaking subjects. Even though these identifications carry the promise of assembling meaning or getting close to narrative safety, it is the process of Morrison's narrative control and prolific use of manipulative narratological devices that keep the reading subjects both subjugated and in the making of their subjectivity.

My reading of *Beloved*, however, seeks to examine safety as an empty signifier. As such, it is the signifier of absent communitarian fullness, open to the filling function of hegemony and revealing the political agents and alliances that make the socio-structural organization of late nineteenth century black Cincinnati community possible. Parallel to that, the novel makes a statement about the safety net that one of the most

influential African American theories – Gates’s theory of Signification – offers to African American literature.

Sethe, a slave on the Sweet Home plantation in South Carolina, decides to flee to a free territory as part of a plan devised by the slaves after the death of the old master and the arrival of his brother-in-law, referred to as schoolteacher, who is now in charge of the property. It is during schoolteacher’s rule that the life of the slaves significantly worsens through stricter disciplinary measures involving physical punishment, sexual assault, as well as racist scientific experiments designed to prove the biological inferiority of the black race. Sethe herself becomes a victim of a cruel pseudo-scientific experiment where schoolteacher and his nephews open up the back of her pregnant body to document the findings of their “scientific” experiment.

At the time of the escape, Sethe gives a mythical birth to her forth child in the wilderness, assisted by a white girl, Amy, and exhausted from the trip and the natal pains, arrives in Ohio in the house of the mother-in-law Baby Suggs. Baby Suggs welcomes Sethe and the newborn and promises to reunite in the morning the mother with her other three children that Sethe sent there ahead of her escape.

After twenty-eight days of free life with family members and new friends, Sethe gets a warm introduction into the community of black people. Baby Suggs, an already established voice in the community with her ability to fulfill a religious function of preacher and healer of traumatized bodies, organizes an abundant feast for everybody to eat and drink and celebrate the state of freedom. She gets rebuked for her excess and is put in isolation when the murmurs and discontent of her behavior reach a high peak. As a result, when schoolteacher comes to collect what lawfully belongs to him – Sethe and her

children – nobody warns the inhabitants of 124 that danger is coming. Caught off guard, Sethe recognizes the hat of schoolteacher in Baby Suggs’s yard, quickly collects her children and rushes to the shed, where she slits the throat of her crawling baby girl with a saw and frantically is about to repeat the bloody act when Stamp Paid manages to yank out of her hands the next victim.

The reaction of the black community to this chilling episode is quite peculiar. Its members not only fail to inform Sethe and Baby Suggs of the coming danger, but their choice to remain silent extends into something far worse; they either don’t show up or turn into passive observers, from a safe distance, of a grim maternal spectacle spontaneously executed as a response to schoolteacher’s attempt to retake his property. It is not a premeditated murder or a pre-calculated political maneuver on behalf of the affected mother, but rather an action of contingent character with political implications, arising at the moment of its implementation and stretching far into the future, when eighteen years later, the community has to save her from what she believes to be her dead daughter who came back to punish her.

A closer examination of the infanticide scene would reveal that the black Cincinnati dwellers prove themselves weak at expressing communal solidarity and demonstrate instead a passive complicity similar to what an act of viewer consumption requires when following schoolteacher’s own procedural spectacle of catching a runaway slave. And as schoolteacher advances towards the climax of his hunter-prey spectacle, the action gets displaced by the climax of a second spectacle, that of the improvised bloody maternal retort in the form of infanticide. But who are the viewers of this double

spectacle and will they perceive or miss the subversive value of the second spectacle or dismiss it as an act of freakishness and savagery the way schoolteacher and his posse do?

Morrison describes the witnesses to the shift in spectacle production by putting a great emphasis on the absence of viewer awareness that the maternal spectacle is an urgent call for their agency and critical intervention. Communal dysfunctionality is what the present viewers demonstrate with their behavior:

Six or seven Negroes were walking up the road toward the house: two boys from the slave catcher's left and some women from his right. ... A crazy old nigger was standing in the woodpile with an ax. You could tell he was crazy right off because he was grunting – making low, cat noises like. About twelve yards beyond that nigger was another one – a woman with a flower in her hat. Crazy too, probably, because she too was standing stock-still – but fanning her hands as though pushing cobwebs out of her way.

Inside, two boys bled in the sawdust and dirt at the feet of a nigger woman holding a blood-soaked child to her chest with one hand and an infant by the heels with the other. ...the old nigger boy, still mewling, ran through the door behind them and snatched the baby from the arc of its mother's swing. (*Beloved* 175)

Morrison works with several techniques to convey the idea of a communal rift, tension, and dysfunctionality. The idea of craziness or some sort of mental instability displayed both by male and female onlookers advances the conclusion of unreliable communal response. The ax in the hands of the “crazy” black man and the animal-like noises and questionable gestures that register black people's presence do not have an intimidating, menacing edge to their appearance but rather suggest a sensationalist façade associated

with a circus or carnival display of aspects of black exoticism and a taste of abnormality so valued for demonstration by white organizers of black entertainment shows.<sup>6</sup> In other words, the black presence as an expression of “animalistic aggression” and “uncivilized manners” is featured as a harmless exhibit of radical otherness. The image of this radical otherness as tamed, observable curiosity is delivered by the safe performance of the participants in a show directed by schoolteacher.

In the context of schoolteacher’s spectacle, the act of maternal infanticide becomes the “show-stopper,” the ultimate freakish exhibit and a proof that if left unchecked, the racial otherness is inherently dangerous. It retains its sensationalist quality when another freakish exhibit, “the old nigger boy, still mewing,” snatches the baby from the deadly maternal grip.

Morrison designs that scene by employing a limited point of view narration. The action, it seems, is seen through the eyes of a stranger, of someone non-related to the characters, who experiences the event as a theatrical observer with a penchant for details and factual documentation. The choice of words for character identification is quite indicative of the narrator’s outsider status. “Crazy old nigger,” “a woman with a flower in her hat,” “a nigger woman holding a blood-soaked child to her chest” and another “infant by the heels with the other,” “old nigger boy still mewing” are all general phrases that while ensuring anonymity provide racial identification of the participants and conveniently produce the basis for generalization upon which “truth” claims for a whole group of people can thrive. The point of view is very similar to that of a newspaper reporter who borrows readily from the nineteenth century journalistic discourse.

The rendition of events from the perspective of an outsider with an observer status in a referential race-specific language to describe the behavior of the participants and define the gender-transgressive crime of the black mother documents the lack of communal awareness and adequate response. In other words, there is nothing that would hint at some political orientation in the ranks of the black representatives; they still speak of their situatedness in and subjectivization by the dominant white order instituted in the South and propped up by the North. Infanticide is not perceived as a countermeasure to a degrading act of a mother-child hunt by men that will reassign the victims their “proper” place in the system of slavery, but as a transgressive act of motherhood. Similarly, the mother is not seen as a protective figure of her children, who provides them with safety, a declaration that Sethe will make later, but as an impulsive creature devoid of much rationality and closer to the world of wild animals, where similar behavior is within the norm. Both hegemonic discourses on race and motherhood construct her as villain and less than human at this moment, and logically, the black witnesses of the tragic event, lacking countermeasures to the white discursive hegemony, do not see Sethe’s spectacle as a separate one – a protest drama with a painfully-acute political message – but perceive it as a climactic act in schoolteacher’s adventurous spectacle of taming disobedient animals.

In *Reconstructing Womanhood*, Carby argues that “two different but independent codes (of sexuality) operated in the antebellum South, producing opposing definitions for motherhood and womanhood for black and white women which coalesce in the figure of the slave and the mistress” (20). In discussing the sexually coded difference between the women of the two races, Carby defines the cult of the true womanhood graciously



borrowed from the Victorian moral code as the social discourse on the maternal that prescribed the norms and duties of white mothers. This type of mothering promoted its exclusively beneficial social parameters. To be a good mother, one has to be nurturing, caring, protective, fully dedicated to the interests of the child, submissive to paternal authority. The cult of the true womanhood shapes the maternal discourse not only by virtue of its far more ethically superior and benevolent social mission, but also by virtue of the external support of paternalistic and religious discourses. In antebellum America, this cult of white womanhood needed to be measured against the marginal space allowed for black motherhood. According to Carby, two options defined the essence of black motherhood, “the glorified mammy and the breeder” (30). If the former has a long history of idealistic conceptions spread through the sentimental genres of the old South, the latter remained in the focus of abolitionist literature in the North, and became a tool for coining the abolitionist ideology from maternal perspective both in fiction and nonfiction. Thus, in the South, mammies took care of and nursed white children while breeders fulfilled an economic function to increase the master’s property. For black women of the North, the Victorian- coded version remained the only acceptable and “right” model for motherhood.

While mothering on free territory in Ohio, Sethe tries to embrace the ideology of true womanhood that can provide her with a mandate to mother her children in the same way white women do. For the twenty-eight days spent in Baby Suggs’s house, Sethe inherits, inhabits, and recreates a particular feminine space that helps her live like a “good” mother of her children. She is reunited with her children just like the convention of true motherhood requires, and she behaves like an attentive and devoted parent surrounded by the atmosphere of comfort and protection of Baby Suggs’s home. But her

maternal rights in the North are not legally protected. It is the South that still holds legal power over her by virtue of the controversial Fugitive Slave Act of 1850. What Sethe has as an option in Ohio is rather a motherhood in limbo than a real opportunity to mother her children. This imperiled opportunity becomes increasingly obvious with the arrival of schoolteacher. She seeks to inscribe herself as a subject into the discourse of true motherhood, but all she gets is her and her children's conversion into objects placed where they belong into the discourse of slavery once again. It is this state that she needs to protest in order to express her desire for true motherhood and freedom for her children. So from her perspective, the spectacle of infanticide is a protest drama and not a spectacle that fulfills the cultural expectations of the whites and corroborates the "natural" conclusions about the inferiority of her race. Her agency is politically charged and not racially performative as her Southern master would see it.

The act of infanticide, however, puts Sethe in an awkward position in relation to the two systems of the North and the South. She is no longer definable as a slave breeder by Southern standards but as something lower than that. Schoolteacher compares her to a horse that has been beaten beyond the point of education. Nor can she be a "true" mother by Northern standards because she has violated the central premise of motherhood – tending to the needs of her children. To use Laclau's term, she becomes a manifestation of a structural *dislocation* in both socio-economic systems. At this point, it is only the act of infanticide, the nonverbal element that helps disarticulate the notions of the black woman as a breeder and the sugar-coated Victorian version of the good mother. This is precisely what gains Sethe the position of externality, of being beyond the borders of the two systems. Relegated to the status of an outsider, Sethe experiences her

negativity first as a person who has lost her child (personal trauma), and second as an individual condemned to isolation (social punishment). This puts her in antagonistic relation to her opponents. We know from Laclau that any dislocation – or encounter with the real – is not only an experience of negativity but also a possibility for political positioning and articulation of new core values.<sup>7</sup>

So how does the act of infanticide help Sethe articulate her maternal political position?

The act of infanticide exposes the safety bubble that the “true” motherhood hegemonic discourse of the North illusively offers to the black mother, and at the same time, unleashes the logic of contestation and difference. But this newly produced difference has no viable place, as we have already observed, neither in the system of the North nor in the system of the South. Infanticide raises the logic of difference against which the logic of maternal (and other) equivalence stands. Mothers and women from all walks of life and of different color find themselves in agreement as to which maternal approaches are admissible and which threaten the foundation of the institution of motherhood. Since infanticide cannot be a difference beyond the systems, it becomes the very limit of the systems and the point from which Sethe will try to articulate a new version of maternal outlook.

Sethe’s decision to kill her children is as much a product of contingency as it is a product of her traumatic past. When she recognizes schoolteacher’s hat in Baby Suggs’s yard, she returns mentally back to Sweet Home, where schoolteacher and his nephews raped her maternal body and opened her back in an attempt to study her species “scientifically.” This left a permanent scar on her back, just as her mother bore a scar

under her breast, as a physical confirmation of an assigned social and economic status in the system of slavery and a painful reminder of the suffering and humiliation that goes with that status. So, the moment of radical contingency that leads Sethe to a controversial decision is a mixture of past and present where the present is historically marked by a past temporality. It is this present of rememory, to borrow Morrison's word coinage, that becomes a prerequisite for the critical assessment of normative motherhood.

Far from rejecting motherhood, Sethe seeks to validate her maternal position as a way to protest the highly selective character and set of privileges available only to a certain number of women who can be "true" mothers under the current system. She claims her maternal position by articulating safety in a new way. Safety, accomplished the Sethe way, signifies protection in death. But unlike Grimke's, Graham's and Johnson's mothers, who verbalize the new meaning of safety almost immediately after the act of infanticide, Sethe remains silent for quite some time and counts primarily on the non-verbal act to produce a symbolic message. The justification of her action takes place in her mind, and we are only exposed to it through the techniques of internal focalization and not through a direct public emotional proclamation. Shortly before the murder of her daughter, we learn about Sethe's planned modification of the signifier *safety*:

Simple. She just flew. Collected every bit of life she had made, all the parts of her that were precious and fine and beautiful, and carried, pushed, dragged them through the veil, out, away, over there where no one could hurt them. Over there. Outside this place where they would be safe. (*Beloved* 192)

This is the moment when we, the readers, gain a secured access to her interior thoughts to learn the black mother's interpretation of safety. To the members of the black and white communities, it still remains obscure, enveloped in maternal silence. It is much later that they will get to the verbal explanation of this metaphorical meaning of infanticide as safety.

It is interesting to note that at the moment of decision making, Sethe perceives herself and her children as a single body of life. One could argue that she perceives her maternal body as a complex assembled organism made of different parts that functions under the auspices of excessive maternal protection. The children are not treated as independent subjects but as objects in a kind of a unified corporeal ensemble that fails to represent their individual interests but foregrounds instead the maternal power of representation – a moment of maternally hegemonized children's interests. Protecting the integrity of such a composite maternal body does not end up in exterminating the whole body but only in dismembering parts of it or eliminating the voices that might contradict the maternal representation of their interest. By eliminating parts of this composite maternal body (her children), Sethe produces an economic justification of her action, too; she makes sure that the most-precious elements of that organism do not become exploitable in the hands of the master.

Organized in this fashion, Sethe's protective maternalism equates safety with murder and has a limited influence that does not go beyond the members of her immediate family. Thought and expression of collective unity is demonstrated only through the composite maternal body while communal loyalty appears to be of little importance to her. Thus, the dimension of the political in the absence of immediate verbal

message, based solely on its gory visual content, cannot be grasped as a call for political action from the members of the black community. Their reaction is to put Sethe in complete isolation for the next eighteen years. This demonstrates an awareness that something went wrong, but it is only addressed in political terms later on when *Beloved* arrives and a new temporal and social context appears to recreate the meaning of infanticide from a different angle, finding in it that social value that rises above the immediate context of its social production to claim the space of the universal.

