

2010-12-21

Haunting Witnesses: Diasporic Consciousness in African American and Caribbean Writing

Brandi Bingham Kellett
University of Miami, b.kellett@umiami.edu

Follow this and additional works at: https://scholarlyrepository.miami.edu/oa_dissertations

Recommended Citation

Kellett, Brandi Bingham, "Haunting Witnesses: Diasporic Consciousness in African American and Caribbean Writing" (2010). *Open Access Dissertations*. 510.
https://scholarlyrepository.miami.edu/oa_dissertations/510

This Open access is brought to you for free and open access by the Electronic Theses and Dissertations at Scholarly Repository. It has been accepted for inclusion in Open Access Dissertations by an authorized administrator of Scholarly Repository. For more information, please contact repository.library@miami.edu.

UNIVERSITY OF MIAMI

HAUNTING WITNESSES: DIASPORIC CONSCIOUSNESS
IN AFRICAN AMERICAN AND CARIBBEAN WRITING

By

Brandi Bingham Kellett

A DISSERTATION

Submitted to the Faculty
of the University of Miami
in partial fulfillment of the requirements for
the degree of Doctor of Philosophy

Coral Gables, Florida

December 2010

© 2010
Brandi Bingham Kellett
All Rights Reserved

UNIVERSITY OF MIAMI

A dissertation submitted in partial fulfillment of
the requirements for the degree of
Doctor of Philosophy

HAUNTING WITNESSES: DIASPORIC CONSCIOUSNESS
IN AFRICAN AMERICAN AND CARIBBEAN WRITING

Brandi Bingham Kellett

Approved:

Lindsey Tucker, Ph.D.
Professor of English

Terri A. Scandura, Ph.D.
Dean of the Graduate School

Joseph Alkana, Ph.D.
Associate Professor of English

David Luis-Brown, Ph.D.
Assistant Professor of English

Ifeoma Nwankwo, Ph.D.
Associate Professor of English
Vanderbilt University

KELLETT, BRANDI BINGHAM
Haunting Witnesses: Diasporic Consciousness
in African American and Caribbean Writing.

(Ph.D., English)
(December 2010)

Abstract of a dissertation at the University of Miami.

Dissertation supervised by Professor Lindsey Tucker.
No. of pages in text. (201)

This project examines the ways in which several texts written in the late twentieth century by African American and Caribbean writers appropriate history and witness trauma. I read the representational practices of Toni Morrison, Ernest Gaines, Paule Marshall, and Fred D'Aguiar as they offer distinct approaches to history and the resulting effects such reconstituted, discovered, or, in some cases, imagined histories can have on the affirmation of the self as a subject. I draw my theoretical framework from the spaces of intersection between diaspora and postcolonial theories, enabling me to explore the values of the African diaspora cross-culturally as manifested in the representational practices of these writers. This study creates an opening into recent discourses of the African diaspora by comparing texts in which the effects of history rooted in diaspora are explored, both in how this history cripples with the impact of trauma and how it empowers dynamic self-actualization and the resistance of the status quo. I argue that in these novels, challenging hegemonic historical narratives and bearing witness to the past are necessary for overcoming the isolating and disempowering effects of trauma, while affirming diasporic consciousness enhances the role of communal belonging and cultural memory in the process of self-actualization.

Dedicated to my Sweaness,
without whom this would not have happened

Acknowledgements

The writing of this dissertation was a group effort. I would like to thank my parents, Terry and Kathy Bingham, for their unwavering belief that I could finish the daunting task before me. Mike and Joan Kellett, my other parents, made the long drive over to Nashville each time I was ready to write a chapter. They changed diapers and made lunches so I could lose myself in a writing frenzy. These four people came every time I called, and my little family survived this process happy and healthy because of them. I want to thank Lindsey Tucker for always making time for me and for being a treasure trove of references and theoretical trends. Joe Alkana threw me a life line by making himself available to my every question, while also pushing me to improve each chapter theoretically. I appreciate Sandra Paquet's instilling in me a love for and an understanding of Caribbean theory and literature. David Luis-Brown literally saved the day by stepping into my work in the final stages, and his questions and comments in my defense will no doubt give me a better shot at developing this work into something more substantial. Finally, and directly, to my sweet boys, Marshall, Eli and Gabriel, thank you for grounding me in my fabulous life as your mom. I never got completely lost in this work because I came home to you. Incidentally, I will never know how many years you saved me with your ability to take long naps! And to Josh, if you had not agreed to stay in South Florida so that I could embark on the journey of the Ph.D., this day would not have come. Thanks for sacrificing, for pushing, for forgiving, and for believing "It's already done" long before the final words were written. I love you, Swea.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

	Page
Chapter	
1 THE PROBLEM OF HISTORY THROUGH THE DOOR OF NO RETURN: AN INTRODUCTION.....	1
2 SHAPING HISTORIES, SHAPING SELVES: ACCESSING HISTORY IN TONI MORRISON'S <i>TAR BABY</i> AND <i>PARADISE</i>	23
3 GETTING TO BE BRAVE: NARRATIVES OF RESISTANCE IN GAINES'S <i>A GATHERING OF OLD MEN</i>	68
4 THE PAST AS (DIS)ORIENTING FORCE: DIASPORIC CONSCIOUSNESS IN <i>PRAISESONG FOR THE WIDOW</i>	110
5 LAYING THE PAST TO REST: REVISING HISTORY BY RESISTING DEATH IN D'AGUIAR'S <i>FEEDING THE GHOSTS</i>	147
Bibliography.....	189

Chapter 1
The Problem of History through the Door of No Return:
An Introduction

In the summer of 1781, Liverpool merchants financed a ship that detached from Africa's "Guinea" Coast, sailing for Jamaica. Struck with sickness, the ship had overwhelming casualties. The loss mourned was financial, not human, and "of the 440 slaves purchased by Collingwood and crowded into the hold of the *Zong* no names survive" (Baucom 11). In July of 1783, Granville Sharp, who had been on the *Zong*, dispatched a letter to the Lords Commissioners of the Admiralty, which

relat[ed] the tale of a British ship, its trans-Atlantic voyage to the Caribbean, the loss of life onboard the ship, the monetary amount a British court had passed as just compensation to those whom it determined to have suffered this loss. That the ship, the *Zong*...was a merchant vessel [and] that the dead were not British sailors but the 132 slaves the ship's captain had thrown overboard. (Baucom 8)

Fred D'Aguiar, a Guyanese poet, imagines the history of this voyage and the aftermath of the trauma experienced onboard in his 1997 novel, *Feeding the Ghosts*. This dissertation sets D'Aguiar's book in context with other Caribbean and African American texts which illuminate the dual challenges of absence and trauma for those in the African diaspora.

Ian Baucom, in his 2005 book *Spectres of the Atlantic*, offers

a history of that unacknowledged letter, the events it recounts, the appeal it makes, the business the Lords Commissioner left unfinished in not responding to it, the silence it writes into the histories of empire and the modern, and the efforts that have been made to broach that silence. (4)

According to Baucom, the only way into this "gap in the archive" is through a largely imagined "counterarchive;" nevertheless, this absence is "worth reading, worth uncovering, *worthwhile*" (4). I begin my dissertation with Baucom because his project

acknowledges, indeed, is framed around, the complexities inherent in any examination of historical approaches to legacy, trauma, and diasporic consciousness. For anyone living in the African diaspora, history necessarily represents an absence where the trauma of disempowerment once occurred, and I, like Baucom, argue here that these histories are “worth uncovering” (4).

This project primarily examines the ways in which several texts written in the late twentieth century by African American and Caribbean writers uncover and appropriate history. I read the representational practices of Toni Morrison, Ernest Gaines, Paule Marshall, and Fred D’Aguiar as they offer distinct approaches to history and the resulting effects such reconstituted, discovered, or, in some cases, imagined histories can have on the affirmation of the self as a subject. I draw my theoretical framework from the spaces of intersection between diaspora and postcolonial theories, and use this productive dialogue to explore the approaches to and uses of the past in several texts.¹ A postcolonial analysis enables me to explore the values of the African diaspora cross-culturally as manifested in the representational practices of these writers. Although my primary methodologies are shaped by postcolonial, diaspora, and trauma theories, I do not read each text in the same way. Rather, it is effective to ask the same questions of each book and then employ the particular methodology that probes these issues in the most productive ways in each instance. The questions guiding my project include: How do these texts appropriate, manipulate, witness or imagine history? Moreover, how does this historical approach shape diasporic consciousness, and to what effect? And, finally,

¹Postcolonial theory has been shaped by many important voices, not the least of which, for my purposes here, are Edouard Glissant, Frantz Fanon, V.S. Naipaul, Derek Walcott, Paul Gilroy, and Homi Bhabha, while Dionne Brand, James Clifford, Brent Hayes Edwards have done much to note the ways in which the experience of diaspora has been influenced in large part by movement, conflicting nationalisms, and diverse cultural and communal claims. Their contributions are articulated in the following pages.

how does the telling of history challenge the status quo, offer avenues of resistance, or articulate a cultural legacy; in short, how does this awareness affirm self-actualization within a constructive communal orientation?