What matters then, in terms of Sethe's radical maternal politics, is that she manages to introduce an important maternal question – although not immediately verbally tied to safety – acutely and abruptly into the public space. By a blitz planning of her chilling protest, she participates directly into the deconstruction of the signifier *safety* as it operates in the dominant discourse of motherhood. The result of her maternal biopolitics, to echo Foucault's term, receives wide communal attention after the arrival of Paul D and *Beloved*.<sup>8</sup> Prior to that, it is perceived either as shameful theatrics or as a sign of insanity. To follow Lacan's theory, we have a case where the moment of dislocation marks a prolonged existence before it is positivized into a moment of search for communitarian fullness.

#### Other Interpreters of Safety or That Safety Which is Not One

Sethe's interpretation of safety is immediately dismissed by the female members of the community. "Clean yourself up!" Baby Suggs commands right after the gory act, when Sethe attempts to resume her maternal duty to nurse her survived baby, Denver. Ever since Baby Suggs moved from Sweet Home after her son, Halle, bought her freedom from Mr. Garner and arrived in Cincinnati, she devoted her life to the spiritual

uplifting of all those in need of coping with the trauma and stress in their post-slavery lives or those who simply look for spiritual guidance that fits best their needs. Baby Suggs becomes “an unchurched preacher” (*Beloved* 102) and the Clearing – a wide-open area cut deep in the woods – becomes the home of her “ministry.” In her remake of traditional religious practices and Christian doctrines, Baby Suggs creates her own religion based on the worshipping of the exhausted from the labor and oppression of the human body. Stepping out from among the “ringing trees,” her disciples hear Baby Suggs’s preaching her psychosomatic form of spiritual cleansing and recuperative strategies. It is a call to release the negative emotions in acts of crying, dancing, and laughing that women, men, and children have to experience in order not to be saved but to reclaim their bodies for new earthly and social existence. What starts as a differentiated, gender-based and age-oriented approach – women should cry, men should dance, and children should laugh – ends up in a transgression of imposed behavioral limits resulting in a productive mix up. We learn that “Women stopped crying and danced; men sat down and cried; children danced, women laughed, children cried until, exhausted and riven, all and each lay about the clearing damp and gasping for breath” (*Beloved* 103). This mixing of bodily activities across gender and age lines provides for a better bonding experience among individuals which facilitates the road to the state of desired communitarian unity.

Baby Suggs’s “uncalled, unrobed, and unanointed” preaching resembles another maternal approach in its insistence to take care of the flesh and nourish the body. At the same time, it is also shaped by the religious/spiritual discourse that advocates love as a means for overcoming suffering. Baby Suggs’ twist on the Christian dogma of “love thy

neighbor” or “brotherly love” reads as “love your body” – an ego-centered philosophy at first sight, but absolutely necessary to unite the stage for gender/age crossed patterns of communal experiences. The maternal exceeds the domain of the family and private affairs to offer a site of communitarian unity, a location where voluntary participation and joint experience of relief become central to the perception of some consensual communal existence. Babby Suggs voices her instructions for corporeal integrity as follows:

[I]n this here place, we flesh; flesh that weeps, loves; flesh that dances on bare feet in grass. Love it. Love it hard. Yonder they do not love your flesh. They despise it. They don't love your eyes; they'd just as soon pick them out. No more do they love the skin on your back. Yonder they flay it. And O my people they do not love your hands. Those they only use, tie, bind, chop off and leave empty. Love your hands! Love them. Raise them up and kiss them. Touch others with them, pat them together, stroke them on your face 'cause they don't love that either. *You got to love it, you!* (*Beloved* 103-104).

Babby Suggs keeps on listing body parts with the message that they need special care and love. Strong arms, unnoosed and straight necks, dark livers, beating hearts, lungs that need to breathe free air, life-holding wombs are all to receive the loving attention of their body owners. It is a call for feeling the integrity of the human body and appreciating its capacity to serve its body owner well. It is also an attempt to reclaim one's own body from the master who consistently tries to “dismember” it and exploit those parts for (re)productive capacities. Putting those parts back together requires a form of maternal approach just like a mother would take care of her child. Babby Suggs sees the mothering of corporeal unity as the very condition of a safe environment for the growth of



communal bonding. Her maternal model for safety is substantially different from Sethe's in the attempt to recognize the autonomy and subjectivity of the single human body, its ability and right to constitute itself as a meaningful unit in some system of productive differentiability where its wholeness and integrity is the guarantee for self-made and successful model of social organization. The restored body is the metaphoric expression of this self-made social organization. Baby Suggs's definition for safety then equates with her slogan to love your own body. The meaning of safety as corporeal love clashes with the meaning of safety as death and draws the lines of distinction between Sethe's maternal politics and Baby Suggs's maternal politics. It also introduces a generational tension between the two types of maternal politics. Is the important communal rule of ancestralism and paying homage to seniority going to remain intact in this case or will it be rewritten to acknowledge the potential of any representative, regardless of gender, age, or class, to become a locus of political subjectivity?

The other aspect of Baby Suggs's unchurched maternal healing philosophy involves the submersion of the body into a cultural code capable of representing collective bonding that leads to communal affiliation. Rhythm and dance become the backbone of this cultural code. Baby Suggs dances while others give the right note until "the four-part harmony [is] perfect enough for their deeply loved flesh" (*Beloved* 104). The aestheticizing offered in this group performance gives the members a sense of spiritual fulfillment, satisfaction, and awareness so that the result of the performance depends on their work as a team. Harmonizing communal effort in folk art gives the impression of transcending time and situating the experience in some universal space,

rather than keeping it constantly contextualized, which is something that would validate only its temporary effect of bonding and sense of communal belonging.

But Baby Suggs's maternal model that features safety as corporeal and cultural unity loses popularity as she engages in excessive feasting to celebrate the arrival of Sethe and her reunion with her children. Sethe's murder of her almost-crawling baby also puts pressure on the validity of Baby Suggs's unchurched teaching by abolishing the very subject and agent of her philosophy, the integrity of the human body. Sethe disrupts the maternal approach upon which the practice of Baby Suggs's healing ceremonies are constituted. Without an integral performing human body, the cultural code as a viable horizon is severely impeded. Sethe has "saved" parts of her composite maternal body that will not perform. She has jeopardized the totality of Baby Suggs's system of salvation. In the following years, Baby Suggs has no choice but to give up her compromised teachings. The signifier *safety* from this perspective loses the signified that she attributes to it.

Sethe's disruption of the sign of safety first in the dominant maternal discourse and second in Baby Suggs's spin on maternal religiosity is powered by an overwhelmingly protective maternal strategy. When Paul D comes to Sethe's place eighteen years after the incident, Sethe reveals to him her maternal philosophy based on utmost devotion and obsessive protection of her only left child, Denver. Sethe makes an excuse to Paul D on behalf of Denver's provocative words toward him, and when advised not to cover up for Denver, Sethe explains that she is the only one in charge of her and not Paul D. Paul D's reminder that Denver is grown up enough to apologize on her own meets Sethe's emotional disapproval, "I don't care what she is. Grown don't mean

nothing to a mother. A child is a child. They get bigger, older, but grown? What's that supposed to mean? In my heart it don't mean a thing" (54). Sethe pledges an extreme maternal protection, a duty that stretches even beyond the boundaries of her own life, "I will protect her while I'm alive and I will protect her while I ain't" (*Beloved* 54).

It appears that Sethe has extended her maternal politics of safety in the years after the infanticide in two ways. First, its applicative power goes beyond the category toddler or small child to embrace the category adolescent. Denver is already a teenager capable of voicing her own opinion and grasping the importance of speech act as constitutive of subjectivity. One should think of how she delights in telling her story of birth. So, Sethe's maternal function has shifted from a mere physical "protection" of the child's body to a full back-up of her daughter's verbal acts and behavior. Sethe now becomes the maternal protector to a body of speech authored by her daughter – the real world language of a young black woman advanced with maternal protection against the authority of a black man's expression of protest. Thus, the spectrum of communicators widens, too. The question of safety no longer concerns the immediate circle of Sethe's family as was the case with the murder of the baby, but now the question of safety begins to involve actively other community members.

The second important nuance in Sethe's updated maternal politics is the public verbalization of the notion of safety operating from the place of death. That space of safety as death is claimed not only for black children who become victims of exploitation and oppression but is also a site for maternal agency and guardianship of the children.

These changes mark a philosophical shift in Sethe's radicalized version of maternal politics as infanticide. Safety, in this revision, requires a direct confrontation

with those who threaten the children or a supernatural maternal intervention from the world of the dead. On the surface, it excludes a repetition of the version of safety as child murder. In theory, it sounds like an idealized version of a life-long conscripted maternalism in service of children.

We have already noted that even though the act of child murder targets critically the oppressive system of slavery, it fails to produce a political consensus among the various representatives of the black community. Men are no exception in this scenario. Paul D's reaction to the tragic event is full of shock and disapproval. He reflects, "This here Sethe talks about safety with a handsaw. This here Sethe didn't know where the world stopped and she began" (*Beloved* 193). He struggles with her interpretation of safety because it does not fit the moral and humanistic discourse that he draws on to make the statement. Sethe, in his view, appears to smear the boundaries between the world as a context for her identity construction and the impossible attempt for her identity to construct a context for this very same world.

Paul D is concerned about the question of safety since the day he walks into 124. He has to expel a troublesome ghost, relying on his masculine power to save Sethe and Denver from its whimsical and tormenting presence. Here is the depiction of his defense of the two women in the house in the name of safety:

"God damn it! Hush up!" Paul was shouting, falling, reaching for anchor. "Leave the place alone! Get the hell out!" A table rushed toward him and he grabbed its leg. Somehow he managed to stand at an angle, and holding the table by two legs, he bashed it about, wrecking everything, screaming back at the screaming house.

“You want to fight, come on! God damn it! She had enough of you. She got enough!”

The quaking slowed to an occasional lurch, but Paul D did not stop whipping the table around until everything was rock quiet. (*Beloved* 22)

Few critics point to Paul D’s attempt to free the house and its female inhabitants from the ghost and they agree that his was a failure or temporary cover up for the situation. The development of the narrative corroborates these versions. What seems intriguing for the purpose of our analysis is to see Paul D’s reaction as a gendered response to the issue of safety. He draws on a discourse of masculinity, which allows settling the score with the ghost as to who gets the woman, now expressed as a physical fight accompanied by a rough provocative language. His physical approach parallels the ghost’s restless violent attacks. Coupled with destructive acts of house property and the strategy of “screaming back at the screaming house,” Paul D’s response hints at a standard patriarchal solution to the problem of safety. Safety in the discourse of masculinity translates into submission of the violator to the rule of masculine power that also regulates gender relations. His protective reaction is from the perspective of a former friend and a potential partner, perhaps even a prospective husband of Sethe.

Later when *Beloved* appears, Paul D learns that he lost his battle to the ghost as he faces a more powerful and unpredictable presence.

Having learned from Stamp Paid about Sethe’s infanticide, he addresses her with a stern remark – “you have two feet, Sethe, not four” (196) – and reproaches her maternal affectionate feeling with the phrase, “your love is too thick” (*Beloved* 193). It is easy for him to ascribe Sethe animal characteristics similar to those schoolteacher gave

her, although for a completely different reason. Schoolteacher compares her to a horse beaten beyond the point of education after she cuts the throat of her two-year old daughter, trying to make a point about her nature and inability to be disciplined while Paul D reminds her that she has stepped down to the state of animal as she opted for an excessive measure to protect her daughter. The accusation is that she might have yielded to the white stereotypical perception of the black race as an inferior species. He does not approve of the way Sethe launched her critique of a racist hegemony, but, at the same time, he is not sure what might be the right way to react to injustice.

Paul D is the first one to take Sethe out of the eighteen-year-long isolation that the black community of Cincinnati, Ohio, put her in after her act of infanticide. As an outsider to the community, he initially lacks knowledge of the communal secret – how, when, and why the murder of the child took place. He feels no restriction to reintroduce Sethe to social life. This is one practical result from the visit to the carnival for colored people. As a person of Sethe's past and a dear friend, he has certain leverage to ease her social reintroduction. But as his attempt fails, and once Beloved sets in with her impossible demands, he is forced to withdraw his presence from Sethe's life. The issue of infanticide torments him and he seeks further explanation from Stamp Paid.

This is how a second male presence is (re)exposed to the problem of infanticide. With a newspaper clipping and his account of the event, Stamp Paid informs him of the day when Sethe raised relentlessly the question of safety eighteen years ago. Stamp Paid remembers the day when he decided to pay a visit to Baby Suggs's house for her own sake and described to Paul D his encounter with voices and speech that made little to no sense:

What he heard as he moved toward the porch, he didn't understand. Out on Bluestone Road he thought he heard a conflagration of hasty voices – loud, urgent, all speaking at once so he could not make out what they were talking about or to whom. The speech wasn't nonsensical, exactly, nor was it tongues. But something was wrong with the order of the words and he couldn't describe or cipher it to save his life. All he could make out was the word *mine*. The rest of it stayed outside his mind's reach. Yet he went on through. When he got to the steps, the voices drained suddenly to less than a whisper. It gave him pause. They had become an occasional mutter – like the interior sounds a woman makes when she believes she is alone and unobserved at her work: a *sth* when she misses the needle's eye; a soft moan when she sees another chip in her one good platter; the low friendly argument with which she greets the hens. Nothing fierce or startling. Just that eternal private conversation that takes place between women and their tasks. ( *Beloved* 203)

This is a crucial scene in Morrison's novel that illustrates again how the signifier *safety* circulates in different discourses. Operating from within the discourse on freedom, Stamp Paid pays little attention to the voices or rather to Sethe's maternal conversation that he overhears. He does not perceive the talk as a possible expression of maternal politics that engages the topic of safety, but perceives it instead as a feminine talk, straight from the sphere of domesticity, a sphere traditionally left to the control of women. His social profile gives us further clues as to why his becomes an aural/oral misperception of maternal talk.

Stamp Paid is an influential and respectful member of the community from the time when his main job was to organize and provide safe passages for runaway slaves. He rows boats down the river to transport fugitive slaves, puts poles as signs when new people will make the crossing, attaches white flags on the poles to signal that a mother and children who require special accommodation are arriving, and above all, risks his own life by conducting illegal activities in violation of the Fugitive Slave Act.

His reputation of savior and law breaker in the name of human freedom paints a heroic aura of his personality and qualifies him undeniably as a political agent with enormous influence in the black community and a support figure for those who need safety to transition from one social stage of their lives to another.

Furthermore, Stamp Paid's rescue operations of runaway slaves require a solid group organization with strictly assigned tasks to the rescuers. In this sense, Stamp Paid's representational function, similar to Baby Suggs's, far exceeds the realm of his personal interest and private convictions and assumes the role of representation of all other rescuers of the team and those in general who profess abolitionist views. By Laclau's definition, we are clearly facing a political subject with enormous influence, one who has hegemonized the space of rescue operations.