In the texts examined here, Gaines, Marshall, D'Aguiar and Morrison appropriate the past in order to resist oppression and affirm individual and communal identities rooted in diasporic consciousness. In particular, this project analyzes the representational practices of Morrison in *Tar Baby* (1981) and *Paradise* (1997), Gaines in *A Gathering of Old Men* (1983), Marshall in *Praisesong for a Widow* (1983), and D'Aguiar in *Feeding the Ghosts*. I have chosen these writers because they intentionally address personal and collective histories, making clearly defined attempts to witness the past within the present. I am particularly interested in how they figure the approach, witness, and recall of the past common to those Africans living in parts of the diaspora in order to develop subject positionality. I use the term *subject positionality* to identify an empowered state of being in which one is capable of acting autonomously; similarly, *self-actualization* describes a person who, having affirmed her subjectivity, possesses an integrated identity which addresses past influences and is thus able to live in the present with agency. I borrow here from Homi K. Bhabha, who claims that the "return of the subject" is a process in which "an agency that seeks revision and reinscription" is established (191). Indeed, *subject positionality* and *self-actualization* do not imply fixed identities or even consistently integrated selves; rather, the terms connote the affirmation of the self as an acting subject capable of negotiating with and recognizing the Other. I am arguing here that the representational practices of the writers I discuss suggest that a confrontation

with the past which increases awareness of the traumatic effects and the cultural legacy of the diaspora is necessary in order to position oneself as a subject.

The erasure and manipulation of the past are thematic concerns in both Caribbean and African American writing. These writers' figurings of memory find that reclaiming history and developing a diasporic consciousness are crucial to the resistance of hegemonic power, even if such resistance does not lead to communal empowerment. Although the past figures dominantly in each text explored here, the representational practices vary significantly in each. In Morrison's *Paradise*, for example, the founding families of the all-black town of Ruby are obsessed with the past and believe the bravery exhibited to confront past abuse must dictate the town's present and future, but their patriarchal control of history destroys their community. Morrison thus offers multiple revisions of dominant historical understandings as she challenges singular, patriarchal narratives of history. For Gaines, abuses experienced in the past severely limit the agency of each of his male characters. In giving voice to these traumas, his characters are empowered to confront their long-time oppressors and challenge the status quo. In several of Marshall's texts, the past is initially bewildering and therefore ignored; however, Marshall figures history itself as an actor that confronts the destructive alienation common to those in the African diaspora as a result of trauma. When the past is recognized and slowly embraced in both *Praisesong* and *A Chosen Place, the Timeless People*, Avey and Merle reclaim themselves in the contexts of community by developing a diasporic consciousness which provides continuity and a sense of legacy to their disjointed lives. In contrast, D'Aguiar figures the sea as a site of abuse and as a place of origin for enslaved Africans. As such, he evokes the history of the sea and explores

possibilities for individual and communal healing through the act of imagining that site of erasure.

In representing the process of self-actualization for those in the African diaspora, these writers appropriate history, explore the effects of witnessing on the affirmation of identity, and promote diasporic consciousness. My use of *witness* here borrows primarily from Holocaust and trauma theories, in which the experience of articulating acts of abuse and oppression often facilitates the commemoration of victims, the issuing of justice, and the empowerment of survivors.² It is irresponsible and overly simplistic to claim that dealing with the past in any way gives birth immediately to a sustainable understanding of one's self and identity. Accordingly, in my project, terms like *trauma*, *identity*, *race* and *gender* are not regarded as fixed; instead, I find it productive to analyze the ways in which such tropes are used, manipulated and explored as personal agency is approached and, often, found to be unattainable. Nuanced readings of texts do not simply establish the path to an elusive construction of imagined wholeness, but rather explore attempts and failures at individual and communal resistance, reclamation, and subject positionality.

Despite increased globalization and the rise of cosmopolitanism, the representational practices of many writers of African origin imagine efforts at increased autonomy and the individual assertion of power. The writers I explore here are even more interested in community and the sense of empowerment one draws from a recognized place in the African diaspora. Rather than using trauma as the primary unifying foundation of a common African past, Morrison, Gaines, Marshall and D'Aguiar

² For more on how I read Holocaust theory in conjunction with African American theory's turn to trauma, see my discussion on pages 14-17.

assert subjectivity accessed in part through their recognition of the cultural legacies of the African diaspora. James Clifford's assertion that "diaspora discourse articulates, or bends together, both roots *and* routes" is helpful here, for he recognizes that movement, rather than stasis, informs our ideas about our identities (251). In fact, he hypothesizes that "practices of displacement might emerge as *constitutive* of cultural meanings rather than as their simple transfer or extension" (3). It is here that Clifford demonstrates the complexity of the diaspora beyond origin or absence:

The diasporic and hybrid identities produced by these movements can be both restrictive and liberating. They stitch together languages, traditions, and places in coercive ways, articulating embattled homelands, powers of memory, styles of transgression, in ambiguous relation to national and transnational structures. (10)

For those theorizing—like Clifford—or imagining—like the writers I examine here—diasporic orientations, "memory becomes a crucial element in the maintenance of a sense of integrity" (44). This dissertation takes up his project by examining the ways in which history—as ongoing trauma and as constructive African cultural legacy—is appropriated in African American and Caribbean writing. Clifford holds that although diasporic cultures "begin with uprooting and loss" (263), they "work to maintain community, selectively preserving and recovering traditions, 'customizing' and 'versioning' them in novel, hybrid, and often antagonistic situations" (263). In short, for Clifford, "diasporic consciousness lives loss and hope as a defining tension" (257).

This view, also held by Paul Gilroy, elevates diaspora as an ongoing, shaping influence, rather than as something having to do with origins alone, and in this way, helps justify my reading of Caribbean and African American writers together in a diasporic context. While he acknowledges that African American cultural orientations "have been

historically shaped into distinct patterns of struggle and marks of authenticity” and thus “are not transnational or diasporic in the same way or to the same degree” as Caribbean understandings, Clifford also suggests that “important comparative questions emerge around different histories of traveling and dwelling” (Clifford 267). This study, then, creates an opening into recent discourses of the African diaspora by comparing texts in which the effects of history rooted in diaspora are explored, both in how this history cripples with the impact of trauma and how it empowers dynamic self-actualization and the resistance of the status quo.

Literary studies has become enamored with diaspora studies, cosmopolitanism and globalization of late. In an effort to overcome the ambiguity of the oft used terms travel, translation, global contraction, transnationalism, cosmopolitan movement, roots, and routes, and in order to state my particular intellectual claim, it will be useful to offer a brief summary of those who have shaped my understanding of postcolonialism, the African diaspora and the construction of history.

In his essay “The Muse of History,” Derek Walcott articulates the dearth of accessible history for those in the African diaspora. Born in Saint Lucia, he writes, “In the New World servitude to the muse of history has produced a literature of recrimination and despair, a literature of revenge written by the descendants of slaves and a literature of remorse written by the descendants of masters” (“Muse” 37). Walcott questions the very foundation of history and the flawed nature of colonized language, suggesting that New World writers and poets must wrestle with the implications of their limited language choices while struggling to access a deeper, life-giving history that resists the perils of both remorse and revolution.

Martiniquan Edouard Glissant, like Walcott, articulates the destructive effects of colonialism in the West Indians. In *Caribbean Discourse*, he points to the “complete eradication of cultural expression” (24), “exploitation” (20), the domination of language (20), the subversion of cultural expression (24), and historical alienation (82; he also argues that those colonized in diaspora too often had their “collective memory...wiped out” (64)...as a result of a “dislocation of the continuum” (62). Glissant thus calls for “Caribbean writer[s] to] ‘dig deep’ into this collective memory” (64) because “the past, to which we were subjected, which has not yet emerged as history for us, is, now obsessively present” (63). Glissant suggests it is possible to overcome the “void of an imposed nonhistory” (65), in part because all individuals and communities in diaspora have a “longing for history” (79); in Glissant’s view, struggling to know one’s own history “provokes the deepest isolation” and yet this struggle is necessary for subjectivity to be asserted (82).

Writing of and responding to this “longing for history”, Morrison, Gaines, Marshall and D’Aguiar evoke spaces shaped by what Trinidadian Dionne Brand describes as “a rupture in history, a rupture in the quality of being” caused by “the Door of No Return: that place where our ancestors departed one world for another; the Old World for the New” (5). Brand asserts that “to live in the Black Diaspora is I think to live as a fiction, a creation of empires, and also self-creation. It is to be a being living inside and outside of herself” (18). While I examine the ways in which these writers both present and critique this process of self-creation, I am not suggesting that such a process has a fixed beginning and end for those in a spatial setting of the postcolonial diaspora. In each instance, whether in the United States or in the Caribbean, the reality of living in

diaspora necessitates a reckoning with trauma derived from the experience of passing through the “Door of No Return.” The cross-cultural context allows me to examine these “gaps” in representational practice, spatial orientation and historical appropriation of those in the African diaspora.

Glissant’s thoughts on Caribbean nonhistory are helpful for establishing a frame whose parameters include the two distinct cultural groups of African Americans and Afro-Caribbeans. While Glissant articulates differences within the Caribbean, he simultaneously links the subjectivity of individuals and groups. Indeed, he suggests “a systematic renewal of ancient forms of survival” (243) would be productive because then subjectivity could be “maintain[ed]...through interdependence” (243). Glissant affirms that self-actualization is accessed when “cultural identity” is articulated (169); however, he also acknowledges that an African American’s reclaiming of history is distinct from someone in the Caribbean (169). Because Glissant urges those in the postcolonial Caribbean to “transition from the shared experiences to conscious expression,” he suggests a dialogue could be possible and even fruitful (222). In other words, for those in the African diaspora, and in the Caribbean in particular, Glissant advocates acting on the longing for history through the intentional reframing of experience through the past and in “creating a new relationship” with others in diaspora (98).