In the discourse of emancipation, where Stamp Paid grounds his activities, the signifier *safety* is attached to two things: the mere physical survival of individuals as they make the passage from slavery to freedom and the moment of smooth social integration into the new place. The flow of the procedure runs in strictly organized phases, adherence to strict rules, reliable coded systems of communication, and an entire network of supporters to complete the successful crossing of runaway slaves.



As a ring leader of such a rescue group, Stamp Paid is well-acquainted with the construction of the political meaning of safety as physical survival, communal integration, and discretion. His notion of safety is not based on a personal and masculine perception the way Paul D's is toward Sethe, but on a unifying humanitarian ploy to save people who by virtue of the paralegal act of liberation are transformed into presences with political value. His political activism encompasses a broad spectrum of both rescuers and rescued to form a viable emancipatory structure that displays the power of a counter-hegemony to the existing social order. It appears that Stamp Paid, as a seasoned political and communal organizer, is better equipped than Paul D to decipher Sethe's maternal political message if he comes across it while visiting the person who is of greater importance to him at the moment – unchurched preacher Baby Suggs. But he misses it, as we have noted, because everything from the house and its cultural location to his mission obligation and political subjectivity pushes him in the realm of his safety and not Sethe's safety.

The visit to Baby Suggs's house is rife with ambiguities and proliferations of referrals in meaning, but he barely registers them all. The history of the house as the birth place of Bodwin, the white abolitionist, and later a location for rescued refugees compresses the history of the struggle for freedom as a result of primarily black but also white effort. As a metaphoric condensation of joint freedom actions, Stamp Paid has no problem identifying the house as a familiar shelter, run by known actors who provided victuals and advice to those who made the passage. It is the absence of the house as a place of shared common language of freedom and salvation that baffles him now, but he cannot clearly recognize what kind of language has displaced the familiar one. He can

sense the shift in signification, but the history of the place and the dwellers cloud the actual understanding of this new language.

As Stamp Paid approaches 124, he first registers a conflagration of loud hasty voices that disrupt the speech act beyond the boundaries of interlocutor – audience understanding. The thematicity of the speech act is quite vague to Stamp Paid. It is not in tongues either. The clarification that it is not speech in tongues is very important, because it discards the idea of glossolalia, of having “a façade of language” as linguist William J. Samarin describes it, or the masqueraded presence of foreign authority that is unintelligible because both the speaker and the hearer cannot break its linguistic code. It is rather a more radical way of organizing Bakhtinian heteroglossia by mixing utterances and speech manners determined by the social situatedness and political agenda of the speaker. Implied is that whatever linguistic modifications and distortions the speech produced, they are all within the terrain of some functional linguistic system where the voice that delivers the speech is fully aware of its meaning. It is not a sheer receptacle of anybody’s will but only of their own.

The most disturbing characteristic of this speech is the order in which words appear to block their comprehension. It is a form of communication that does not offer safety through easily graspable vocabulary and stable grammatical structures (standard or vernacular). It appears to bend phonetic, morphological, and syntactic arrangements in a subversive mode. As a result, the field of the statements semantics remains imperceptible to Stamp Paid. He cannot hear Sethe’s maternal narrative clearly from outside the house but is able to distinguished fragments or chipped words that appear to express something.

“In Giving Body to the Word,” one of the most influential psychoanalytic readings of *Beloved*, Jean Wyatt introduces the term *maternal symbolic* to explain Morrison’s construction of Sethe as a maternal body and the consequences it has for communal and social arrangements.<sup>9</sup> Wyatt employs the term *maternal symbolic* “to discuss not only an alternative language incorporating maternal and material values, but also a system, like Lacan’s symbolic, [that] locates subjects in relation to other subjects” (212). Wyatt specifically places Sethe within her own maternal symbolic of presence and connection that draws Denver and Beloved into it. Following Wyatt’s hypothesis of the maternal symbolic, it could be argued that when Stamp Paid hears the voices coming from the house, he is not able to locate his subjectivity within the system of maternal expression and values and hence his difficulty to decipher Sethe’s maternal language. This difficulty means that he will not be able to go past the mother-child system of plenitude that requires no paternal signifiers to exist.

Yet, there are linguistic words and residues that provide a connection, no matter how slim, to the symbolic. There is the signifier *mine* that clearly inhabits the world of the symbolic and there is the sound *sth* which is very difficult for someone to ascribe some meaning to it. At a first glance, *sth* is the perfect candidate to fit Watt’s concept of the maternal symbolic. Stamp Paid’s reaction, however, does not seem to confirm an encounter with the maternal symbolic. He singles out the word *mine* although he lacks a proper situational linguistic context to tell to what it is attached, and he identifies the sound *sth* as some sort of interjection that is characteristic of woman’s speech when practiced in a domestic environment. In other words, Stamp Paid measures the content of what he heard strictly within the symbolic. To him, ultimately, after the initial chaos and

uncertainty, the language does not remain startlingly foreign and imperceptible but becomes a tamed feminine linguistic register that men “naturally” do not employ. This female linguistic register cannot impose any threat on the current linguistic order because it is contained as a private language within the sphere of domesticity.

It should be suggested, however, that what Stamp Paid heard is not just a scrambled female speech oriented exclusively toward some domestic circle of femininity, but Sethe’s maternal speech, the explication of her safety philosophy, and her craving for a wider social reception of the issue that she raised some eighteen years ago with infanticide. This is the speech that first exposes her to the public. Consider how close stylistically and semantically, even from the little that we know, the speech that Stamp Paid described is to the maternal monologue Sethe has prepared for Beloved and that we get exposed to only later on in the novel:

Beloved, she my daughter. She *mine*. See. She comes back to me of her own free will and I don’t have to explain a thing. I didn’t have time to explain before because it had to be done quick. Quick. She had to be *safe* and I put her where she would be. But my love was tough and she back now. I knew she would be.

(*Beloved* 236, italics mine)

It is quite possible that Stamp Paid hears something to this effect, and if so, he might have witnessed Sethe’s maternal attempt to pronounce herself as a political subject, this time in language regardless of its chaotic and disjointed flow.

If we return to the verbal presentation that Stamp Paid heard, we can examine what the significance of *mine* and *sth* may be in the context of the maternal political speech. The reader’s awareness of Stamp Paid’s perspective of receiving the information

is indeed important, because it creates the possibility of interplay between the reader's interpretation and his – an excellent illustration of how Morrison's writing technique of reader inclusiveness works.<sup>10</sup>

The signifier *mine* stands for the possessive pronoun, indicating the maternal desire to possess her children, but it might be as well acknowledged as Sethe's explosive "mining" of her life after the act of infanticide. In other words, she counts on the repercussion of this "mining" or crushing of her life to bring attention to a serious social problem that requires a communal solution. The word *mine* could surely have such a meaning for the present day reader whose task, as Morrison claims, is to work along with the author.

Thus, Sethe's disjointed linguistic performance is about the maternal assessment of the act of infanticide and the "safety" Sethe claimed it would bring. In this context, *sth* is like a vocal print that approximates phonetically the word *safety* and at the same time fails to capture a sufficient image-approximation of the word that would unequivocally boost a recognizable semantic value for *safety*.<sup>11</sup> Put another way, the phonetic image *sth* is traceable to *safety* only if the message sender and message recipients are familiar with the historic context that enables a similar linguistic connection – the history of Sethe's infanticide. The recognition of a past contingency, in other words, is the guarantor for certain semantic identification. Stamp Paid puts Sethe's maternal speech entirely in the context of domesticity and household work, and that is why he misses the importance of the message; neither is he able to perceive its sender as a political subject.

The phonetic inspection of *sth* indicates the absence of vowels. *Sth* sounds and resembles a smothered or dismembered image of *safety*. Its metaphoricity is reminiscent

of Sethe's dead child, whose throat was cut in the name of safety. The phonetic print, thus, is a sorrowful reminder, a maternal mourning for the lost child.

The visual image *sth*, on the other hand, is like a diminished, compressed version of Sethe's name. From that perspective, it serves as an open confession that Sethe's maternal politics on safety might have gone wrong.

Even the name Sethe can be inserted in the puzzling linguistic chain of "safety" signifiers that fiction characters and readers confront as they unravel the past of slavery. Sethe, despite the absence of conclusive evidence that Morrison planned this effect, can be read as an intrinsic part of the linguistic and discursive game that *Beloved* presents to its audience. Sethe is another phonetically transformed version of safety, as temporal and linguistic evidence in the novel suggests. As a signifier, it captures the antagonistic fight between her as a slave and her adversary, the slave master, who prevents her from being a mother to her children. *Sth*, on the other hand, reveals the radicalization of the antagonistic relation; the moment of turning it into what Žižek calls "pure antagonism." *Sth* becomes Sethe's confession of her own self-hindering and blockage from realizing her full identity. Her name and its distorted version name her symptom.<sup>12</sup> This recognition, however, does not disqualify her as a political subject.

Thus, the maternal chain of signification that the reader confronts takes the following shape – *safety-Sethe-sth* – and it becomes the code for reading the political struggle of the black community told one specific way – the maternal way. The persistence with which the black mother keeps the issue of safety with various nonverbal and verbal means in the public focus is an attestation of its discursive displacement and

attempt to bring its importance to the sphere of universality. The issue of safety must be considered by all. It has not reached its final stage of communal agency yet.

In *The Signifying Monkey*, Henry Louis Gates, Jr. develops his theory of signification based on the power of black vernacular to twist, bend, improvise, and thus serve as a corrective to the master's language. Gates argues that Signifyin(g) is the black trope of the tropes. He describes the process of Signifyin(g) as follows:

Talking about the black concept of Signifyin(g) is a bit like stumbling unaware into a hall of mirrors: the sign itself appears to be doubled, at the very least, and (re)doubled upon closer examination. It is not the sign itself, however, which has multiplied. If orientation prevails over madness, we soon realize that only the signifier has been doubled and (re)doubled, a signifier in this instance that is silent, a "sound-image" as Saussure defines the signifier. (44)

Counting on the politically charged concept of Signification, the origin of which Gates describes as the work of "some black genius or community of witty and sensitive speakers" who "disrupted the nature of the sign" to make their revisions of the formal system of signification that reserves mainly positions of disadvantage to them, we can see how the name Sethe in Morrison's *Beloved* signifies the concept of safety. Sethe becomes the maternal black signifier for safety. Further evidence for the connection between the name Sethe as an African American linguistic response to the English word *safety* and its nineteenth-century American conceptualization comes from the pages of Morrison's novel. Early on, as memories of her plight of giving birth to Denver in the wilderness flood Sethe's mind and mix with memories of earlier time when Sethe was a child on a plantation somewhere in Louisiana or Carolina, she remembers women working in the

field with their backs turned to her. The language they used seems now to Sethe distant and imperceptible, but the songs and dances they had remain quite vivid in her imagination.

Pointing to a woman in the field, a young girl left in charge of the small children informs Sethe who her mother is. Instead of keeping a single recognizable image of her mother, the picture engraved on her mind is that of a group of women all of them called Ma'am who address her, her own mother included, with Seth-thuh when instructing her what to do:

“Seth-thuh.”

“Ma'am.”

“Hold on to the baby.”

“Seth-thuh.”

“Ma'am.”

“Get some kindlin in here.”

“Yes, Ma'am.” (*Beloved* 37)

We know that Sethe's mother, along with other women, came as a slave to America straight from Africa. Nan's story about how Sethe's mother rejected the children from the crew members but kept Sethe and named her after the black man whom she loved confirms that the little girl's name was an original African name. The women field workers from Sethe's childhood memories are direct representatives of their African background and cultural heritage. Seth-thuh, thus, is the original African sounding of Sethe's name – an instance of African purity still untouched by American English linguistic interference.<sup>13</sup> Seth-thuh is not phonologically related to *safety*, to follow



Gates's vernacular theory of (re)doubling of signifiers, the way Sethe is. There is no explanation in *Beloved* when and where Seth-thuh became Sethe, but by all means, the name Sethe is already in circulation as she is first brought to the Garners' plantation at the age of fourteen. With her transition from childhood into womanhood/motherhood, the brutal sexual assault by schoolteacher and his nephews, followed by the mythic escape to freedom and the act of infanticide, the connection between Sethe and *safety*, I argue, becomes more and more visible. The personal name Sethe becomes an instance of an African American trope and a linguistic political commentary on the idea of safety. But is the name really capable of holding up to its full corrective critical potential for black signifiers as Gates argues in his theory? Will it stand for the triumph of wit, as he claims?

If Sethe is an instance of the doubling of a signifier, its design is to argue relentlessly for the truth-claim about safety and maternity sustained by the hegemonic discourse on motherhood. It also asks flagrantly for safety that is not the safety of the free state of Ohio complicit with the South when it comes to ex-slaves, nor does it accept the safety of corporeal spirituality that the ministry of Baby Suggs offers to its people, nor does it admit that Stamp Paid's paralegal rescue operations achieve fully their goals. Sethe's political opponents, it appears, are powerful figures on both sides of the black and white communal division. If read under these circumstances, her name carries the potential to become a political code-name for safety in reference to other black mothers and their experience and in reference to other members of the community who, as Morrison's narrative confirms, have experienced the lack of safety to the point of paying with their own lives. Sixo is burned, Paul D is in an iron collar, and other male slaves from Sweet Home are crucified when their plan to flee was uncovered. Ella, Baby Suggs,

and Sethe's mother, like other countless slave mothers, knew that safety and protection for them and their children is an impossible demand. Some of them, too, have committed infanticide, although phrasing differently their reasons for protest. Thus, Sethe technically meets the requirement to become an emblem of the black search for safety, but in reality the potential individuals and groups of black people who could side with her choose not to jump on the bandwagon of her social protest. The name, Sethe, demonstrates its capacity to be a black signifier for safety, but Sethe's action precludes its social circulation as a communicative form that spells a linguistic victory over the enemy. Stamp Paid's encounter with the voices in the house where Sethe lives proves this point.<sup>14</sup> In other words, Sethe, as a signifier, undercuts Gates's vernacular theory in its role of using language as a victorious tool against the master. Sethe is rather a signifier that aims at the correction of something (actual approaches) in the vernacular basis that produces Signification.<sup>15</sup> As a result, by choosing the name Sethe and the context for its signifyin(g) function (infanticide), Morrison ends up working both within and against Gates's theory of Signification.

There is another way, however, to preserve Sethe as a black signifier with political function, and it is to recognize it as a plea for a new structural hegemonic articulation of safety with wide communal reception. This is what Sethe's "monologue" in its vocal conflagration attempts to say to Stamp Paid at the door of the house. It is a reflection on the horrific event of infanticide as a failed policy to ignite communal agency on the spot some eighteen years ago and it is a plea for a present communal alliance to self-write an acceptable definition for safety. *Sth* is that "enigmatic" double image of the signifier *safety* that will either open the gates to communal (re)union or will stay

obtrusively locked in the sphere of the domestic, identifiable, as Stamp Paid says, as an “internal private conversation” with “nothing fierce and startling” (*Beloved* 203).