Gilroy’s work has done much to expand such discussions on the problems of historical alienation and cultural erasure from specific colonial experiences to a condition of living in the African diaspora. Born in Britain to Guyanese parents, Gilroy “question[s] the credibility of a tidy, holistic conception of modernity but also argue[s] for the inversion of the relationship between margin and centre as it has appeared within

the master discourses of the master race” in *The Black Atlantic* (45). For my purposes, Gilroy’s notion of the black Atlantic is a useful construct not only worth thinking about but also that serves as a diasporic space within which a productive cross-cultural dialogue can occur in service of witnessing trauma and affirming subjectivity. Indeed, he reclaims history for those in the African diaspora:

What was initially felt to be a curse—the curse of homelessness or the curse of enforced exile—gets repossessed. It should be obvious that this unusual perspective has been forged out of the experiences of racial subordination. I want to suggest that it also represents a response for the success, the displacements, migrations, and journeys (forced and otherwise) which have come to constitute the black culture’s special conditions of existence. (111)

Thus, I derive my methodology of viewing African American and Caribbean figurings of diasporic cultural heritage here from Gilroy. He claims, “these gestures articulate a memory of pre-slave history that can, in turn, operate as a mechanism to distil and focus the counter-power of those held in bondage and his descendants” (58). I draw from Gilroy the perspective of taking “the Atlantic as one single, complex unit of analysis...and use it to produce an explicitly transnational and intercultural perspective” (15). This framework emphasizes the empowered subjectivity that can be drawn from both “roots” and from “seeing identity as a process of movement and mediation” (Gilroy 19). I, like Gilroy, find cultural authority enhanced and not undermined by intercultural exploration and affirmation within the African diaspora.

Michelle Wright’s project on *Becoming Black* shapes the scope of my project as well. “Any truly accurate definition of an African diasporic identity, then,” she argues, “must somehow simultaneously incorporate the diversity of Black identities in the diaspora yet also link all these identities to show that they indeed constitute a diaspora

rather than an unconnected aggregate of different peoples linked only in name” (2).

Taking Wright’s notion of diaspora as a caveat, my intention is not to subvert difference in order to find uniformity. Rather, I endeavor to view the reality of diaspora as a state of being which limits and signals loss, but perhaps also empowers, providing a spatial framework for resistance and self-actualization in different ways for communities comprising the African diaspora.

Brent Hayes Edwards is helpful here, for he offers a theoretical framework for the complexities surrounding the experience in his 2003 book, *The Practice of Diaspora*. Edwards argues that in an effort to create a legacy which empowers, we treat “diaspora with abstraction—like it is representative of all unified African descendants” (12). Edwards reminds us common experiences or orientation should not be mistaken for uniformity across the African diaspora. Indeed, he claims, “read as an anti-abstractionist term, *diaspora* points to difference not only internally (the ways transnational black groups are fractured by nation, class, gender, sexuality, and language) but also externally” (12). His complex figurings of diaspora “force us to articulate discourses of cultural and political linkage only through and across difference in full view of the risks of that endeavor” (13).

Paule Marshall’s writing illustrates Edwards’s important distinction between unity and uniformity in the African diaspora. Of her 1969 novel, *A Chosen Place*, Marshall says, “I hoped that the novel would not solely be seen as a novel about the West Indies, even though it’s set there, but a novel that reflects what is happening to all of us in the Diaspora in our encounter with these metropolitan powers, power of Europe and the power of America” (quoted in Pettis, “MELUS” 124). While each of her novels focuses

on a specific space and its people, her perspective expands to the African diaspora.³ In this way, Marshall's work is in keeping with Edwards's view that an African diasporic consciousness is best articulated from a space which recognizes difference while affirming commonalities.⁴ Marshall establishes this unity, according to Barbara Christian, primarily "as a stance from which to delineate the values of the New World. Marshall's entire opus focuses on the consciousness of black people as they remember, retain, develop their sense of spiritual/sensual integrity and individual selves, against the materialism that characterizes American societies" ("Ritualistic Process" 74). While Marshall does unify the African diaspora in the effort to articulate an alternative to and resistance against white, western, materialism, she maintains the nuanced paradigms of distinct diasporic experiences. It is in this assertion of difference within unity that Marshall demonstrates Edwards's points of view. Just as difference is crucial to Edwards's conception of diaspora, my project is aware that the notion of diasporic consciousness is "inherently décalé, or disjointed, by a host of factors" (Edwards 14). Edwards explains that "décalage is the kernel of precisely that which cannot be transferred or exchanged...it is a changing core of difference" (14). This theoretical framework of the African diaspora is founded upon this décalage; indeed, the aim of my project is to explore this lack of uniformity even as I also note the consistency across gender, time, and national allegiance which articulates the necessity of diasporic consciousness in the "return of the subject" (Bhabha 191).

³ Indeed, as Lisa D. McGill notes, "Marshall's work does not displace an African American self for a Caribbean one; instead, it evokes and establishes the African American and Caribbean communities' relationship to each other" (73).

⁴ Dorothy Hamer Denniston argues that Marshall's varied spatial orientations are crucial to this endeavor, saying that "the cultural space surrounding Marshall's characters also includes her imaginative reconstruction of African history and culture to establish an underlying unity that links all peoples of African descent" (xii).

Wendy W. Walters utilizes a similar approach in her *At Home in Diaspora: Black International Writing*. Her primary aim is to “show how writing allows authors and readers to transform their experiences into oppositional and resilient identities that move away from the tragic” (xi). This work thus charts the ways in which diverse writers create “oppositional” identities by witnessing the tragic and affirming aspects of diasporic consciousness. Like Edwards, Walters argues that as we mark out “a ground between essentializing diaspora as a unified or seamless identity and analyzing shared strategies of resistance through fiction, it is important to see literary narratives as crucial ongoing sites where diaspora claims are made, unmade, contested and reinforced” (xi).

Several other writers approach the diaspora if not “this way, through their *décalage*” (Edwards 15), then certainly through a paradigm which acknowledges a gap, an abruption of time. With Brand’s work in mind, I acknowledge the dual realities of the African diaspora: memory and absence. I bolster my use of Brand’s notion with the work of Paul Christopher Johnson, who argues, “Space and memory are the twin anchors of any discussion of diasporas, as diasporic sentiments of affinity for a distant place require spatial memories and their intentional evocation—the recognition of a present absence of a place that must be recalled, if not in physical then in symbolic forms” (11).⁵ Memory and bearing witness to the past are critical aspects of any discussion of the African diaspora and resistance.

History thus serves as an agent influencing and, at times, even dictating, the present and future—hence my turn to the fruitful work of scholars in Holocaust theory. Holocaust survivors and their families live in a reality in which they may feel, like those

⁵ Johnson, like Brand, provides a focus for the paradoxical foundation of my approach to the African diaspora: I am arguing that diasporic consciousness rooted in Africa is necessary for those not in Africa.

in the African diaspora, bewildered and disenfranchised by their pasts even as they are haunted and at times controlled by them.⁶

Building on the work done on trauma by these scholars, theorists in African American literature and in African studies have engaged in the theorizing of trauma in the last two decades, as questions of memory, history and witness are explored in literature. Achille Mbembe acknowledges, as do the authors studied in this project, “the spectre of slavery has never ceased to haunt African consciousness” (21). Olu Oguibe helps describe the effect of trauma on those in the African diaspora by describing their relationship with history:

The slave and generations of descendants after him were left in the suspense of history, wedged between worlds to which they must

⁶ For instance, Ana Douglass and Thomas Vogler claim that “it is in the nature of a physical *trauma* to violate and impair the normal functioning of the body and it is by definition in the nature of a mental trauma to exceed and violate our normal mental processing ability frames of reference. The more massive the traumatic impact, the more it will affect our ability to register it” (2). Dominick LaCapra argues that after experiencing trauma, “one disorientingly feels what one cannot represent; one humbly represents what one cannot feel. Working through trauma involves the effort to articulate and rearticulate affect and representation in a manner that may never transcend . . . that disabling dissociation” (42). Michael Bernard-Donals further explains how trauma hangs in the margin of one’s existence, saying, “we cannot view testimony as a window on the past; at its most extreme—in memories of trauma—testimony marks the absence of events, since they did not register on, let alone become integrated into, the victim’s consciousness” (197). Dori Laub’s work is most helpful in examining this absence, for she argues that “the victim’s narrative—the very process of bearing witness to massive trauma—does indeed begin with someone who testifies to an absence” (“Bearing Witness” 57).

In his important work, *The Moral Demands of Memory*, Jeffrey Blustein explains the ways in which witnessing within a community brings healing to these haunting memories which refuse integration: “If, despite the emotional risks and psychological distress, the survivor of trauma is able to bear witness to what she has undergone, and her testimony receives acknowledgement and validation from others, the survivor may find relief from painful and humiliating memories” (338). He goes on to examine how we might, as individuals within a community, bear witness to the past using “successful strategies”, rather than allowing the past to “become an exaggerated focus of social and political concern” (22). Indeed, he argues that while “Peace and stability may not be achievable without proper acknowledgment of past wrongdoing,” there might be “value[in] willed forgetting” (22). Holocaust and trauma theory are helpful not just in the analysis of the diverse community formations within each text, but also in examining the writing of these texts as acts of witness. In an important collection of essays edited by Nancy Miller and Jason Tougaw, called *Trauma, Testimony, and Community*, Orly Lubin explains that just as witnessing allows survivors to “better serve the collective’s needs, they serve the self as well. . . Their testimonies, therefore, simultaneously constitute ‘the self’ autobiographically and submerge it in collective history” (135). Witnessing, then, is a necessary part of confronting traumatic memories and of the process of self-actualization.

only aspire, but never fully subscribe. Caught between a past that is largely lost, and a present that refuses to be owned, this becomes the greatest curse of the African diaspora: this unhinging from the past, this unknowing which results in a ceaseless, yet futile effort to return, to seek for markers of origin, to know. The child of the slave seeks to assuage the collective trauma of her race by searching for nodes of identity and reunion, so that perhaps, through her, the souls of her ancestors may find peace. (98)

Oguibe describes the complexity of the relationship with history—which involves trauma, witness, diasporic consciousness, self-actualization and community affirmation—for the person living in the African diaspora. I read elements of Oguibe’s description in each of the texts this project examines for they are representing this absence of origin, this need to witness trauma, in their approaches to history within community. Bernard Bailyn explains the complexity of the relationship between history and memory, and how they “may act usefully upon each other” (251). He claims,

the passionate, timeless memory of the slave trade that tears at our conscience and shocks our sense of decency may be shaped, focused, and informed by the critical history we write, while the history we so carefully compose may be kept alive, made vivid and constantly relevant and urgent by the living memory we have of it. (251)

Patrick Manning is further helpful here as he explores the ways in which memory can help counter the disempowering effects of trauma: “Creating *memory* is one device that can help make up for past oppression” (346).

African American theory not only links memory and history, it then goes on to articulate the crucial role of witness. Marian MacCurdy has explained that “when a trauma first occurs, we are speechless; we have no words” (57). In establishing the importance of writing one’s experience, she says that “silence perpetuates trauma and the shame and guilt that often accompany it” (2). Her view is manifested clearly in Gaines’s

text, while the power of unspoken trauma is seen explicitly in D'Aguiar's book. In a recent study of trauma in African American women's writing, Jennifer Griffiths expands this argument: "since trauma evades conscious understanding, memory becomes encoded on a bodily level and resurfaces as possession" (1). Because of this, she argues that "a struggle—to listen to the body's voice, to process its information, and to move beyond the muting isolation of trauma" is increasingly seen in black women's writing (11). Griffiths claims—and we will see this demonstrated in Marshall's *Praisesong* and again in D'Aguiar's *Feeding the Ghosts*—survivors must "acknowledg[e] the actual bodily experience of trauma, or tell the body's story, instead of inscribing a story onto the body" (11). This theorizing of trauma and its impact informs my approach to each text as an act of witness (of sorts) and shapes the critical frameworks I use within the texts. Trauma serves as another justification for reading the work of Caribbean and African American writers with and against each other; although the characters, narratives and their representations serve as very different kinds of witnessing, each text is burdened by the traumatic crossroads experiences of the Middle Passage and its resulting diaspora.

An examination of the appropriation of history must also recognize the ways in which the past can be used to demonstrate one's humanity or to advance discrimination. Here, Walcott's perspective on history is again useful as he writes, "thus, as we grow older as a race, we grow aware that history is written, that it is a kind of literature without morality, that in its actualities the ego of the race is indissoluble and that everything depends on whether we write this fiction through the memory of hero or of victim" ("Muse" 37). As Bhabha asks in his 1994 book, *The Location of Culture*,

How do strategies of representation or empowerment come to be formulated in the competing claims of communities where, despite

shared histories of deprivation and discrimination, the exchange of values, meanings and priorities may not always be collaborative and dialogical, but may be profoundly antagonistic, conflictual and even incommensurable? (2)

Many scholars have explored “strategies of representation” and the “shared histories of deprivation and discrimination” in these and other texts (2). I also discuss the complicated nature of history in settings of massive inequality while giving equal attention to “the competing claims of communities” and the forces in these communities that are “profoundly antagonistic” (Bhabha 2). Affirming the productivity of relationships within the diaspora, my analysis is propelled by questions about the roles of community and history in asserting agency, as I note that for each writer I examine, communal witnessing is a necessary component of an individual’s healing.

The field of postcolonial studies has done much to raise questions about the subjectivity of those (often living in diaspora) in colonial settings. For those, like many in the Caribbean, who grew up in diaspora and under the imposition of a colonial set of values, access to self-actualization is doubly difficult. It is in these settings that diasporic consciousness is most useful in challenging the status quo, discrediting colonial values, and asserting one’s agency. I have already discussed the useful work of Glissant and Walcott; in chapters three and four, respectively, I approach Gaines’s text through the postcolonial work of Bhabha, and read Marshall through Edward Said. Simply put, from my point of view, diasporic studies must be informed by the fruitful work of postcolonial scholars. Frantz Fanon perhaps best articulates this need in his 1952 text, *Black Skin, White Masks*. Born in Martinique and living in France, Fanon describes colonized people as “every people in whose soul an inferiority complex has been created by the death and burial of its local cultural originality” (18). His premise, that “not only must the black

man be black; he must be black in relation to the white men” (110), resonates today because he addresses the othering power of white hegemony and acknowledges cultural erasure that occurred as the result of the subtle “shame and self-contempt” blacks felt at the reality of their blackness (116).

Trinidadian V.S. Naipaul agrees with Fanon, arguing that adopting white standards of beauty and value “was the greatest damage done to the Negro by slavery. It taught him self-contempt. It set for him the ideals of white civilization and made him despise every other” (66). Indeed, in *The Middle Passage*, Naipaul posits that because the West Indian is “living in a borrowed culture,” he “needs writers to tell him who he is and where he stands” (68). My primary aim in articulating these diverse approaches to history and witnessing is to explore the ways in which the writers examined here promote the development of a diasporic consciousness.

In Chapter Two, I suggest that Morrison examines the result of patriarchy within diaspora that often controls individual and communal attempts to witness. Using Mae Gwendolyn Henderson’s notion of the dialogic, I read Morrison as challenging the exclusionary notion of sanctioned history, even among survivors. In *Paradise*, she portrays Misner’s affirmation of his membership in the African diaspora as a challenge to the patriarchal grip of the Morgans which threatens the autonomy of the citizens of Ruby. Morrison uses Misner’s direct articulation of the resistance movement, which centers on a history of cultural greatness in Africa, in order to widen the scope of any community of African Americans to include the greater diaspora. Morrison’s layering of narratives also emphasizes the necessity of the act of speaking in moving beyond the disempowerment of past trauma and in creating a space of self-actualization. This consciousness continues

as a foundation in *Tar Baby*. While the narrative voice and the persons of Son and Thérésa affirm diasporic consciousness as an excellent foundation for self-actualization, Jadine refuses to acknowledge her ancient properties. Indeed, Morrison draws a crucial distinction between diaspora and cosmopolitanism here; Jadine, the international traveler, has little sense of her place in the African diaspora, but is well aware of her cosmopolitan status. Despite Jadine's seeming autonomy, Morrison portrays her as ungrounded, weak, and without any sense of belonging, thus signaling that Morrison posits a causal relationship between the development of diasporic consciousness and self-actualization.

In the third chapter, I assert that Gaines also promotes diasporic consciousness as a viable avenue for the affirmation of one's position as a subject. As the men in *A Gathering* challenge the status quo, they create what Bhabha calls "an in-between space" in which they affirm the strength of their ancestors and thus garner the courage to witness their past abuses (7). Reading him through Bhabha, I find Gaines asserts subject positionality directly through articulating voices silenced in the past. For Gaines, the "return of the subject" requires an intimate relationship between private memory and public assertion, and historical trauma is neutralized when silence is overcome (Bhabha 191). Gaines figures witnessing as a courageous act with empowering communal effects. Gaines foregrounds African Americans' successful assertion of subjectivity with their acknowledgement of and respect for the lives of those who had lived and died before them. This realignment with their ancestors serves as Gaines's statement about the productivity of a diasporic consciousness in self-actualization.

In Chapter Four, I read Marshall's text as a postcolonial exploration of what Said calls "linger[ing] imperialism," for Avey is initially detached from the African diaspora

when she replaces her autonomy with hegemonic cultural values (9). Marshall illustrates the isolation and the loss of subjectivity that occur when diasporic consciousness is forfeited in order to find acceptance in white, wealthy America. Indeed, *Praisesong* demonstrates Fanon's claim that, "the black man, however sincere, is a slave to the past" (200), because he has believed a "history that others have fabricated for [him]" (100) and has substituted his own cultural values and personal goals with those created by hegemonic culture in order to dominate people of color and to elevate white men to positions of unquestioned power. Marshall recognizes Fanon's paradigm, and then through Avey's transformation, Marshall demonstrates the process of self-actualization. Marshall figures Avey's unacknowledged diasporic past as a force which haunts her, functioning as an outside force acting upon Avey, forcing her to physically imagine the trauma of the Middle Passage. For Marshall then, ridding oneself of white cultural values—which demean her—is necessary for the recovery of her ancestral legacy and the recognition of agency rooted in her sense of belonging in the African diaspora. Marshall resists the notion that a black woman needs only to recognize and bear witness to her past in order to assert her identity; rather, she uses Avey's journey into her ancestry as a medium through which she explores the relationships between individual and communal memory.

Like Morrison, Gaines, and Marshall, D'Aguiar suggests the foundational necessity of a diasporic consciousness for those who wish to resist oppression and live with an agency which has integrated past trauma into one's understanding of oneself. In the final chapter, I argue that D'Aguiar's very approach attests to the importance of the memory of Africa for those in diaspora, for his novel centers on the erasure of the sea and

the centrality of Africa in survival attempts. Indeed, Mintah, a woman in the contact zone of a slave ship in the Middle Passage, resists historical erasure and powerful oppression by clinging to wood that physically represents and reminds her of Africa. D'Aguiar complicates my primary, for he is ultimately ambivalent about the productivity of such consciousness. While early in the text Mintah's power rests in her connection to Africa and those captured on the ship, her relationship with the African community cannot finally save her. Mintah dies at the end of D'Aguiar's novel as an isolated woman victimized by her past trauma at sea. D'Aguiar recognizes that the evocation of memory can heal *and* destroy; for those in the African diaspora, giving voice to the past is sometimes neither possible nor productive in terms of ending oppression. I read his approach to resisting historical erasure through imaginary witness as ambivalent, for he certainly exposes the complexities and failures of memory, resistance, and autonomy in the African diaspora. D'Aguiar is included here in part because his project, serving as his own attempt at imagining an erased historical event, demonstrates the complexities inherent in witnessing past trauma for those who have passed through the "Door of No Return" (Brand 5).