Critics interpret Morrison’s choice to name her most renowned literary character, Sethe, from a single, in my view limited, perspective. The general consensus is that Sethe is derived from Set(h), the Egyptian god of the desert, storm, and foreigners, or the Biblical Seth, the son of Adam and Eve born after the slaying of Abel by Cain as a replacement for the lost son. For Wilfred Samuels and Clenora Hudson Weems, the name is an example of Morrison’s talent to manipulate myth and mysticism for fictional purposes. According to them:

Morrison’s tendency to shatter conventional meanings and interpretations as she draws on more conventional myth and folk material is most visible in her use of Sethe’s name, which she *obviously* [italics mine] borrows from the Seth who was one of the major gods of ancient Egypt and the biblical Seth who was the child of Adam and Eve and whose descendants include Noah and his grandson Ham, who was cursed for having seen his grandfather naked. This biblical mythology was often used to justify the enslavement/oppression of blacks. It is the irony that we face when we consider the physical appearance of the Egyptian mythical Seth that is important to Morrison’s use of the name. In form he was part man and part animal or bird (perhaps a falcon); he was often connected with purification rituals.

(*Toni Morrison* 136)

Such an examination of the etymology of the name Sethe establishes undisputable historical and mythological roots that tie Sethe solidly to her African heritage. It is in line with the traditionalist orientation that is so prevalent in African-American literary

criticism and fiction. Morrison herself is a proponent of traditionalism traceable through ancestral roots and mythologized rituals, as one of her most popular essays, “Rootedness: The Ancestor as Foundation,” suggests.

Samuels and Weems look further into the Egyptian connection by pointing to the fact that in *Beloved* Sethe is compared to a cow: a clear referent for the critics to the Egyptian goddess Hathor, mother of the sun god and life giver. In Samuel and Weems’s view, Morrison “successfully elevates Sethe to the level of goddess through her selection of name alone” (*Toni Morrison* 137). But why elevate a twentieth-century African American female fiction character to that of a goddess? What is the advantage of a similar triumphalist interpretation buried in ancient Egyptian mysticism? <sup>16</sup>

Barbara Hill Rigney also arrives at a similar interpretation of Sethe’s name to validate the weight of cultural tribal identity. “Whether this name is derived from that of the Egyptian god, Seth, or from the Biblical Seth,” Rigney writes, “it represents, like most of the names that Morrison designates as chosen, a sense of heritage and relational identity” (“Breaking the Back of Words” 146). Rigney points out that Sethe’s name is one of the few chosen by her mother, and as such it is a mark of blackness. Sethe is also one of the lucky few slaves to have kept the original name given at birth by her mother, although it went through an important modification as demonstrated earlier. From this angle, Morrison indeed supplies her character with an incredible political instrument for self-representation and cultural identification. In fact, Morrison herself points out the significance of names in the African tradition as a marker for not only personal but tribal identity:

If you come from Africa, your name is gone. It is particularly problematic because it is not *your* name but your family, your tribe. When you die, how can you connect with your ancestors if you have lost your name? That's a huge psychological scar. (Interview with Thomas Le Clair 28)

Although Morrison does not deny her character the option to (re)connect with her ancestors based on the significance and meaning of her African name, to remind, Seth-tuh is how her biological mother and other women called Sethe when assigning her tasks, gaps in the personal history of slaves, including onomastic transformations, were a standard practice.<sup>17</sup> The phonetic transformation of Sethe's name performed at an onomastic level is crucial for revealing how language reflects the politicization of black motherhood and the expression of its agenda in its most radical version.

Most crucial, although important, the mythological/biblical context of Sethe's name is not enough to push her through the time slot of the past and into the present fully protected. In other words, the power of self-representation via a personal name can only be utilized by the name bearer not in situations of mythical invocation of the past but in situations of presentness where the past may or may not offer its mythic strength to help settle the score in the present. Along with the benefit of self-representation backed up by mythicized cultural knowledge comes the danger of fixed identities and cultural matrixes that monstrosly threaten to block the currents of power released by present-day clashes of conflicting parties and their interests. When interpretations of Sethe's name as a marker of cultural heritage and relational identity are oriented exclusively to the past, they fail to take into consideration the power of contingency, the very same power that shaped Sethe's protest action.

What Sethe offers to the black community through the linguistic chain *safety-Sethe-sth* – is the mutability of the sign in relation to its internal and external properties, which is to say in relation to its phonological and semantic plasticity. Each member down the chain signifies upon the previous one and directs the meaning farther into the black communal space, creating a state of disintegration and social miscommunication. Morrison maximizes this effect in Beloved’s monologue where the assault on narrative oral and written conventions obstructs meaning. It is a moment where the reader faces an instance of texticide and confronts the politics of the novel in its monstrous shape-shifting forms and elements of representation.<sup>18</sup>

#### Enter the Sound

In “The Telling of *Beloved*,” Eusebio L. Rodrigues proposes the concept of word-sounds to study the musical patterns of Morrison’s novel. His claim is that “Toni Morrison undermines the heaviness of print by turning word-shapes into word-sounds in order to allow her narrator to chant, to sing, to exploit sound effects” (152). Word-sounds create rhythm and rhythmic patterns that give Morrison’s novel the aural effects that slide into musical qualities in her prose. One could easily include the sequence *safety-Sethe-sth* as an example of Rodrigues’s transformation of word-shapes into word-sounds that sustain a certain rhythmic quality to the literary expression. With the concept of word-sound, Rodrigues is closer to registering the significance of contingency for articulating elements of language with a new meaning. It also shares affinity to Gates’s vernacular theory of signification and Laclau’s conceptualization of the empty signifier as ways of making politics and extracting political dividends based on semantic variation and logics of articulation and equivalence for meaning making and its retention.

If the infanticidal mother in *Beloved* constructs the chain *safety-Sethe-sth* as a linguistic code for the expression of her political agenda on the platform of black motherhood but does not gain a sufficient number of followers, how could the safety project be salvaged to work in favor of communal empowerment? Thus far, the maternal polylogue has done a good job crucifying the signifier *safety* of attaching its body to pillars of pure antagonism and antagonistic fight, of emptying it of specific troubling contents that cannot hide the absence of systemic fullness as well as charging it with its own conflictual content. As a result, it has failed to fix a meaning for it to restore the possibility for a new communal beginning.

The process towards the coining the new meaning for safety goes first through the aptly named Stamp Paid, who had trouble deciphering the political message of the loud voices heard in Sethe's house, the voices that made him feel like "a stranger at the gate" and regrettably made him walk away (*Beloved* 203).

It is only after he discovers the traces of other degrading spectacles (segregation and lynching), involving black people as unwilling prime "entertainers," that he witnesses his safety method being ruthlessly devaluated. This realization sparks a series of political reflections and a gradual understanding of what the voices and mumbling coming from 124 may have all been about:

Eighteen seventy-four and whitefolks were still on the loose. Whole towns wiped clean of Negroes; eighty-seven lynchings in one year alone in Kentucky; four colored schools burned to the ground; grown men whipped like children; children whipped like adults; black women raped by the crew; property taken; necks broken; He smelled skin, skin and hot blood. The skin was one thing, but human

blood cooked in a lynch fire was a whole other thing. The stench stank. Stank up off the pages of North Star, out of the mouths of witnesses, etched in crooked handwriting in letters delivered by hand. Detailed in documents and petitions full of whereas and presented to any legal body who'd read it, it stank. But none of that had worn out his marrow. None of that. It was the ribbon. Tying his flatbed up on the bank of the Licking River, securing it the best he could, he caught sight of something red on the bottom. Reached for it, he thought it was a cardinal feather stuck to his boat. He tugged and what came loose in his hand was a red ribbon knotted around a curl of wet woolly hair, clinging still to its bit of scalp. (*Beloved* 212-113).

It is the assessment of the Reconstruction and the reintroduction of different racist and segregationist practices in the South that makes Stamp Paid see the problem of not just one individual but of whole communities that have become paradoxically more unsafe after the abolition of slavery. This paradox of granting freedom with one hand and removing it with the other by substituting old techniques of fear and subservience with new ones, presents Stamp Paid with the validity of Sethe's maternal claim that safety is what is missing and that they are the only ones to try to compensate for this lack.

Not surprisingly, it is the red ribbon knotted around a curl of woolly hair that belonged to a girl, just like Sethe's murdered daughter, that led Stamp Paid to 124 to try to approach Sethe again.

He keeps on moving surrounded by the loud voices that still remain incomprehensible, but this time he is able to put a face on them. This identification of voices is crucial for the formation of political awareness among community members.



“This time,” the narrator tells us, “although he couldn’t cipher but one word, he believed he knew who spoke them. The people of the broken necks, of fire-cooked blood and black girls who had lost their ribbons” (213). The voices in Stamp Paid’s mind belong to the victims of those, who like Sethe, did not get a chance to live the life of promised freedom, the ones whose bodies assumed a horrendous tropological meaning to signal an unsafe state of being.

The personal discovery of Stamp Paid rewrites his old survival mission by giving it a new direction and communal activism to fit the specificity of the current day social assemblage. This time, saving people by carrying them on boats on the water and accommodating them with shelter are tasks that are not going to be sufficient. A whole new safety passage has to be invented with the help of broad communal participation. And this time, as the story of entangled relations among Sethe, Denver, and Beloved shows, the solution will have to involve a mechanism for coping with an internal undesirable communal presence; it is no longer strictly an intercommunal affair with white villains and black victims but an intracommunal business of unity through cultural fortification.

Stamp Paid addresses the women in the community and relies on old political partners, such as Ella, who was actively involved in the rescue crossings of slaves in the old days. Her own secret story of infanticide, carefully kept in the back of her mind, along with her past rescue activism does not make her hesitate whether to engineer and channel a new safety passage for Sethe. Denver is the other person who brings indirectly to Ella’s attention the fact of Sethe’s dire situation and total surrender to Beloved’s wishes when she begs the black ladies for food and work.

When a group of thirty neighborhood women decide that Sethe had enough of her own safety, they perform a kind of group exorcism to save Sethe from Beloved and bring her back to the community. At the core of this exorcism is an aural communal construction that represents their version of safety. The end of Sethe's story indicates that it is a successful form of exorcism: Sethe and Paul D get their chance for a life together, Sethe gets a new welcome into the community of Cincinnati; Denver gets a job and completes her integration into society, while Beloved with her impossible demands is gone. So how does this exorcism work to establish a framework for new communal consensus and acceptance of the signifier *safety* with a signified that lures towards a new communal horizon? To answer this question it is important to examine two elements of the act of communal exorcism: the unified sound that the women produce to save Sethe and the transformation of that sound into a song as a reinstatement of African American cultural values. It is the first element that is of crucial importance to the emancipatory definition of safety, and together with the second element comes the delineation of a readable hegemonic horizon.

Critics borrow cultural labels from the vocabulary of the oppressed to define the joint rescue effort by calling it "communal exorcism" and a "form of healing". This is undoubtedly to honor African American cultural heritage and the involvement of its elements as instruments for literary theorizing. Both words "exorcism" and "healing" define in advance the dramatic, myth-like imagined scope of the social battle for safety and its outcome. For Rodrigues, the group exorcism is "More than a speech act, it is a *mantra*-like utterance that rises from the creative female depths of their self" (161).<sup>19</sup> For Harris, the women perform a number of pagan and religious rituals. "The comparative

images that come to mind are straight out of *The Golden Bough*,” Harris contends (135). The voices perform the same purist function as the pans, sticks, and chants used in pre-technological cultures to drive the evil away. Women, according to Harris, acted as “the proverbial ‘witch doctor’” (“*Beloved*: “Woman Thy Name is Demon” 135) of ancient times who had the power to command the living and hearing evil. Finney also emphasizes the purist and omnipotent aspect of the female group intervention. In his words, “Sethe is washed clean of her sin and guilt by the Black community” while *Beloved* “disappears immediately after Sethe has directed her anger at the man whom she mistakenly takes to be schoolteacher” (115). Reed supports an ethnographic reading of the exorcism very similar to that of Harris; for her “the legitimacy of the sound is anchored in the ancestral heritage” (57) and becomes a vehicle for communal restoration and authoritative feminine spiritual practice.

But what if we reserve a second place for the influence of folklore and tradition and their role to secure community consensus? The problem “Sethe-Beloved” seems to foreground contingency again as with the case of Sethe’s infanticide eighteen years ago. This time the villain is *Beloved* and not schoolteacher. In this situation, a group of thirty women, with the full support of other members of the community, approach Sethe’s home to save Sethe and thus put an end to the polysemic clashes of safety that block the way to communal unity. They have to find a specific filling function for the empty signifier *safety* that would be appealing to different members of the community. If successful with their temporary fix for the meaning of safety, they will emerge as the particular group with a chance at hegemonizing the social space.

Their hegemonic attempt rests on the concept of the sound and its power to both formulate basic structural linguistic units and disrupt the authoritative function of the old system of linguistic representation. The narrator describes the women's act of exorcism as follows:

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

*(Beloved 306)*

The thirty women's aural exorcism becomes a response to Sethe's maternal signification on safety. From an existential perspective, Sethe critiques safety through the act of infanticide. From a verbal perspective, Sethe talks about safety by constructing a linguistic chain based on signifiers, their phonetic and visual twists, and consonant vocal imprints to keep the conversation on safety going on, foregrounding its importance, and assessing her maternal role in it.

At first glance, the women of the community opt for a linguistic approach, similar to Sethe's, to heal the maternal psycho-somatic trauma and recuperate the maternal body for further social functions. They seek for the sound. Upon closer examination, they seek for a specific but unspecified sound, which breaks the back of words but with a different end result of how Sethe broke the normative "safety" with her proposed "safety" into *sth*. In a way, they are correcting Sethe's linguistic chain by adding a fourth member with

exclusive signifying power. After their intervention, the extended version of the signifying chain could be schematized in the following way: *safety – Sethe – sth – sound*. What safety can the women's sound offer to erase the negatives of all the previous versions that were blocking the way to communal agency and integrity?