Thus, Morrison, Gaines, Marshall and D'Aguiar represent and approach the past both through the contexts of their novels and through their own acts of writing. For this project, while I am aware of the danger of such a suggestion, I do find it productive to point out the many ways that the African diaspora is not only a spatial reality of international abuse but also a space of empowered unity. I argue here that it is necessary to intentionally confront and bear witness to the past for overcoming the isolating and disempowering effects of trauma, while affirming diasporic consciousness enhances the

role of communal belonging and cultural memory in the process of self-actualization in the literature of the late twentieth century African diaspora.

We begin with Morrison's work as she emphasizes the important role the community must play in affirming the values of African heritage, in witnessing the historical trauma of the diaspora, and in resisting the oppression of singular notions of history. In *Tar Baby*, Morrison figures the past—what she calls “ancient properties”—as an agent capable of action (Morrison in Ruas 104). In *Paradise*, Morrison illuminates the dangers of sanctioned historical narratives which exclude personal accounts of witness. Indeed, for Morrison, the erasure of trauma is encouraged, rather than alleviated in such communities, while past and present oppression is resisted in spaces where accounts of witness are integrated into the community's evolving narrative of history.

Chapter 2
Shaping Histories, Shaping Selves:
Accessing History in Toni Morrison's *Tar Baby* and *Paradise*

There he saw the stars and exchanged stares with the moon, but he could see very little of the land, which was just as well because he was gazing at the shore of an island that, three hundred years ago, had struck slaves blind the moment they saw it. -Tar Baby

In the novels *Tar Baby* and *Paradise*, Toni Morrison portrays men posturing as patriarchs who appropriate the past in failing attempts to garner power. In her representation of this (ab)use of history, Morrison critiques the efficacy of any patriarchal system in which men strive to control the present by monopolizing the past. In her own critical work, Morrison undermines the white hegemonic view of American history with a strong African American literary and cultural presence. In *Playing in the Dark: Whiteness and the Literary Imagination*, she asserts the foundational influence of slaves, African Americans and imagined blackness on the culture and literature of the United States from its inception, arguing, “the contemplation of this black presence is central to any understanding of our national literature and should not be permitted to hover at the margins of the literary imagination” (5). Morrison confronts the marginal status of black influences in literary and cultural histories by (re)reading seminal works of American literature, focusing particularly on the portrayal of, indeed, even fascination with, African Americans in these texts.⁷ Morrison’s critical work not only reframes American

⁷ Eric J. Sundquist’s seminal work, *To Wake the Nations*, successfully furthers Morrison’s attempt to create “new formulations of the canonical tradition” (7) as he “reconstruct[s] the history of American literary culture in its formative period” (3). In this endeavor, his “argument moves back and forth—alternates, so to speak—between black and white texts in order to suggest that neither perspective is by itself adequate to account for the ongoing crisis over race in American cultural and political life, just as neither black nor white authorship guarantees any sort of univocal vision or moral advantage” (7). Indeed, his aim is to “trace the expressive heritage of a biracial culture” (9), for Sundquist, like Morrison, argues that in order to discuss the foundations and contributions of African American literature, we must first redefine American literary culture in its entirety. Sundquist merits mention because of the importance of his scholarly text; he effectively shapes the conversation both in the wide scope of his investigation and in the rigor of his treatment of the nuances of many American texts.

literature as a field of study, it also demonstrates her fiction as a witness to histories and perspectives long ignored and indeed, deemed not to exist in any relevant way.

In *Paradise* and *Tar Baby*, Morrison brings a similar challenge to hegemonic notions of history, community and gendered and racial identities. Because this point of view primarily privileges only a white male, patriarchal approach to life, it denies the relevance, or even existence, of women of color who espouse diverse orientations toward history, community and their own autonomy. Morrison confronts the historical and cultural hegemonies in these two texts with several other historical narratives rooted in the acknowledgement of the ancient properties. For Morrison, communities are strengthened not by dominant narratives, but by a chorus of witnessing voices from historically conscious people.⁸ In contrast, I read the patriarchal narratives in these texts

Other scholars have commented on the interplay between Morrison's critical arguments and her work in fiction. Shirley Ann Staver reads Morrison's fiction as an extension of her "agenda of writing African Americans into American history" (73). Justine Tally goes on to assert a "common thematic foundation to [Morrison's] narratives precisely arising from the concern with historiographic metafiction; that is the underlying question of the relationship of history, memory, and story, both with each other and with their role in the survival of African Americans in the United States" ("The Morrison Trilogy", 76). I also read the role of history—whether haunting in *Beloved*, acting in *Tar Baby*, or empowering in *Paradise*—as a central concern of Morrison's. As such, this chapter further focuses on Morrison's historiography; that is, I examine how she approaches history in her texts, while noting how and to what effect narratives of history are formed and disseminated within the texts.

⁸ Many scholars have illuminated the way in which Morrison challenges master narratives in the body of her work. For instance, Ana María Fraile-Marcos reads *Paradise* as Morrison's shunning of "religious as well as ethnic and nationalistic essentialisms by means of the open ending of the novel which implies that *Paradise*—as well as ethnic construction—is neither closed nor fixed, but a condition that has to be consciously worked on" (30). Similarly, Rob Davidson asserts that Morrison "exposes competing concepts of communal historiography" in *Paradise* (358). Indeed, Magali Comeir Michal reads *Paradise* as Morrison's exploration of "coalition processes that are more accommodative, caring, and loving, rather than exploitative, and that are aimed principally at survival and at moving toward a new, alternative form of non-hierarchical justice, rather than at maximizing power and winning" (644). Judylyn S. Ryan further argues that in *Tar Baby*, Morrison "rejects the limiting prescription of a unidimensional discussion of gender conflicts, even as [she] confronts and responds to it as a significant constituent within a multidimensional and complex matrix" (64). My argument recognizes Morrison's portrayal of the danger of essentialisms and one dimensional paradigms through my analysis of how power is attained or relinquished with such "competing concepts" (Davidson 358). Indeed, while many scholars make mention of Morrison's commitment to communal history making, they do not examine the ways in which she links narrative making and power in terms of a community's access to history. I illustrate then, the many ways that Morrison problematizes the idea of collaborative narrative formation; she not only explicitly highlights

as performative in nature,⁹ divorced from a consciousness of their place in the African diaspora, and destructive to the communities from which they arise. As a result of this detachment from history, these narratives are ultimately stripped of power by marginal voices who revise history by offering their own accounts of witness.

Much of Morrison's work attempts to represent American life from a black, female perspective.¹⁰ In *The Bluest Eye*, she gives voice to the perceptions of a young,

the destructive nature of master narratives, she also describes difficulties in communally accessing and witnessing histories.

⁹ I derive my notions of performativity from J.L. Austin and Judith Butler. Austin, in his seminal work, *How to do Things with Words*, enunciates the performative nature of speech, asserting that,

It seems clear that to utter the sentence (in, of course, the appropriate circumstances) is not to describe my doing of what I should be said in so uttering to be doing or to state that I am doing it: it is to do it...I propose to call it a *performative sentence* or a performative utterance, or, for short, 'a performative'. (6)

Thus, for Austin, language and speech do not merely represent feelings or pronounce truth; the utterance of some words actually accomplishes, or performs, an action. Language is thus performative in terms of its ability to shape, define, or even alter reality.

In her groundbreaking 1990 *Gender Trouble*, Judith Butler challenges "socially instituted and maintained norms of intelligibility" regarding gender identity (23). She claims, "there is no gender behind the expressions of gender"; "identity is performatively constituted by the very 'expressions' that are said to be its results (*Gender* 25). Rather than accepting gender and sexuality as stoic formations which determine behavior, Butler argues that we constantly 'perform' our various identities. Over a decade after establishing her theory of performativity, she comments on our inability to identify our identities: "If the identity we say we are cannot possibly capture us, and marks immediately an excess and opacity that falls outside the terms of identity, then any effort made 'to give an account of oneself' will have to fail in order to approach being true" ("Account" 28). Butler continues to question societal standards of normative behavior, asserting that individuals cannot even articulate their own drives. She argues that, "to tell the story of oneself is already to act, since telling is a kind of action, and it is performed" ("Account" 37). She finally affirms, "I am always recuperating, reconstructing, even as I produce myself differently in the very act of telling" ("Account" 27).