A number of critics cite Morrison's claim that she wanted to create a novel with an aural quality to it and a text that would give the illusion of oral expression, story telling, and song to define convincingly the African American cultural border.<sup>20</sup> The critics' general approach, based on Morrison's artistic declaration, and their honoring of African American criticism perhaps, treats the role of the sound in the scene of collective exorcism as a convenient and welcoming cultural invitation for both characters and readers of African American descent to return to a place called home – the milieu of their cultural heritage. Sethe is already well-familiar with soothing sounds of African American songs as an expression of care and cultural identification. It is enough to recall how she recognized Beloved's song as the very same song that she had sang later on to her children or the songs that she heard at the Clearing and the plantation where she lived as a child. Also, it is obvious that gradually, after Paul D's and especially Beloved's intervention into her life, she becomes a dramatic-romantic teller of her stories. Take for example the story of her earrings, told upon Beloved's request. From a maternal perspective, she is also familiar with the power of the sound that gave birth to her daughter Denver in the wilderness. In other words, Sethe knows and makes use of the black cultural codes quite well. She is familiar with their healing and restorative power. What would be so special about the power of the women's sound that Sethe did not know prior to that? In what sense will it be restorative and, perhaps more importantly, liberating

for her? The fact that the group will perform with her healing in mind and show good will to accept her again in the communal ranks does not guarantee the success of their salvaging operation. So, this strikingly loud and powerful sound must be of a different quality and function. It has to be articulated in a different way before it assumes a potent cultural sway again and displays both a minimalist and maximalist signifying function to accomplish its mission of salvation.

I would like to emphasize that before the action of the women's vocal intervention becomes healing and restorative, it is strictly *emancipatory*. To see this, we need to pay close attention to the characteristics of the sound and its power to "break the back of words" as the omniscient narrator informs us.

To express a possible reading, the power of the sound becomes the locus of safe existence by virtue of breaking the back of the words and assaulting the epistemic security of two different cultural regimes of representation. It severs to cripple the bi-cultural logic (black and white) that previously articulated Sethe as "a witch" (23), a "nigger woman" (39), "an animal," "a horse" (176), "a hawk" (185), "a carnival wom[a]n with nothing to do" (283), who stood on display on the porch of 124, "a chastised child" (295), "a mother in a dark place, with scratching noises"(243). Even she, herself, feels the powerful gravity of the fixes in a state of existence "suspended between the nastiness of life and the meanness of the dead" (*Beloved* 4).

The repressive regulatory regimes of the two cultural logics are further well reflected in Sethe's words of reintroduction to Paul D after eighteen years of separation, "I got a tree on my back and a haint in my house" (*Beloved* 18). Phrased as a riddle, this reintroduction cannot hide for long the workings of the repressive and isolating regimes

of white and black cultural discourses upon the black infanticidal mother. The whites “planted a tree” on her back to explore her animal characteristics, and now she has to carry the tree as a cross on her back, exposing her figurative crucifixion of flesh and spirit.

<sup>21</sup> From the blacks, she inherited the ghost in the house that demanded her exceptional servitude again. The enigmatic talk effectively marks the marginal spaces that both cultures, black and white, reserved for Sethe. She is nothing but “bad” material for a “good” slave and a “witch” who killed her child and dirtied them all. Sethe admits in her interior thoughts that, “her past had been like her present – intolerable” (4), while Paul D registers her bi-cultural subjectivation as an art form for aesthetic assessment. Her face is “like a mask with mercifully punched-out eyes” (10) and the scar on her back is a “sculpture [...] like the decorative work of an ironsmith too passionate for display” (*Beloved* 21). In that grotesquely stylized body, Sethe has yet to experience the rage of the ghost that wrecks everything. The best Paul D could do is try to rescue her from the haint’s cultural presence and its traumatic, freakish performance by hitting hard the house objects and “screaming back at the screaming house” (*Beloved* 22), but his strategy proves wrong. Sethe enters our world as a case shaped by whiteness and blackness that have turned the “bad” maternal body into an absurd exhibit of cultural production.

The female exorcism offers safety from the restrictive pegging of dominant discursive formations through the power of the sound. This is possible because the sound is void of any restrictive characteristics that provide a clear view of its specificity. We know very little about its phonetic value or corporeal vestige. We are deprived of the very characteristics that create its differential value. And the central premise of phonology tells us that a sound acquires its differential value only in opposition to other

sound.<sup>22</sup> In the absence of a specified phonetic presence, but in the presence of an unspecified sound, it becomes possible to break the back of words. As an unspecified sound, it cannot be tied to particular words which could have its and their back broken. To follow Laclau's theory on emancipation, it operates so that it disassembles, creates a dislocation, but also establishes a new significance in doing so. Signification is found not in a word in contrast to other words, but in an unspecified sound that has no contrasts but at the same time all contrasts. It is safe in its representation, since it is dislocated from the principle of representation. It is safe because it cannot be structuralized, contrasted, and it creates power in its non-structured, non-contrastedness. The narrator describes its power in reference to its volume and force of penetration. It hegemonizes through lack of contrast and allows us to see a new insight into how to view the black/white contrast; it offers safety through its becoming a new uncontrasted meaningfulness, thereby making racial contrast non-meaningful. The racial contrast becomes dislocated. This lack of meaningfulness of the racial contrast creates what Laclau considers a new foundation upon which new identities emerge.

Missy Dehn Kubitchek compares the powerful sound to that of birth giving and arrival of new life. She sees in Morrison an attempt to rewrite the biblical dogma "in the beginning was the word" with "in the beginning was the sound" (305). *Beloved*, according to Kubitchek, refuses the authority of the European word and God as creator and celebrates the authority of the sound and women as life creators. Again, the clash is between two systems of knowledge and authority: the European word versus the African sound. Kubitchek sees in that sound a demonstration of a female black language, created by a group of women from the sounds that they know. The moment of exorcism, thus, is



the moment when “the female community marshals the resources to fight an alien system of representation” (“Claiming the Heritage” 175).

What Kubitchek misses to note is that the neighborhood women come with the purpose to free Sethe by expelling Beloved, “the devil-child” that came (back) to both be with Sethe and punish her.<sup>23</sup> Beloved, with her shape-shifting identity and rumored history, belongs culturally to the African American community. This is not to say that an alien dominant system does not have a say in the discursive construction of Beloved at all. It has its share in her making just as African American discourses make her too. The point is that Beloved identifies herself culturally, socially, and historically as African American. In that sense, the group of women is not fighting an alien system of representation but something that comes from within their culture. It is something that inhabits the terrain of their culture and threatens to impose marginality on its own people; the thing that points to the limit of this culture of sound that structures the sociality within the black community. And the women, as the narrator reports, are very familiar with this cultural structural foundation, “In the beginning was the sound, and they all knew what that sound sounded like” (305).

Examining the key moment of exorcism, Anissa Ward claims that “the community of women create this redemptive language” and “form word-shapes to represent their collective history” (47). To her, this redemptive language has the capacity to reject the language as a symbolic system and adopt the semiotic instead as a more primal mode of communication and connection between mother’s and child’s body. The Kristevan semiotic, however, refers to spontaneous and even chaotic eruption of sounds and rhythm that precede the symbolic. According to Kristeva, it has the capacity to

subvert the symbolic and the best evidence for this subversion is found in poetic language. This insight raises the question of the semiotic and its relation to signification. Can rhythm and spontaneous flow of sounds signify something or is it a stage of pre-signification and as such its effectiveness to counter the symbolic becomes possible?

To return to our case of vocal exorcism, “the voices of the women search for the right combination, the key, the code, the sound that broke the back of words” (*Beloved* 305). This polyvocality, voices of the women, and their expression of the powerful, disruptive sound leads at first glance conveniently to the semiotic. But upon a closer look, the women *know* that a code, a right sound rather than a flow of spontaneous sounds exists and it is a question of improvisation to discover it. In order to hit the right key, the voices have to sound as one; there is a need for the cancellation of difference in favor of equivalence. It is this knowledge of a code or proper combination that makes signification reappear and distance their sound from the semiotic field of sounds. Furthermore, if it were merely an expression of the semiotic, it would problematize the moment of emancipation and consequently broader social acceptability that Sethe enjoys after she is saved. Paul D returns to live with her and Stamp Paid clearly reacts as a concerned friend. The result, in other words, surpasses the sphere of femininity and the mother-child dyad with which the semiotic is closely associated.

Influenced by Cornel West’s notion of kinetic orality, Khayati reads the exorcism as “a ritualistic method in which the workings of spirit and kinesis join the sound to ‘break the back of words’” (321). Kinetic orality is associated with “passionate physicality” and “combative spirituality” that promote survival and dream of freedom. It emphasizes rhetorical styles and dynamic repetitions as formative of communities and

improvisational identities.<sup>24</sup> In other words, it constructs stylized cultural forms (black music, songs) as tools for conducting identity politics. Although the concept of kinetic orality promises much, Khayati fails to read fully the presence of the unified but unspecified sound, its group performance as one, and its potential to break the back of words. It misses to explain the precise mechanism of making the emancipatory act possible. Nor does he specify the tyranny of which words “pin” Sethe down which the kinetic orality breaks apart.

If the main task of the women’s powerful sound is to “break the back of words,” it aims to disrupt what Laclau defines as differential logic or that logic which is responsible for fixing particular identities. We have already concluded that the sound fights the hegemony of two differential cultural logics, represented in their dominant discourses. The operation of disabling the functionality of the differential logics finds compensation in the strengthening of the equivalential logic, which is represented by the power of the sound, and the group of women who manage to create their hegemonic move – the force which makes Sethe feel “baptized in its wash” (*Beloved* 308). The moment of baptism means a return to a system of signification that offers a more accommodating arrangement of subjects in it. As the act of exorcism indicates, women are building voice upon voice until they find the right sound. This means that they themselves are in the process of experimenting and discovering the right sound. They already have the knowledge that such a sound exists, but now they discover how it sounds and witness its effects. It is they who define the features of the sound as features of the social imaginary which, in turn, brings the promise of structural closure – a space defined as safe.

This is obviously a collective act executed by the group of women but supported by numerous members of the Cincinnati community. Paul D and Stamp Paid are clearly among the male supporters; Denver as a close relative gets involved, and even the abolitionist Edward Bodwin has a role in the event. In other words, we have a long chain of diverse subjects united behind the idea to expel the threat called Beloved.

The sound that offers safety, a product of contingency, does not remain as a foreign, independent element, but quickly receives articulation in the black cultural system as a credible and unifying component of that system. Morrison is quick indeed to endow it with the influence of black culture. In the next paragraph after Sethe's vocal baptism, the narrator identifies the group of women as "singing women" (308). We never learn what the song was about, but we do know that the layering of powerful sounds led to the creation of the song: an identifiable expression of African American art. Thus, the sound gets culturally claimed for the production of a classic hegemonic operation controlled by a group of women with extraordinary appealing effects on the community members.

Although the completion of the vocal exorcism is not the actual closure of the book, it is the place where the reader gets a hint of what the main characters' lives might be in the future. Optimism on the family and community levels prevails after the return of Paul D in Sethe's house and the integration of Denver into the social life of the community. The desire to end the main narrative on an optimistic tone, with possible productive arrangements for personal lives and communal blossoming, is quite understandable, given the level of crisis that each character, Sethe in particular, undergoes. It is also an empowering and justice-oriented literary response to a great

number of African American texts that express a situation of frustration or impasse about the future of black people. Richard Wright's *Native Son* and Ralph Ellison's *Invisible Man* come to mind first.

After an episode of personal and communal responsibility, it looks the right time in the narrative to say goodbye to the characters in *Beloved*. But such a happy-end solution is, of course, too trivial to be on par with the complexity of the text. The novel needs a second closure provided by the narrator, who has witnessed the past events and from a safe distance in time is able to reflect on Sethe's story. "This is not a story to pass on" (*Beloved* 324), the narrator declares, even though it has been already passed on to and by fictional characters and from there on to the bigger community of readers from different generations and diverse backgrounds. The advice of how to process the disturbing events and the complex social history does not end with the act of forgetting and amnesia, but rather with the awareness that like "the rustle of a skirt [that] hushes when they wake" (*Beloved* 324), safety, as constructed to buttress communal stability, can never remain constantly fixed but will be the terrain for various hegemonic operations.

---

## NOTES

<sup>1</sup> Inspired by Bakhtin's study on carnival and the concept of the carnivalesque, I call Sethe's act of infanticide "dark maternal carnivalesque" to emphasize the chaotic, violent, and grotesque subversive mode of Sethe's action and its literary representation as opposed to the cheery, comical and satiric effects that are usually associated with the carnival practice. See Bakhtin's *Problems of Dostoyevsky's Poetics* (1929) and *Rablais and His World* (1965) for carnival and its entry into literature as the carnivalesque. Morrison skillfully plays with the idea of carnival in *Beloved*. Sethe's first social outing with Paul D after many years of isolation is at the carnival for colored people. It is right after their return from the carnival that Beloved appears, propped against a tree near Sethe's house. From this moment on, it is as if Sethe has brought the carnival home.

<sup>2</sup> For the difference between antagonism and pure antagonism, see Žižek's "Beyond Discourse-Analysis" in Laclau's *New Reflections on the Revolution of Our Time*. London: Verso, 1990. pp. 249 – 260.

<sup>3</sup> For a review of *Beloved*'s criticism, see Barbara H. Solomon's "Introduction" to *Critical Essays on Toni Morrison's Beloved* (1998) pp. 1- 36. See also *The Toni Morrison Society Bibliography: 2000 – 2006*, compiled by Tom Snowden, *The Toni Morrison Society Bibliography: 2005 – 2006*, compiled by Lynne Simpson-Scott, and *The Toni Morrison Society Bibliography: 2008 – 2011*, compiled by Lynne Simpson. All bibliography listings are available at [www.tonimorrisonssociety.org](http://www.tonimorrisonssociety.org).

<sup>4</sup> Representative studies of this type of criticism vary in their sharpness and insistence on the role of tradition and folklore in Morrison's work. Barbara Christian's "Fixing Methodologies: *Beloved*" (1993) is a well-known highly critical reaction to the usage of Western models of theoretical thought at the expense of African American cultural memory and belief system as frames for literary analysis. In relation to *Beloved*, Christian claims that "the power of this novel as a specifically African American text is being blunted" (363) by the application of mainstream critical discourses. As a result, she proposes a reading of *Beloved* from the perspective of African cosmology that involves African beliefs in spirits and continuity through acts of active remembering. Ultimately, such a reading has the effect of turning the novel into an illustrative material for ethnography. Trudier Harris's *Fiction and Folklore: The Novels of Toni Morrison* (1991) also puts an emphasis on the African American folklore as the basis for most African American literature, but unlike Christian's focus on pure African traditional elements, Harris argues for Morrison's reconceptualization and modification of folkloric elements, even construction of folk-like motifs, in her fiction. Harris calls this "literary folklore" and commends this strategy for solving the problem with warring genres. Marilyn Sanders Mobley's *Folk Roots and Mythic Wings in Sarah Orne Jewett and Toni Morrison* (1991) views Morrison as a cultural archivist when it comes to her work with folklore. In her use of folklore, Mobley argues, Morrison critiques American culture. Peter J. Capuano's "Truth in Timber: Morrison's Extension of Slave Narrative Song in *Beloved*" (2003) is close to Harris's approach to Morrison's treatment of folklore and more specifically the slave song.

The attention to folklore and tradition in African American literary criticism is, of course, closely related with the idea of communal bonding and community building. As in *Beloved*, the discussion of the cultural function of the community as a protector from outside influence is always present. As a result, the political is measured mainly along intercommunal lines.

<sup>5</sup> This is not to discard the attempts of African American literature by men, who also thought of, conceptualized, and creatively explored combination of story-telling elements from various traditions, to create a stable and culturally safe literarily product.

<sup>6</sup> Here one should think for a second about P. T. Barnum's success in the sphere of entertainment. The success of his circus, fairs, and exhibits depended largely on the inclusion of black performers among other things. P.T. Barnum's *Struggles and Triumphs* (1869) is an excellent document that testifies to the development and organization of profitable, well-marketed events directly relatable to the culture of spectacle in nineteenth century America. Barnum claims to have understood the social need for turning spectacles into a profitable, booming business. "Men, women, and children," he writes, who cannot live on gravity alone need something to satisfy their gayer, lighter moods and hours, and he who ministers this

---

want is in a business established by the Author of our nature” (*Struggles and Triumphs* 37). There is nothing disrespectful and degrading in this business and culture of spectacle because, in Barnum’s logic, it is already sanctioned by God in His acts of creation.

One of the most popular “natural curiosity exhibits” of Barnum’s shows was Joice Heth, an old black woman of strange appearance, who “claimed” to be George Washington’s mammy and told funny stories from his childhood. Barnum describes in his book his impression of Joice Heth from the day he first saw her as follows:

Joice Heth was certainly a remarkable curiosity, and she looked far older than her age as advertised. She was apparently in good health and spirits, but from age or disease, or both, was unable to change her position; her left arm lay across her breast and she could not remove it; the fingers of her left hand were drawn down so as nearly to close it, and were fixed; the nails on that hand were almost four inches long and extended above her wrist; the nails on her large toes had grown to the thickness of a square inch; her head was covered with a thick bush of grey hair; but she was toothless and totally blind, and her eyes were sunk so deeply in the sockets as to have disappeared altogether. Nevertheless she was pert and sociable and would talk as long as people would converse with her. She was quite garrulous about her protégé “little George,” at whose birth she declared she was present, having been at the time a slave of Elizabeth Atwood, a half-sister of Augustine Washington, the father of George Washington. As nurse she put the first clothes on the infant and she claimed to have “raised him.” She professed to be a member of the Baptist church, talking much in her way on religious subjects, and she sang a variety of ancient hymns. (38)

Joice Heth’s freakish experience has something in common with the crazy and awkward presence of Morrison’s members of the black community, who show up to witness Sethe’s spectacle. In a sense, they are still participants in schoolteacher’s catch-a-slave spectacle and not in Sethe’s protest drama.

<sup>7</sup> In *New Reflections*, Laclau introduces the term *dislocation* to refine his theory of hegemony and affirm the conjoined psychoanalytic and poststructuralist vein of his analysis. Dislocations for him mark the encounter with the real and produce negative and traumatic effects. At the same time, they may contain a productive dimension too. They are traumatic and disruptive in the sense that “they threaten identities” and are productive in the sense that they offer “the foundation on which new identities are constituted.” See p.39.

<sup>8</sup> Technically Foucault uses the term biopolitics in reference to the mechanism of bio-power that modern societies utilize to foster economic and social prosperity. This includes the positing of the body as a machine by virtue of its integration into and utilization in systems of efficient economic control on the one hand. On the other hand, the body was submitted to a biological form of control that revolved around issues of reproduction, sexuality, public health, longevity. Thus life became a political object of discussion around which discussion of “rights” occurred. See *The History of Sexuality*, vol.1, pp.135 – 159.

Since the black infanticidal mother uses the death of the body as a way to manipulate the bio-power regime of the system of slavery, she gets involved in her maternal biopolitics to negate the state’s program of “distributing the living in the domain of value and utility” (Foucault 144).

<sup>9</sup> Jean Watt’s *maternal symbolic* is conceived as an alternative to Lacan’s paternal symbolic. Its purpose is to flout basic rules of normative discourse and undo separation markers that usually give language the perception of stability. But it appears that the very success of the maternal symbolic as a critical strategy is determined by its irretrievable relation to the paternal symbolic; otherwise, it would fail to make its point of criticism.

<sup>10</sup> See “Rootedness: The Ancestor as Foundation” p. 2287. Morrison considers it the writer’s duty to provide places and spaces for reader participation. This duty seeks to define literature as an interactive communal process rather than a simple instance of cultural consumerism. It also heightens the political and cultural experience in decision making with all its difficulties, nuances, and intricacies for consideration.

<sup>11</sup> Interestingly enough, Ella, a woman with a history of concealed infanticide and a community activist, also uses “sth” as a reaction to Stamp Paid’s proposal to save Sethe from Beloved. The history of “sth”, however, does not end there. Toni Morrison chooses “Sth” for the opening of *Jazz* (1992), the novel that

followed immediately after *Beloved* (1987). Some critics of *Jazz* read “sth” as an informal attention getter to dip the audience in the events of the novel. Others, such as O’Reilly, see “Sth” as a lexicon of the primal to illustrate the desire and loss for the mother. See “In Search of My Mothers Garden, I Found My Own” p.377. Indeed such a reading remains quite convincing, but the fact remains that “sth” made its literary journey from *Beloved* to *Jazz*.

<sup>12</sup> Zizek finds Laclau and Mouffe’s notion of antagonism extremely productive, but he thinks that in adopting the post-structuralist term “subject-position” they are regressing in what the notion of antagonism is fully capable to offer. He advocates the Lacanian term “subject” as being correlative to its own limit. This idea helps to distinguish between antagonism, or antagonistic fight, on the one hand, and the radical experience of antagonism, or pure antagonism, on the other. See Zizek’s “Beyond Discourse-Analysis.”

<sup>13</sup> It could be also argued that in the economic cycle of field production, Seth-thuh reminds of rhythmic elements that structure work songs with the second syllable expressing the harshness of physical labor. This type of reading places the name in the context of an already mixed, African American linguistics.

<sup>14</sup> Interestingly, “sth” is also Ella’s initial reaction to the news Stamp Paid brings to her that Sethe needs help from *Beloved*’s menacing presence. When Ella utters “sth,” we learn, she is unmoved and thinks of the rift between her and Sethe created after Baby Suggs’s excessive feast in celebration of freedom and Sethe’s infanticide. In this context, Ella’s “sth” sounds like a sarcastic confirmation of Sethe’s failure to provide safety for her daughter. See *Beloved*, p. 218 – 219.

<sup>15</sup> In order to explain the function of black (re)doubling of signifiers, Gates distinguishes between the white and black processes of making meaning. The term “signification” applies to the standard English language and follows closely the Saussurean concept of the sign. Signification in this case stands for the signified/signifier combination to reflect the relation between concept and sound-image. Gates offers the following visual scheme to explain the famous structuralist idea about language:

signified      concept  
 -----  
 signifier      sound-image

To refer to the black vernacular, Gates uses the term “Signification” to explain the idea that the relation of semantics has been displaced and substituted by a relation of rhetoric. The visual explanation for the black vernacular looks like this:

rhetorical figures  
 -----  
 Signification =  
 signifier

To Signify means to engage in rhetorical games; all rhetorical figures are subsumed under the term Signify and the black process of conducting such rhetorical interventions is known as Signifyin(g). The power of the black vernacular lies in “Signification.” It constructs, to cite Gates, “a simultaneous, but negated, parallel discursive (ontological, political) universe [that] exists within the larger white discursive universe” and it marks that “the most poignant level of black-white differences is that of meaning, of ‘signification’ in the most literal sense. “Signification” becomes a powerful revisionist strategy of “signification” and, by implication, the white discursive universe. What is striking here is Gates’s choice, to which he personally admits, to present the black vernacular term “Signification” capital letter “S” and reserve the lowercase for “signification.” It reflects the reversal in power between rhetoric and literality, and more importantly, between black and white meaning. Based on the visual and verbal argument that Gates constructs, victory is on the side of the black vernacular. In this context, the name of Sethe, read as a signifier, corresponds fully to the visual aspect of Gates’s argument on Signification. Sethe is a metaphor for safety. But the reversal in power that the rhetorical ploy brings with it, as the verbal part of the argument goes, does not take place immediately through that signifier, as Morrison’s novel suggests. An additional, internal black on black Signification takes place in order to count as a successful political operation on meaning.



---

<sup>16</sup> This is not to say that such a reading is incorrect. Historically these are rightfully established name connections. The problem is that they seem to serve an argument that casts Sethe in the light of a mythical heroine rather than imagine her as a more complex character.

<sup>17</sup> In the absence of detailed official written records, the personal narratives of former slaves speak of frustrating lacks and uncertainties of biographical information pertaining to their lives. The two early most representative texts for this phenomenon are Frederick Douglass's *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass, An American Slave* (1845) and Harriet Jacobs's *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl* (1861). *Beloved's* historical reconstruction of such frustrating moments and the mechanisms for coping with this informationless trauma is quite elaborate. A simple examination of the characters' names, old and new, will prove this point.

<sup>18</sup> In his famous study on the novel, Bakhtin defines plasticity as a generic feature of the novel. The novel, Bakhtin writes, "has no canon of its own [...] It is a genre that is ever questing, ever examining itself and subjecting its established forms of review" ("Epic and Novel" 39). In this sense, Morrison's monologue of *Beloved* is an extreme version of novelistic plasticity brought to the point where it endangers to cannibalize the narrative aspect of the novel. This is plasticity in its monstrous form.

<sup>19</sup> It is interesting that Rodrigues relies on a non-African but again ethnic term, *mantra*, to define the quality of the female group exorcism. As he explains, *mantra* is a Sanskrit term used in ceremonies and rituals to refer to the ineffable. His emphasis on ancient ethnic and folkloric elements is much in line with how he thinks *Beloved* should be perceived.

<sup>20</sup> Morrison expressed her artistic credo about aural and oral literature in an interview the year before *Beloved's* publication. See Christina Davis's "An Interview with Toni Morrison" (1986) reprinted in *Conversations With Toni Morrison* (1994), pp.230-232.

<sup>21</sup> In a recent article, "From the Same Tree: Gender and Iconography in Representations of Violence in *Beloved*," Sandy Alexandre reads the chokecherry tree on Sethe's back "simultaneously as a woman's rape tree and as a man's lynching tree" (935-936). Alexandre's insightful reading illustrates the complexity of the tree image as it operates in white culture of slavery and segregation. In "'Chokecherry Tree(s)': Operative Modes of Metaphor in Toni Morrison's *Beloved*," Heike Harting lists several meanings for the tree metaphor. The tree is associated with the tree of life, the family tree, the pseudo-race scientific tree, and the tree of lynching and mutilation. Despite the high number of meanings derived from different contexts and in different times, they all have the seal of white cultural production.

<sup>22</sup> An important clarification is needed here. When Morrison uses the word "sound" to describe the activity of the thirty women, she is being quite elusive. What comes out of the women's voices could be a single sound (phoneme) or a combination of sounds (several phonemes). It is my choice to restrict it to the smallest vocal unit with a differential value as I develop my argument. Besides, Morrison has already explored the capacity of short combinations of sounds, *sth*, to disassemble and assemble meaning.

<sup>23</sup> Critics agree that *Beloved* is extremely slippery to identify. This is a figure with wide referentiality. Some of the possible identities for *Beloved* are that she is Sethe's killed daughter, Sethe's mother, a survivor of the Middle Passage, an actual black woman who was kept by a white man for his pleasure, a representative of the sixty million that cannot speak, an extortionist, or opportunist of some kind who makes high demands. Critics read her as well as an expression of Sethe's guilt, a projection of repressed collective memory, or simply the return of the repressed.

*Beloved* gets the name "devil-child" after Ella and the other women in the community learn about her impossible demands. Straight from the moment *Beloved* entered Baby Suggs's house, she exhibits signs of a passionate African American folk consumer. She loves stories and both Sethe and Denver compete in the genre of story-telling to keep her attention. She loves to dance madly in the house when Denver provides the music or becomes *Beloved's* dancing partner. She loves to sing and be sung at. This is how Sethe, at one of *Beloved's* musical performances, hears the song that she invented for her children. She also loves all sorts of games and entertainment that Denver and Sethe provide for her. The extortions of her

---

consumerist behavior become impossible when she threatens Sethe to leave her if she fails to deliver what Beloved wants. Ella classifies the situation as a ghostly activity which is to be tolerated within reason but when it becomes threatening, this cultural presence, according to Ella, is “an invasion” (*Beloved* 302). At this stage, the threat is generated from within the African American culture as an unbearably high demand for popular cultural performance. It is comparable to Derrida’s pharmakon that can both kill or cure. The women’s vocal intervention will regulate decisively this two-fold effect.

<sup>24</sup> For full definition of kinetic orality, see Cornel West’s “Black Culture and Postmodernism” in *Remaking History*, p. 93.

## CHAPTER VI

### CONCLUSION

This study presents an argument about the political making of African American literature by women at two distinct periods of literary and cultural prosperity associated with the black people in America. The short story of Angelina Weld Grimke, “The Closing Door,” and the one-act dramas of her two immediate literary successors, Shirley Graham with *It’s Morning* and Georgia Douglas Johnson with *Safe*, created between 1919 and 1940, belong to an era widely known as the New Negro Renaissance, where women writers, in the words of leading critic Cheryl Wall, “struggled to claim their own voices” (9) amidst a strong male literary competition, and proved to explore the colored women’s “social and psychological meanings of their positionality in ever increasing depth” (*Women of the Harlem Renaissance*, 12). Several decades later, in the 1980s, a time of intense institutionalization of African American literature, Toni Morrison, with her Pulitzer prize-winning novel, *Beloved*, continued the struggle for claiming black women’s own voices and helped expand the territory of their influence and the places where they could be heard. In the words of John Duvall, Morrison’s early fiction, and especially *Beloved*, gave us “the authorized Morrison” (119), a constructed position from which to write and speak with power.

Grimke’s “The Closing Door,” Graham’s *It’s Morning*, Johnson’s *Safe*, and Morrison’s *Beloved* reveal a strategy for these African American women writers to build their positions of power, put themselves in service of their communities, and

intervene in the African American literary politics. By introducing the figure of the black overprotective mother and a plot operating around the act of maternal infanticide, Grimke, Graham, Johnson, and Morrison managed to address burgeoning social and democratic deficits related to the status and condition of the black people and their communities in their times. To critique those social and democratic deficits, the four women writers chose either to turn to black history and its most traumatic dimension – slavery, the way Graham and Morrison did, or to concentrate on the most painful racist practice of their day – lynching, the way Grimke and Johnson preferred. In both historical contexts, slavery and lynching, the figure of the black infanticidal mother serves to metaphorically express the personal tragedies and communal hardships incurred by the operation of dominant white discourses and their decisive impact on the organization of the system of economic and social relations. Along with the expression of tragedy and hardship, however, an explanation backed by an imposing number of critics, some of which extend this interpretive tragic line into a solid body of victimhood criticism to view maternal infanticide as a sign of despair and communal failure to produce desirable models for black motherhood, there comes the possibility for a different kind of interpretation that foregrounds the political dividends to be extracted from an otherwise indeed tragic and painful event. Far from being just a victim of tragic circumstances and an illustration of erratic and desperate behavior under extreme pressure, the infanticidal black mother proves to be a viable instrument for stimulating, in the long run, black communal politics of unity and integration.