¹⁰ Much of the scholarly work on Morrison explores the ways in which her writing style both revives African myths, African American southern folklore, and prizes the oral tradition by writing it into her novels. For instance, Jacqueline Fulmer argues that "elements of oral tradition also contribute to depictions of complex yet folkloric female characters" (9) even as the presence of such African American oral formulations rejects the stereotypes placed by the "dominant group" onto the "subaltern group" (43). Andrea O'Reilly has written an impressive study in which she "defines and positions maternal identity as a site of power for black women" (1). In her project, O'Reilly presents Morrison's, "fully developed theory of African American mothering that is central to her larger political and philosophical stance on black womanhood" (1). Similarly, Therese E. Higgins claims that the "thrust of Morrison's message is that African Americans need to, indeed have a duty to, connect with their ancestors" (45). Higgins argues that, particularly in *Tar Baby*, Morrison "uses an Ancient African tale to shed light on a modern African American dilemma" (48). Finally, Marc Conner asserts that Morrison "is certainly engaged in putting much of Western thought and culture into question" (xiii), because, "for Morrison, the claim that art is somehow divorced from the political realm... is absurd" (x). Lest she only be read as an African American writer, though, Conner does claim that, "Morrison insists that her writing is not limited to a single culture, that—if it is truly great literature—it has a universal appeal and accessibility" (xxii). Indeed, Candace M.

teenaged girl as she tracks the inevitable alienation of growing up black in America in the middle of the twentieth century. In an interview with Claudia Tate, Morrison clearly situates her orientation as a writer: “When I view the world, perceive it and write about it, it’s the world of black people” (157). In later projects, Morrison not only expands her subject matter, but also stretches her own rhetorical techniques.¹¹ For example, in *Beloved*, Morrison employs a multi-vocal narrative that illuminates the many ways in which one’s individual history can dictate one’s present—both in terms of her interior life and within her community of relationships. Morrison’s presentation of many perspectives allows her to articulate different approaches to the past which bear witness not only to physical and emotional trauma, but which also demonstrate the unyielding grip such memory has on African Americans. In fact, *Beloved* is Morrison’s representation of the literally silenced daughter killed by her mother as a direct result of the terror engendered by her experience in slavery. Morrison’s figuring of *Beloved* as the personification of Sethe’s horrific past reinforces her notion that memory is not a passive force to be picked up or left behind at will; rather, the past—particularly a traumatic past—at times exhibits agency, demanding submission or even a reckoning of sorts in Morrison’s fiction.

Jenkins, writing on *Paradise*, admits that Morrison does not go so far as to honor “intra-racial loyalty” (277). Rather, Jenkins claims that even as she promotes elements of African American speech patterns and trends, Morrison “implicitly critiques the very notion of racial authenticity, in the process commenting on the frequent suppression of the multiracial in authenticity discourse” (277).

¹¹ In *Sula*, she articulates more divergent perspectives: a cosmopolitan woman who returns to a close knit community only to disrupt several lives therein; the woman whose marriage Sula destroys; and perhaps most significantly, the community as a whole as it works to embrace and heal those alienated by life choices dictated by independence. In speaking of this project, Morrison says, “I feel a responsibility to address—well, I say myself!...I felt that nobody talked about or wrote about these Black people the way I know those people to be” (Bakerman 38). In her writing, Morrison works to provide witness for African American women whose perspectives are rarely championed in literature and whose lives are at best misunderstood and at worst ignored in the culture of the United States.

Morrison thus endeavors to rehistoricize an often erased or ignored past by writing from a black, female perspective.¹² In *Specifying: Black Women Writing the American Experience*, Susan Willis asserts that such a perspective requires a figuring of history shaped by the conflicting claims of a community. She writes:

Instead of an individual storyteller occupying a position of privilege, history and the cultural tradition are privileged, as these are the life blood and spirit of the community. Furthermore, there is no separation between teller and text. Rather, the speaking subject is at one with the narrative, as are the listeners. (15)

I therefore read Morrison's *Tar Baby* and *Paradise* as attempts to revise and re-envision African American history from several imagined points of view. Morrison does not simply endeavor to set the record straight, as it were; this, of course, is not possible in African American history, which is defined as much by absence as by event. If anything, she complicates any record by offering multiple revisions and uses of history that reflect various racialized and sexualized understandings of the African-American self. In this chapter, I argue that through her narrative techniques and plot, Morrison challenges the

¹² In her article on "The Black Canon," Joyce A. Joyce argues that there is a "direct relationship between Black lives—Black realities—and Black literature" (293). Morrison's fiction explicitly links these aspects of Black life by using literature not only to figure an African American perspective, but also to confront the implicit oppressive forces of the past and present. Joyce goes on to describe Morrison's task: "The function of the creative writer and the literary scholar was to guide, to serve as an intermediary in explaining the relationship between Black people and those forces that attempt to subdue them" (293). Morrison's work is not only reflective of an African American perspective; she situates her writing, according to Valerie Smith's definition articulated in 1989, firmly in the Black feminist perspective. Smith asserts that, "Black feminist literary theory proceeds from the assumption that black women experience a unique form of oppression in discursive and nondiscursive practices alike because they are victims at once of sexism, racism and by extension classism" (375). Black feminist literary theory thus attempts the twinned goals of articulating their unique experiences of oppression and offering strategies of resistance against such forces. Patricia Hill Collins tracks such attempts at resistance, noting that, "this tradition of resistance suggests that a distinctive, collective Black women's consciousness exists" (92). Indeed, bell hooks argues that for African American women, "true speaking is not solely an expression of creative power; it is an act of resistance, a political gesture that challenges politics of domination that would render us nameless and voiceless. As such it is a courageous act—as such it represents a threat" (*Talking Back* 8). hooks describes this act as "writ[ing] our way into freedom, publishing articles and books that do more than inform, that testify, bearing witness to the primacy of struggle, to our collective effort to transform" (*Talking Back* 29). Morrison's work not only affirms the reality of such a consciousness; she has also done much to advance this tradition of resistance.

notion of a master narrative of history and a stable, fixed identity.¹³ For Morrison, this paradigm requires foregrounding the role of history, history telling, and memory, which necessarily includes dialogue within an interlocutory community.¹⁴ In the case of the African Americans in Morrison's work, this understanding of history and community must be rooted in the African diaspora.¹⁵ Indeed, the texts demonstrate Ron Eyerman's view that "individual memory is conceived as derivative of collective memory. It is the collective memory which orients the group through time and over space by providing a narrative frame, a collective story, which locates the individual and his and her biography within it" (161). Morrison's patriarchs deny the existence of a collective memory of Africa, discrediting and marginalizing their communities in the process; Morrison's representational practices then undermine the basis of their power, and challenge the efficacy of their master narratives through the communal chorus of witnessing the past within each text.

¹³ Charles V. Carnegie, in *Postnationalism Prefigured: Caribbean Borderlands*, describes the very idea that Morrison challenges in *Tar Baby* and *Paradise*: "Westernized modernity has excelled in the production of discrete, stable, manageable categories. Hand in hand with that production has gone a process of standardization and homogenization within categories, greater quantifiability, and a relentless urge to reduce ambiguity" (66). I read Morrison's representational practices within these texts as a challenging alternative to the Western, patriarchal notions of master narratives and autonomous power constructed outside one's community.

¹⁴ In his 1976 essay on the black aesthetic, Houston A. Baker, Jr. asserts, "the corpus of Black American literature is predicated upon culturally specific values and experiences. The literature must be viewed in a historical spectrum since it serves as a cultural mirror" (113). Because Morrison openly claims to represent and interpret the specific experiences of African Americans, her work is very much concerned with the roles history and memory play in her fiction. Barbara Christian agrees that "the use of history in the novels of contemporary African-American women writers, then, is constant and consistent" (*New Black* 88). She interprets the prevalence of the historical novel in African American literature as being "a sign of these writers' desire to re-vision African-American history from their imaginative and informed point of view" (*New Black* 86).

¹⁵ Indeed, Ryan has pointed out that Morrison's "fiction displays an extensive concern with the erasure of African cultural consciousness and cultural history, and the persisting cultural illness which this erasure precipitates" (64). This chapter furthers her argument by examining the ways in which Morrison figures the loss of such consciousness and the ensuing consequences when juxtaposed with the empowered agency that accompanies a re-imagined diasporic cultural awareness.

In *Tar Baby* and *Paradise*, rather than privileging one perspective, Morrison's layering of the narrative structure belies her desire to challenge accepted hegemonic norms even as she promotes open dialogue and interaction. Mae Gwendolyn Henderson's use of dialogics and dialectics is helpful to this reading of Morrison, for while she warns against fixed understandings of race or gender, she also reads the use of history as a fruitful entry point into examining diverse figurings of self-presentation, community interaction, and subjectivity. Henderson notes that,

what is at once characteristic and suggestive about black women's writing is its interlocutory, or dialogic, character, reflecting not only a relationship with the 'other(s),' but an internal dialogue with the plural aspects of self that constitute the matrix of black female subjects. The interlocutory characteristic of black women's writing is, thus, not only a consequence of a dialogic relationship with an imaginary or 'generalized Other,' but a dialogue with the aspect of 'otherness' within the self. The complex situatedness of the black woman as not only the 'Other' of someone, but also as the 'Other' of the other(s) implies...a relationship of difference and identification with the 'other(s).' (349)

This chapter reads Morrison's narrative choices as interlocutory, and I examine the ways in which characters within the novel project their understandings of history and diasporic consciousness in relation to others and within themselves. Furthermore, the textual structures illuminate the integrated lifestyles of those who are conscious of their place in the African diaspora, while also revealing the patriarchs' destructive (ab)uses of history, and, in *Paradise*, the denial of their place in the diaspora, which make their interaction with others ultimately unsustainable.

Morrison exhibits a dialogic character in her writing by empowering those marginalized by hegemonic power to speak to the dominant forces in society, successfully revising master narratives in *Paradise*, and challenging the notion of a fixed,

private identity with fluid understandings from the community in *Tar Baby*. Katharina Schramm, in her work on “Tracing the Heritage of Slavery in Ghana”, similarly argues that in appropriating the past, “the entire system of representation is fluid and dynamic—dominant and marginal discourses not only intersect but sometimes intermingle” (91).

Although Morrison represents strong male characters whose authority is never overtly threatened, she creates a dialogue within the texts in which voices from the margin read against the grain of master narratives, often outside the knowledge of the patriarch. In the Preface to *Feminist Theory*, hooks says that, “to be in the margin is to be a part of the whole but outside the main body.” Refusing to complain that marginality is a liability, hooks encourages black feminists to “recognize the special vantage point [their] marginality gives [them] and [to] make use of this perspective to criticize dominant racist, classist, sexist hegemony as well as to envision and create a counter-hegemony” (*Feminist Theory* 15). Rather than simply structuring her texts so that a woman marginalized by race and gender is empowered to speak resistance to her oppressors, Morrison employs several “vantage points” of marginality which offer multiple challenges opposing hegemonic manipulations of history and projections of self. In fact, both novels exhibit narrative wars which compete: in *Tar Baby*, Morrison demonstrates conflicting understandings of the identities of Jadine and Valerian Street within their communities, while in *Paradise*, there is a battle for power over the past. Morrison creates counter-narratives which offer points of witness against the patriarchal views of history and singular notions of self. By juxtaposing these alternative points of view, she critiques not only the male dominated narratives within her texts, but also the American narrative which attempts to control representations of culture and community by

monopolizing the past.¹⁶ In short, Morrison's texts model her own critical approach to American literary and cultural history.

Tar Baby

In *Tar Baby*, Morrison creates a Caribbean space in which she stages gendered and racial conflicts among Americans. Her novel forces into relationship a privileged and decidedly self-absorbed white couple, an elderly and utterly economically dependent African American couple, and two romantically involved but independent, international travelers. Although distinct from the United States, the Caribbean is a space similarly scarred by the domination of colonialism, whose indigenous people have been all but destroyed, and whose population, largely the descendants of African slaves, must negotiate between constructions of self offered them by both race and their national affiliations. Morrison's choice to place this story, despite the fact that its major players

¹⁶ Indeed, Willis reads Morrison's body of work as an attack on bourgeois society's tendency to exclude and alienate, ultimately debunking bourgeois status as a place to which one should hope to arrive. Willis claims that in this effort, Morrison often converges "sexuality with history," as it "functions as a register for the experience of change, i.e., historical transition" (34). I certainly read Jadine and Son's sexual experience in *Tar Baby* as the medium through which Morrison confronts Jadine with the ancient properties, while Connie and Deek's relationship in *Paradise* abolishes hierarchy in the context of Ruby. Willis goes on to argue that Morrison often challenges bourgeois society by,

allowing an alternative social world to come into being. When this happens, "otherness" no longer functions as an extension of domination (as it does when blackness is beheld from the point of view of racist bourgeois society... Rather, the space created by otherness permits a reversal of domination and transforms what was once perceived from without as "other" into the explosive image of a utopian mode. (40)

This chapter further bolsters Willis' argument by illuminating Morrison's refusal to replace a hierarchical grasp of history with a new, but equally dominating, historical narrative. Tally, in *Paradise Reconsidered*, asserts that, one of the 'cautionary tales' of *Paradise* is that 'blackness' is not a uniform condition among African Americans", and that, "black Americans should not fall into reductive thinking of whites who constituted black stereotypes as a way to define themselves" (27). In other words, for Morrison, replacing one monolithic thought process for another is not helpful, or in Willis' terms, entry into bourgeois society is not the goal; instead, Morrison claims that a forum in which historical access is open to all, rather than an agreed upon narrative, creates a utopic society.

are Americans, in a Caribbean context is significant primarily because this allows her to juxtapose American and Caribbean approaches to history and community.

Through these conflicting paradigms, Morrison simultaneously reinforces and complicates stereotypical views of American and Caribbean sensibilities. Although the primary space of conflict appears to surround the patriarchal paradigm of the white and wealthy Valerian Street as he emotionally abuses his wife and reduces his faithful house servants to estranged hired help, Morrison implicitly draws a more meaningful distinction between Valerian's exploitative practices and Son's insistence on the dignity of all human life. Morrison creates a confrontation in their approaches to history: Valerian ignores history, intent on performing whatever persona suits his needs in his immediate spatial and temporal setting, while Son embodies his personal history and his past as part of the African diaspora, which leads to his allegiance to life. Morrison's narrative structure allows her to present conflicting historiographies and personal relationships in layers so that the reader gradually becomes aware of the dysfunction inherent in these characters' understandings of self and others.¹⁷ Sandra Pouchet Paquet asserts that Morrison's choice to reinvent the tar baby folktale provides an appropriate platform for presenting multiple, divergent, narratives: "In *Tar Baby*, a folktale is reinvented as a polyphonic novel, exposing conflicts in the African-American community between the inner self and the outer self, between the self and community" (513). In addition to the dialogic character of the novel, Morrison writes ambiguity into the ending, further reinforcing my premise that in *Tar Baby*, Morrison juxtaposes Caribbean and

¹⁷ Joyce Hope Scott is helpful here, for she points out that Morrison's use of "the vernacular discourse of the black folk community" in the text, "establishes an interracial dialogue that challenges white America's view and ordering the world; and second, it gives voice to an intra-racial dialogue" (26). In my view, Morrison's text proposes such "interracial" and "intra-racial dialogue" as a challenge to patriarchal approaches to history and social interaction.

Americanized approaches to power and community in exploring their (ab)use of history. At the end of the novel, it is unclear, with the exception of Margaret, if any of the Americans are moving forward or if they are simply—willingly or reluctantly—moving back into their pasts.

The Caribbean figures as a stereotypical site of escape for Valerian, who flees Philadelphia and the entrapments of retirement for the lonely isolation he reluctantly relishes in his island home. For Valerian, L'Arbe de la Croix is not a sufficient escape from the rigors of a social life that no longer interest him. Even in this haven of solitude Valerian craves further isolation. His own need for independence is juxtaposed with the fact that his decision to be alone in the Caribbean forces his wife and two servants to leave their own country and accompany him indefinitely. Although he treats them like luggage, Valerian's decisions change every aspect of the spatial and relational lives of his dependents. Ondine, his cook, complains, "I'd like to know if it's permanent. Living like this you can't figure nothing. He might pack up any minute and trot off someplace else" (14).¹⁸ Valerian's wife, Margaret, understands and articulates the interpersonal dynamics accurately when she says, "If I want to live with you I have to do it your way—here" (28). They are literally living day to day, unsure of where they might be tomorrow. Because Valerian fashions himself as a paternalistic patriarch, however, his narrative about himself needs no dialogue, and instead stands outside his community. Valerian's self absorption precludes him from valuing anyone's opinion but his own in all things, as the narrator explains, "Valerian Street was mindful of their criticism, but completely indifferent to it" (11). The Caribbean does not satisfy his need for isolation outside

¹⁸ Morrison, in an interview, claims, "Everyone else is confined to the island by Valerian who has dominion over everything there. I wanted to examine that kind of fiefdom" (McKay 143).

American society. Morrison thus complicates, even as she reinforces, the accepted American view of the Caribbean's role as a retreat for those in the so-called developed world.

Morrison presents Valerian's greenhouse as a microcosm of the Caribbean itself. Surrounded by nature, a greenhouse spatially occupies the margin between indoors and outdoors. It is neither and both, although the concept of a greenhouse attempts to expose the indoors to the outdoors without losing full control. Valerian bought his Caribbean getaway with similar intentions, hoping to immerse himself in an idyllic natural setting. Morrison reveals the inconsistency of his intentions in the amount of control he attempts to impose on the island and on his greenhouse, for it is in this setting that his protection of himself as patriarch is revealed. For instance, he expects the same level of service and accessibility to commodities on the isolated island that he received in downtown Philadelphia. He calls in governmental favors in order to enjoy apples at Christmas; he fires island people if they disappoint his sense of time or propriety, before ever having learned their names; he has access to both a yacht and a jeep to ensure that he is never really trapped in this cage that he bought.

In terms of his greenhouse, Valerian's need for control is even more pronounced. In this setting traditionally celebrated for its wildness and vitality, he imposes a strict schedule. After an impeccably served breakfast, he retires, always alone, to his greenhouse. In this private sanctuary, Valerian listens to loud classical music, reads his mail, and eats a plain baked potato alone, served to him on a silver platter by his personal butler, Sydney. Although he purports to use the greenhouse to escape the busyness of an urban life in Philadelphia, he violates this space with audio technology, print media, and

formality. Morrison reveals the ambiguity that dictates Valerian's life here, for he controls and urbanizes the idyllic natural setting he works so hard to create.

Ondine criticizes his using this tropical paradise merely to reproduce flowers from Philadelphia: "If he wants hydrangeas he should go back home. He hauls everybody down to the equator to grow Northern flowers?" (13). Valerian, out of touch with reality, assumes that Sydney and Ondine understand that "he built the greenhouse as a place of controlled ever-flowering life to greet death in. It seemed a simple, modest enough wish to him. Normal, decent—like his life. Fair, generous—like his life" (53). Here Morrison represents the dialogic nature of Valerian's understanding of himself and others, for his representation of his own life is clearly inconsistent with reality, and only serves to promote his self-image as generous benefactor while actually undermining his authority. She demonstrates the destructive force of such inconsistency in the stubborn refusal of any plant to grow. In one of the most fertile places in Central America, Valerian, a self-proclaimed gardener/botanist, is not only incapable of producing a thriving plant, he actually thwarts growth here, demonstrating the impotency which results from his rootlessness, or his denial of history.¹⁹ Given the juxtaposition of this thriving island with the stifled environment of Valerian's greenhouse, Morrison undermines the force of the patriarchy even as she presents his desperate need for order and control.