If we take into consideration the second line of existing criticism on the black infanticidal mother, we notice the tendency to elevate the importance of this literary

figure to the status of a mythic heroine or a bearer of ancient feminine powers, who defends ruthlessly her maternal position, taking the highest risk possible – the murder of her children – in order to protect them from suffering and humiliation. Although similar readings grant agency to the infanticidal mother and cast her in the role of a fierce protector who knows the price of sacrifice, they often borrow from the pompous and inflated rhetoric of the ancient heroic narrative to assess the maternal action in a dignified manner. Under this scenario, the infanticidal mother champions the cause for a long-sought acknowledgement of black maternal rights, while maternal agency is contextualized both as a victorious intracommunal and intercommunal move. Maternal agency, put in this context, fails to see the result of restructuring the intracommunal political space provoked by the act of infanticide.

Based on Ernesto Laclau's theory of hegemony and emancipation, the restructuring of the intracommunal space as political becomes possible with the introduction of the empty signifier *safety*. The black mothers in Grimke's "The Closing Door," Graham's *It's Morning*, Johnson's *Safe*, and Morrison's *Beloved* kill their children in a most spectacular way, sending the repercussions of horror and dismay across the black communal social fabric, and insisting that they acted in the best interest of their children by providing them with safety from the oppressive regime of slavery and the degrading practice of lynching.

Through the acts of infanticide, the mothers disarticulated the accepted meaning of safety under the established systems of social and economic arrangement and argued for a new meaning of safety that places upfront the maternal ambition to intervene as political subjects in the restructuring of the social space.

In the four cases which this study examines, infanticide, executed as a form of dark carnivalesque, manages automatically to attract communal attention and raise the question of safety in the public space. From a maternal perspective, the question of safety is first introduced as a nonverbal element in at least three intersecting discourses – on safety, motherhood, and freedom – and later becomes a verbal addition to these as well to propose the maternal revision of the meaning of safety. The only exception to this sequential action-verbal model of maternal subject reaction is Grimke’s “The Closing Door,” where the black mother delivers her political speech on safety first, and then implements the act of infanticide.

In the texts, representatives of the black community discuss the state of emergency that affects the black infanticidal mother prior to the perpetration of her homicidal act, and thus, confront the macabre play of the signifier *safety* that at first leaves them speechless and in shock (Johnson and Graham), only to return to the question of safety shortly after the gruesome act of infanticide (Grimke), or years later (Morrison), to explore *safety* as an emancipatory and hegemonic signifier in service of the black communal project of self-defined and intracommunal integrated existence.

If Grimke, Graham, and Johnson succeed in positioning the moment of undecidability in the black community with the issue of infanticide and the maternal explanation for it, Morrison, undoubtedly, goes beyond the moment of undecidability to offer a consensual, non-divisive option for the meaning of the empty signifier *safety*.

To replace the old, compromised interpretations of safety operating in the black community – safety as corporeal love and unity, safety as a journey to the free states up North, or safety as protection in death – Morrison places her cultural and intellectual bet

on the power of the sound that breaks the back of words. As a unified but unspecified sound produced by thirty women, it both disassembles words by virtue of its lack of specificity, and at the same time is safe in its representation, because it remains non-structured and non-contrasted. It hegemonizes through a lack of contrast, which referred to the racialized contrast of black and white existence, promises to eliminate its oppressing status quo. Thus, it makes the signifier *safety* the expression of the black social imaginary – the horizon, to use Laclau’s term, that would give the black community the sense of wholeness and completion.

Initially framed as a question of motherhood, the issue of safety crosses the line of the maternal discourse and spills over into a broader social discourse that tackles the issue of self-definition and cultural independence. As part of the black independence cultural discourse, Grimke, Graham, Johnson, and Morrison gravitate to the black literary theories of their day, and sometimes even boost and propose their own views and activities to strengthen the safety net of black cultural philosophies and literary theories which aim to ensure the growth of specifiable African American literature and culture. Grimke’s work for propaganda magazines, Graham’s position-of-authority stance, and Johnson’s literary salon, *The Saturday Nighters*, all offered a safe continuation of essential aspects of Du Bois’s “art as propaganda” thesis and Locke’s “folk drama.” Morrison, on the other hand, as a representative of a later and more mature trend of African American literature but nevertheless just as sharply politicized as the New Negro Renaissance, created *Beloved* as a piece of literature that could be read both with and against Gates’s vernacular theory, insisting on the signifier *safety* as an integral part of black communal life and politics. As a person with a high-profiled presence in America educational institutions, Morrison

develops a substantial body of nonfiction that imagines a safe theoretical space for the conceptualization of African American literature, even if it displays some openly essentialist characteristics.

Overall, this study concludes, the signifier *safety* functions as a key political signifier in Angelina Weld Grimke's short story, "The Closing Door," Shirley Graham and Georgia Douglas Johnson's one-act dramas, *It's Morning* and *Safe*, and last but not least, in Toni Morrison's novel *Beloved*. It is also this very same political signifier that marks their social activism and extra-literary activities in favor of the flourishing of African American literature.



## BIBLIOGRAPHY

- Alexandre, Sandy. "From the Same Tree: Gender and Iconography in Representations of Violence in *Beloved*." *Signs: Journal of Women in Culture and Society* 36:4 (2011): 915 – 940. Print.
- Andrews, William and Nellie McKay, eds. *Toni Morrison's "Beloved": A Casebook*. New York: Oxford University Press, 1999. Print.
- Awkward, Michael. "Appropriative Gestures: Theory and Afro-American Literary Criticism." 1988. *African American Literary Theory: A Reader*. Ed. Winston Napier. New York: New York University Press, 2000. 331 – 338. Print.
- Baker, Huston. A. *Blues, Ideology, and Afro-American Literature: A Vernacular Theory*. Chicago: Chicago University Press, 1984. Print.
- Bakhtin, Mikhail. *The Dialogic Imagination: Four Essays*. Ed. Michael Holquist. Trans. Caryl Emerson and Michael Holquist. Austin: University of Texas Press, 2004. Print.
- . *Problems of Dostoevsky's Poetics*. Ed. and trans. by Caryl Emerson. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1984. Print.
- . *Rabelais and His World*. 1968. Translated by Helene Iswolsky. Cambridge: The MIT Press, 1968. Print.
- Barnum, P. T. *Struggles and Triumphs: Forty Years' Recollections*. Buffalo: The Courier Company, 1883. Print.

- Berg, Allison. *Mothering the Race: Women's Narratives of Reproduction, 1890 – 1930*. Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 2002. Print.
- Bloom, Harold, ed. *Toni Morrison: Modern Critical Views*. New York: Chelsea House, 1990. Print.
- Bower, Martha Gilman. “*Color Struck*” *Under the Gaze: Ethnicity and the Pathology of Being in the Plays of Johnson, Hurston, Childress, Hansberry, and Kennedy*. Westport: Praeger, 2003. Print. Contributions in Afro-American and African Studies, Number 208.
- Brown-Guillory, Elizabeth. “Disrupted Motherlines: Mothers and Daughters in a Genderized, Sexualized, and Racialized World.” *Women of Color: Mother – Daughter Relationships in 20<sup>th</sup>-Century Literature*. Ed. Elizabeth Brown-Guillory. Austin: University of Texas Press, 1996. Print.
- , ed. *Wines in the Wilderness: Plays by African American Women from the Harlem Renaissance to the Present*. New York: Greenwood Press, 1990. Print.
- . *Their Place on the Stage: Black Women Playwrights in America*. New York: Greenwood Press, 1988. Print. Contributions in Afro-American and African Studies, Number 117.
- Butler-Evans, Elliot. *Race, Gender, and Desire: Narrative Strategies in the Fiction of Toni Cade Bambara, Toni Morrison, and Alice Walker*. Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1989. Print.
- Capuano, Peter J. “Truth in Timber: Morrison’s Extension of Slave Narrative Song in *Beloved*.” *African American Review* 37.1 (Spring, 2003): 95 – 103. Print.

- Carby, Hazel V. *Reconstructing Womanhood: The Emergence of the African American Woman Novelist*. New York: Oxford University Press, 1987. Print.
- Christian, Barbara. "Fixing Methodologies: *Beloved*." 1993. *New Black Feminist Criticism, 1985 – 2000*. Eds. Gloria Bowles, M. Giulia Fabi, and Arlene R. Keizer. Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 2007. 31 – 39. Print.
- . "The Race for Theory." 1987. *New Black Feminist Criticism, 1985 – 2000*. Eds. Gloria Bowles, M. Giulia Fabi, and Arlene R. Keizer. Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 2007. 40 – 50. Print.
- Collins, Patricia Hill. *Black Feminist Thought: Knowledge, Consciousness, and the Politics of Empowerment*. London: Harper Collins Academic, 1990. Print.
- Perspectives on Gender, Volume 2.
- Corti, Lillian. "Countee Cullen's Medea." *African American Review* 32.4 (1998): 621 – 634. Print.
- Cullen, County. *My Soul's High Song: The Collected Writings of Countee Cullen, Voice of the Harlem Renaissance*. Ed. Gerald Early. New York: Anchor, 1991. Print.
- Crouch, Stanley. "Aunt Medea." 1987. *Critical Essays on Toni Morrison's Beloved*. Ed. Barbara H. Solomon. NY: G.K. Hall & Co., 1998. 64 – 71. Print.
- Dawkins, Andrea. "From Madonna to Medea: Maternal Infanticide in African American Women's Literature of the Harlem Renaissance." *Literature Interpretation Theory* 15 (2004): 223 – 240. Print.
- Derrida, Jacques. *The Politics of Friendship*. 1994. tr. George Collins. London: Verso, 2005. Print.

- . "Force of Law." 1989. tr. Mary Quaintance. *Deconstruction and the Possibility of Justice*, eds., Drucilla Cornell, Michael Rosenfeld, and David Gray Carlson, New York: Routledge, 1992. 3 – 67. Print.
- . "Structure, Sign, and Play in the Discourse of the Human Sciences." 1966. *The Language of Criticism and the Sciences of Man*. Eds. Richard Macksey and Eugenio Donato. Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins Press, 1970. 247 – 265. Print.
- Du Bois, W.E.B. *The Souls of Black Folk*. 1903. New York: Barnes & Noble Classics, 2005. Print.
- . "The Talented Tenth." 1903. *Teaching American History.org*. Web.
- . "Criteria of Negro Art." 1926. *The Norton Anthology of Theory and Criticism*. gen. ed. Vincent B. Leitch. New York: Norton, 2001. 980 – 987. Print.
- Duvall, John N. *The Identifying Fictions of Toni Morrison: Modernist Authenticity and Postmodern Blackness*. New York: Palgrave, 2000. Print.
- Effinger, Marta J. "Georgia Douglas Johnson." *Dictionary of Literary Biography 249: Twentieth Century American Dramatists*. 3<sup>rd</sup> Series. Ed. Christopher Wheatley. Detroit: A Broccoli Clark Layman Book, The Gale Group, 2002. 180 – 188. Print.
- Ellison Ralph. *Invisible Man*. 1952. New York: Vintage International/Vintage Books, 1995.
- Finney, Brian. "Temporal Defamiliarization in Toni Morrison's *Beloved*." 1990. *Critical Essays on Toni Morrison's Beloved*. ed. Barbara H. Solomon. NY: G.K. Hall & Co., 1998. 104 – 116. Print.
- Foucault, Michel. *The History of Sexuality: An Introduction*. 1978. Vol. 1. New York: Vintage Books. 1990. Print.

- Fultz, Lucille P. *Toni Morrison: Playing with Difference*. Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2003. Print.
- Furman, Jan. *Toni Morrison's Fiction*. Columbia: University of South Carolina Press, 1996. Print.
- Gates, Henry Louis, Jr. and Nellie Y. McKay. "From Phillis Wheatley to Toni Morrison: The Flowering of African American Literature." *The Journal of Blacks in Higher Education* 14 (Winter 1996 – 1997): 95 – 100. JSTOR. Web. 26 October 2010.
- and K. A. Appiah, eds. *Toni Morrison: Critical Perspectives Past and Present*. New York: Amistad Press, 1993. Print.
- . *The Signifying Monkey: A Theory of African-American Literary Criticism*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1988. Print.
- ,ed. *Black Literature and Literary Theory*. New York: Methuen, 1984. Print.
- Genette, Gérard. 1972. *Narrative Discourse: An Essay in Method*. Ithaca: Cornell University Press., 1980. Print.
- Graham, Shirley. *It's Morning*. 1940. *Black Female Playwrights: An Anthology of Plays Before 1950*. ed. Kathy A. Perkins. 1989. Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1990. 211- 224. Print.
- Gramsci, Antonio. *Selections from the Prison Notebooks of Antonio Gramsci*. eds. and trans. Quintin Hoare and Geoffrey Nowell Smith. New York: International Publishers. 1971. Print.
- Grewal, Gurleen. *Circles of Sorrow, Lines of Struggle: The Novels of Toni Morrison*. Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1998. Print.

- Grimke, Angelina Weld. “ ‘Rachel’ The Play of the Month: The Reason and Synopsis by the Author ” 1920. *Selected Works of Angelina Weld Grimke*. Ed. Carolivia Herron. New York: Oxford University Press, 1991. 413 – 416. Print.
- . “The Closing Door.” 1919. *Selected Works of Angelina Weld Grimke*. Ed. Carolivia Herron. New York: Oxford University Press, 1991. 252 – 281. Print.
- . “Remarks on Literature.” Undated, MSRC. *Selected Works of Angelina Weld Grimke*. Ed. Carolivia Herron. New York: Oxford University Press, 1991. 436 – 437. Print.
- Hale, Grace. *Making Whiteness: The Culture of Segregation in the South, 1890 – 1940*. 1998. New York: Vintage Books, 1999. Print.
- Harper, Frances E.W. *Iola Leroy, Or Shadows Uplifted*. 1892. Boston: Beacon Press, 1987. Print.
- Harris, Trudier. “*Beloved*: ‘Woman, Thy Name Is Demon.’” 1991. *Critical Essays on Toni Morrison’s Beloved*. Ed. Barbabr H. Solomon. NY: G.K.Hall &Co., 1998. 127 – 137. Print.
- . *Fiction and Folklore: The Novels of Toni Morrison*. Knoxville: University of Tennessee Press, 1991. Print.
- Harting, Heike. “ ‘Chokecherry Tree(s)’: Operative Modes of Metaphor in Toni Morrison’s *Beloved*.” *ARIEL: A Review of International English Literature* 29:4 (October 1998): 23 – 51. Print.
- Heinze, Denise. *The Dilemma of “Double Consciousness”: Toni Morrison’s Novels*. Athens: University of Georgia Press, 1993. Print.

- Herron, Carolivia, ed. "Introduction." *Selected Works of Angelina Weld Grimke*. New York: Oxford University Press, 1991. 3 – 22. Print.
- Hirsch, David A. Hedrich. "Speaking Silences in Angelina Weld Grimke's 'The Closing Door' and 'Blackness.'" *African American Review* 26.3 (Fall 1992): 459 – 474. Print.
- Horne, Gerald. *Race Woman: The Lives of Shirley Graham Du Bois*, New York: New York University Press, 2000. Print
- Holloway, Karla F. C. *Passed On: African American Mourning Stories*. Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2002. Print.
- and Stephanie Demetrakopoulos. *New Dimensions of Spirituality: A Biracial and Bicultural Reading on the Novels of Toni Morrison*. Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 1987. Print.
- hooks, bell. *Talking Back: Thinking Feminist, Thinking Black*. Boston: South End Press, 1989. Print.
- Hopkins, Pauline E. *Contending Forces: A Romance Illustrative of Negro Life North and South*. 1900. New York: Oxford University Press, 1988. Print.
- Horvitz, Deborah. "Nameless Ghosts: Possession and Dispossession in *Beloved*." 1989. *Critical Essays on Toni Morrison*. Ed. Barbara H. Solomon. NY: G.K. Hall &Co., 1998. 93 – 103. Print.
- Hughes, Langston. "The Negro Artist and the Racial Mountain." 1926. *African American Literary Theory: A Reader*. ed. Winston Napier. New York: New York University Press, 2000. 27 - 30. Print.

- Hull, Gloria T. *Color, Sex, and Poetry: Three Women Writers of the Harlem Renaissance*. Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1987. Print.
- Jacobs, Harriet. *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl*. 1861. New York: The Modern Library, 2004. Print.
- Johnson, Georgia Douglas. *Bronze: A Book of Verse*. 1922. *The Selected Works of Georgia Douglas Johnson*. ed. Claudia Tate. New York: G.K. Hall, 1997. 75 – 178. Print.
- . A Sunday Morning in the South. c.1925. *The Selected Works of Georgia Douglas Johnson*. ed. Claudia Tate. New York: G.K. Hall, 1997. 385 – 393. Print.
- . *Safe*. c.1929. *The Selected Works of Georgia Douglas Johnson*. ed. Claudia Tate. New York: G.K. Hall, 1997. 377 – 384. Print.
- Johnson, James Weldon. *The Book of American Negro Poetry*. 1922. New York: Harcourt, 1931. Print.
- Joyce, Joyce A. *Warriors, Conjurers, and Priests: Defining African-Centered Literary Criticism*. Chicago: Third World Press, 1994. Print.
- Khyati, Abdellafit. "Representation, Race, and the 'Language' of the Ineffable in Toni Morrison's *Narrative*." *African American Review* 33.2 (Summer 1999): 313 – 324. Print.
- Kipling, Rudyard. "Without Benefit of Clergy." *Life's Handicap: Being Stories of My Own People*. New York: Doubleday, 1913. 212 – 240. Print.
- Krasner, David. *A Beautiful Pageant: African American Theatre, Drama, and Performance in the Harlem Renaissance, 1910 – 1927*. New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2002. Print.



- Kubitschek, Missy Dehn. *Claiming the Heritage: African-American Women Novelists and History*. Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 1991. Print.
- Laclau, Ernesto. *Emancipation(s)*. London: Verso, 1996. Print.
- . "Deconstruction, Pragmatism, Hegemony." *Deconstruction and Pragmatism: Critchley, Derrida, Laclau, and Rorty*. Ed. Chantal Mouffe. London: Routledge, 1996. 47 – 67. Print.
- . *New Reflections on the Revolution of Our Time*. London: Verso, 1990. Print.
- , and Chantal Mouffe. *Hegemony and Socialist Strategy: Towards a Radical Democratic Politics*. 2nd ed. London: Verso, 1985. Print.
- Le Clair, Thomas. " 'The Language Must Not Sweat': A Conversation with Toni Morrison." *New Republic* (March 1981): 21 -29. Print.
- Locke, Alain. "The Negro and the American Stage." *Theatre Arts Monthly*. New York: Theatre Arts 10 (January, 1926): 112 – 120. Print.
- . "The Drama of Negro Life." *Theatre Arts Monthly*. New York: Theatre Arts 10 (January, 1926): 701 – 706. Print.
- . "The New Negro." *The New Negro: An Interpretation*. Ed. Alain Locke. 1925. New York: Arno Press and the New York Times, 1968. 3 – 16. Print.
- and Montgomery Gregory. eds. *Plays of Negro Life: A Source-Book of Native American Drama*. New York: Harper, 1927. Print.
- Ludwig, S□mi. "Toni Morrison's Social Criticism." *The Cambridge Companion to Toni Morrison*. ed. Justine Tally. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007. 125 – 138. Print.

- Mbalia, Dorothea Drummond. *Toni Morrison's Developing Class Consciousness*. Selingsgrove, PA: Susquehanna University Press, 1991. Print.
- McBride, Dwight A. "Speaking the Unspeakable: On Toni Morrison, African American Intellectuals and the Uses of Essentialist Rhetoric." *Modern Fiction Studies* 39.3/4 (1993): 755 – 776. Print.
- McFadden, Alesia Elaine. *The Artistry and Activism of Shirley Graham Du Bois: A Twentieth Century Torchbearer*. Open Access Dissertations. Paper 76. University of Massachusetts, 2009. Web. December 2010.
- McHenry, Elizabeth. *Forgotten Readers: Recovering the Lost History of African American Literary Societies*. Durham: Duke University Press, 2002. Print.
- Meier, Joyce. "The Refusal of Motherhood in African American Women's Theatre." *MELUS* 25.3/4 (2000): 117 – 140. Print.
- Miller, Ericka M. *The Other Reconstruction: Where Violence and Womanhood Meet in the Writings of Wells-Barnett, Grimke, and Larsen*. New York: Garland Publishing, Inc., 2000. Print.
- Mobley, Marylin Sanders. *Folk Roots and Mythic Wings in Sarah Orne Jewett and Toni Morrison*. Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1991. Print.
- Morrison, Toni. "Home." *The House That Race Built: Black Americans, US Terrain*. Ed. Wahneema Lubiano. New York: Pantheon Books, 1997. 3 – 12. Print.
- . "Nobel Lecture." 1993. *Toni Morrison: Critical and Theoretical Approaches*. Ed. Nancy J. Peterson. Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1997. 267 – 273. Print.
- . *Playing in the Dark*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1992. Print.

- . "Unspeakable Things Unspoken: The Afro-American Presence in American Literature." *Michigan Quarterly Review* 28 (Winter 1989): 1 – 34. Print.
- . *Beloved*. 1987. New York: Vintage International, 2004. Print.
- . "The Site of Memory." 1987. *The Norton Anthology of African American Literature*. General eds. Henry Louis Gates, Jr. and Nellie McKay. 2nd ed. New York: Norton and Co., 2004. 2290 – 2298. Print.
- . "An Interview With Toni Morrison." Interview by Christina Davis. 1986. *Conversations With Toni Morrison*. ed. Danille Taylor-Guthrie. Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 1994. 223 – 233. Print.
- . "Rootedness: The Ancestor as Foundation." 1984. *The Norton Anthology of African American Literature*. General Eds. Henry Louis Gates, Jr. and Nellie McKay. 2nd ed. New York: Norton & Co., 2004. 2286 – 2290. Print.
- . "The Language Must Not Sweat: A Conversation With Toni Morrison." Interview by Thomas LeClair. *The New Republic* 184 (21 March 1981): 25 – 29. Print.
- . "Conversations with Alice Childress and Toni Morrison." 1974. *Black Creation Annual. Conversations With Toni Morrison*. ed. Danille Taylor-Guthrie. Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 1994. 3 – 9. Print.
- . *Sula*. 1973. New York: Vintage International, 2004. Print.
- Murphy, Brenda. *American Realism and American Drama, 1880-1940*. New York: Cambridge University Press, 1987. Print.
- O'Reilley, Andrea. *Toni Morrison and Motherhood: A Politics of the Heart*. Albany: State University of New York Press, 2004. Print.

- . "In Search of My Mother's Garden, I Found My Own: Mother-Love, Healing, and Identity in Toni Morrison's *Jazz*." *African American Review* 30.3 (1996): 369 – 379. Print.
- Pavis, Patrice. *Dictionary of the Theatre: Terms, Concepts, and Analysis*. Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1998. Print.
- Perkins, Kathy A., ed. *Black Female Playwrights: An Anthology of Plays before 1950*. 1989. Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1990. Print.
- and Judith L. Stephens, eds. *Strange Fruit: Plays on Lynching by American Women*. Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1998. Print.
- Reed, Roxane. "The Restorative Power of Sound: A Case for Communal Catharsis in Toni Morrison's *Beloved*." *Journal of Feminist studies in Religion* 23.1 (Spring, 2007): 55-71. Print.
- Rice, William Herbert. *Toni Morrison and the American Tradition: A Rhetorical Reading*. Peter Lang Publishing, 1996. Print.
- Rigney, Barbara Hill. "'Breaking the Back of Words: Language, Silence, and the Politics of Identity in *Beloved*.'" 1991. *Critical Essays on Toni Morrison's Beloved*. Ed. Barbara H. Solomon. NY: G.K.Hall, 1998. 138 – 147. Print.
- . *The Voices of Toni Morrison*. Columbus: Ohio State University Press, 1991. Print.
- Rodrigues, Eusebio L. "The Telling of *Beloved*." 1991. *Critical Essays on Toni Morrison's Beloved*. Ed. Barbara H. Solomon. NY: G.K. Hall, 1998. 148 – 165. Print.

- Ryan, Judylyn S. "Language and Narrative Technique in Toni Morrison's Novels." *The Cambridge Companion to Toni Morrison*. ed. Justine Tally. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007. 151 – 161. Print.
- Samarin, William J. "Variation and Variables in Religious Glossolalia." *Language in Society*. Ed. Dell Haymes. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1972. 121 – 130. Print.
- Samuels, Wilfred and Clenora Hudson Weems. *Toni Morrison*. New York: Twyane Publishers, 1990. Print.
- Schopp, Andrew. "Narrative Control and Subjectivity: Dismantling Safety in Toni Morrison's *Beloved*." *The Centennial Review* 39.2 (1995): 355 – 379. Print.
- Schur, Richard L. "Locating Paradise in the Post-Civil Rights Era: Toni Morrison and Critical Race Theory." *Contemporary Literature* 45.2 (Summer 2004): 276 – 299. Print.
- Schuyler, George S. "The Negro-Art Hokum." *Nation* 122 (June 16, 1926): 662 – 663. Web.
- Solomon, Barbara H. *Critical Essays on Toni Morrison's "Beloved"*. New York: G.K. Hall, 1998. Print.
- Spivak, Gayatri Chakravorty. "Subaltern Studies: Deconstructing Historiography." *Selected Subaltern Studies*. Ed. Ranajit Guha and Gayatri Spivak. New York: Oxford University Press, 1988. 3 – 32. Print.
- Stephens, Judith L., ed. *The Plays of Georgia Douglas Johnson: From the New Negro Renaissance to the Civil Rights Movement*. Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 2006. Print.

- . "Art, Activism, and Uncompromising Attitude in Georgia Douglas Johnson's Lynching Plays." *African American Review* 39.1 (Spring – Summer, 2005): 87 – 102. Print.
- . "Politics and Aesthetics, Race and Gender: Georgia Douglas Johnson's Lynching Dramas as Black Feminist Cultural Performance." *Text and Performance Quarterly* 20.3 (July 2000): 251 – 267. Print.
- . "The Harlem Renaissance and the New Negro Movement." *The Cambridge Companion to American Women Playwrights*. ed. Brenda Murphy. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999. Print.
- . "Anti-Lynch Plays by African American Women: Race, Gender, and Social Protest in American Drama." *African American Review* 26.2 (Spring, 1992): 329 – 339. Print.
- Stepeto, Robert. *From Behind the Veil: A Study of Afro-American Narrative*. 1979. 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. Chicago: University of Illinois, 1991. Print.
- Stetson, Erlene. "Rediscovering the Harlem Renaissance: Georgia Douglas Johnson, 'The New Negro Poet'". *Obsidian: Black Literature in Review* 5 (Spring/Summer 1979): 26-34.
- Tate, Claudia. "Introduction." *Georgia Douglas Johnson: The Selected Works of Georgia Douglas Johnson*. Gen. ed. Henry Louis Gates, Jr. New York: G.K. Hall, 1997. xvii – lxxxii. Print.
- . *Domestic Allegories of Political Desire: The Black Heroine's Text at the Turn of the Century*. New York: Oxford University Press, 1992. Print.

- Tally, Justine, ed. *The Cambridge Companion to Toni Morrison*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007. Print.
- Taylor-Guthrie, Danille, ed. *Conversations With Toni Morrison*. Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 1994. Print.
- Wall, Charyl A. *Worrying the Line: Black Women Writers Lineage, and Literary Tradition*. Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 2005. Print.
- . *Women of the Harlem Renaissance*. Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1995. Print.
- Wallinger, Hanna. "Toni Morrison's Literary Criticism." *The Cambridge Companion to Toni Morrison*. ed. Justine Tally. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007. 115 – 124. Print.
- Ward, Anissa J. "Breaking the Back of Words: The Language of the Body in *Beloved*." *The Griot* 17.1 (Spring 1998): 44 – 52. Web. January 2011.
- Warren, Kenneth W. *What Was African American Literature?* Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2011.
- West, Cornel. "Black Culture and Postmodernism." *Remaking History*. Eds. Barbara Kruger and Phil Mariani. Seattle: Bay Press, 1989. 87 – 96. Print.
- Wilson, Harriet E. *Our Nig; Or, Sketches From the Life of a Free Black*. 1859. New York: Vintage Books, 2002. Print.
- Wright, Richard. *Native Son*. 1940. New York: Harper Collins, 1998. Print.
- . "Blue Print for Negro Writing." 1937. *African American Literary Theory: A Reader*. ed. Winston Napier. New York: New York University Press, 2000. 45 - 53. Print.

Wyatt, Jean. "Giving Body to the Word: The Maternal Symbolic in Toni Morrison's *Beloved*." *PMLA*. May 108.3 (1993): 474 – 488. Print.

Zizek, Slavoj. "Beyond Discourse Analysis." *New Reflections on the Revolution of OurTime*. Ernesto Laclau. London: Verso, 1990. 249 – 260. Print.

---. *The Sublime Object of Ideology*. London: Verso, 1989. Print.