This repressed greenhouse also parallels the marriage of Valerian and Margaret, for here, too, Valerian frames a perfect setting only to destroy it with stifling control. He sweeps Margaret off her feet, elevating her social status to unfamiliar heights, only to treat her like a socially inept, unintelligent remnant from a trailer park. He purports to

¹⁹ Indeed, Susan Neal Mayberry argues that, "Morrison presents Isle des Chevaliers as a noisy, colorful, live thing, its rich vitality and irrepressible movement stunned into defensive reaction by white male invasion" (119).

desire intimacy with this woman he has to have, and yet his actions alienate and damage her ability to thrive in the world he has created for her. His power provides him with the means to transform Margaret's situation, and although he takes little responsibility for making her transition smooth, he issues the right to judge her failures at every turn.²⁰ In short, Valerian's patriarchal commitment to control stifles all life around him.

Sydney and Ondine, long time African-American servants of the Streets, participate in the performance of Valerian as patriarch even as they also undermine his projection of himself as generous and decent from their marginal positions. Their aligning themselves with black and mostly white Americans instead of with black Caribbean people stems in part from their emphasis on the benevolent, paternalistic nature of Valerian. Indeed, they overlook the indignity of his treatment of them because they feel, albeit in a strained way, that Valerian has made them one of his own. Ondine and Sydney are indebted to Valerian primarily for his generosity to Jadine and his implied commitment to care for them into old age. Valerian knows this, saying, "I have always taken care of them," while Margaret supports his paternalistic delusions by agreeing, "And they will do the same for you...They are yours for life" (31).²¹

Despite their participation in Valerian's self-deluded sense of patriarchy, their attempt to challenge his notion of himself with their own account of witness is made clear

²⁰ Just as he sees himself as benevolent, he reserves the harshest criticism for both Margaret's deluded perception of her own life and for his son, Michael's, politically active interest in promoting racial equality. After hearing a brief synopsis of Michael's conversation with Jadine, Valerian imposes a summary judgment: "[His intentions] were not good. He wanted a race of exotics skipping around being picturesque for him" (72). Only a foundational delusion could support such a claim without acknowledging his own engagement in a similar activity; Valerian is, after all, intentionally hiding away in a Caribbean paradise. He dismisses his son's attempt to acknowledge and make amends for historical patterns of exploitation as weakness. Indeed, just as his understanding of himself as patriarch creates a platform of power from which he controls and judges everything around him, he uses the same justification to absolve him from any guilt for what he calls "things outside my control" (71).

²¹ Paquet points out that, "Sydney and Ondine's commitment to the smooth functioning of the Street household leads to a divorce from their roots in the African-American community" (507).

when they assert that Valerian's loyalty to them, although as strong as his commitment to his wife, is nevertheless weak and undependable. For instance, Sydney tells Ondine that just as Valerian will not "worry over" Margaret, "he don't worry over us neither" (163). Sydney goes on to assert that "What [Valerian] wants is for people to do what he says do;" indeed, this is a summation of Valerian's relational pattern (163). Rather than privileging a fixed notion of their racial identities, Morrison reveals instances in which they embrace the idea that they are respected and cared for by Valerian, while they also dispel the myth that he is a loyal, paternalistic figure. Here, then, Morrison's narrative reflects the evolving understanding Sydney and Ondine have of themselves, their employer, and their historical consciousness. Their perspective thus serves as a counter-narrative to Valerian's performance of benevolent patriarch.

This illusion—upon which they have privileged their identities and under which they have been functioning—becomes clear when Valerian's paternalistic façade is exposed for the patriarchal tyrant that he really is. The overlooked inconsistencies in treatment and the indignity of their relationship to their employers is revealed when Valerian, in an act seemingly fueled by benevolence, invites his African American servants and guests to share his formal white table for Christmas dinner. Morrison masterfully crafts this scene as a disaster-in-waiting through her unsettling presentation of Margaret's insistence that Michael, their son, is coming for Christmas. The tension becomes palpable for everyone when Valerian extends his warm hand of hospitality to Son, a seemingly belligerent prowler and thief. Finally, the stage is set for negative drama when Margaret, an inept mistress of the house and kitchen, states her intention to cook all of Christmas dinner alone. Morrison presents this as a charade of sorts, with

Margaret playing house, Valerian playing host, and Sydney and Ondine (costumed in formal attire ridiculously ill-fitted) reluctantly playing the holiday guests. Valerian believes so deeply in his own patriarchal power that he assumes he can erase the history of hierarchy in which his own well being is invested with the mere utterance of new holiday plans. His abuse of history and his understanding of himself as a powerful patriarch lead him to establish unsustainable relationships and to issue impossible commands. When the inevitable happens and the dinner serves as a catalyst for latent passions to explode, Morrison makes it clear that Valerian is to blame. This unraveling of assumed roles is initiated by Son, who maintains his historically situated place in the diaspora, and who thus brings the inconsistencies of this charade to the surface.²²

Morrison's multi-layered narrative strategy ultimately not only undermines Valerian's patriarchal power, it also invalidates American claims to nobility and benevolence in the Caribbean, exposing the United States for the exploitative bully that it is. Morrison calls attention to the underlying history and relationship between the Caribbean and American business through the person of Son. As owner of a candy empire, Valerian's relationship with the Caribbean and its people did not start with his purchasing of his island retreat. During Christmas dinner, Son marvels that Valerian "had been able to dismiss with a flutter of the fingers the people whose sugar and cocoa had allowed him to grow old in regal comfort" (202-3). Although he claims to be extending his vacation there innocently, taking care not to alter the balance of the island in any way, Valerian's company only functions because of the raw materials it strips

²² As Scott argues, Son figures as the "trickster" and "invoke[s] primal creativity and destructiveness in the neatly ordered world of the white capitalist/patriarch" (32). Son, as the embodiment of African narrative tradition, sees Valerian for the undermined patriarch that he is and recognizes the indignity placed on their Caribbean employees by both American whites and blacks.

from Caribbean nations. Morrison's choice to make Valerian a candy mogul intentionally brings the Caribbean history of oppression and slavery into the forefront, since cocoa and sugar were the primary crops grown on Caribbean plantations.²³ Son further recognizes that Valerian, "had taken the sugar and cocoa and paid for it as though it had no value, as though the cutting of cane and picking of beans was child's play," allowing Valerian to justify his entire way of life as legitimate (203). Again, Valerian's approach to history is to ignore or manipulate it as best serves his needs. Indeed, he verbalizes the United States' foreign policy when he yells, "I am being questioned by these people, as if, as if I could be called into question!" (206). Morrison's undermining, then, of Valerian's assumed patriarchal benevolence can be read as an indictment of the exploitative nature of the United States' relationship with Caribbean nations.

For his part, when his poorly planned play falls apart, Valerian's true nature as a domineering patriarch is revealed. As the illusion of equality is threatened, Valerian quickly assumes his natural role of controlling master, refusing to admit wrong doing and issuing red-faced orders which no one heeds. For example, when Son calls his entire lifestyle into question, Valerian shouts, "'Call the harbor!'...but again there was no one to do his bidding. He had played a silly game, and everyone was out of place" (208). His own powerlessness is solidified when he is informed that not only has he failed to control his home and everyone's place in it on this particular Christmas night, he has, in fact, failed in his most sacred role as patriarch by failing to protect his son. Even more damning is the news that Michael, Valerian's hope for leaving a patriarchal legacy, was brutalized at the hand of his own wife, whose performance as doting mother directly

²³ This is clear because the climate of the Southern United States is incompatible with these two specific crops, and slaveowners in the Caribbean grew these in order to supply the world's sugar and chocolate addictions.

reflects his success (or failure) as patriarch. Even Ondine, who ignored the past abuse of Michael she witnessed, is implicated because she abandoned her historical consciousness and instead modeled her approach to history after Valerian's. The result of this disastrous Christmas dinner and the ensuing revelation of his family's past is Valerian's loss of control not only over others, but even over his own body.²⁴

This tension between Valerian as paternalistic benefactor and selfish patriarch is further emphasized in the person of Jadine who has distanced herself from her place in the diaspora to the point of literal displacement. As for Valerian, the Caribbean serves as an escape for Jadine, the heroine who is well aware of her place at a crossroads in which she can choose to accept or reject a wealthy white Frenchman's offer of marriage, thereby affirming her place in the cosmopolitan, post-race world of hip Europeans. Nevertheless, she cannot ignore the possibility of rejecting his offer, so she hides away in the Caribbean in perhaps the only space throughout her international travels in which she is both related to the black "help" and welcomed to share in the lifestyle of the white master and his wife. The character of Jadine literally embodies a progressive, fluid view of race and an undermining of its ability to determine or even influence fixed identity.

Orphaned at a young age, Jadine's greatest point of perceived weakness and vulnerability is her motherlessness. Even when her surrogate mother gently admits Jadine, "'didn't have a mother long enough,' blood rushed to Jadine's skin the way it always did when her motherlessness was mentioned" (*TB* 281). This loss in her past dictates the reality of her future in that she is neither daughter nor mother; instead, she hovers at the margin of femininity, choosing to emphasize her beauty, intelligence and

²⁴ At the end of the novel, Margaret tells Jadine, "Sometimes in the morning he can't do everything he used to. You know: buttons, zippers. I have to tie his shoes even. Yesterday I washed his hair" (278). Morrison's undermining of the patriarchy thus culminates in the death, of sorts, of the patriarch himself.

sexuality rather than her historical consciousness as a black woman with an ancestral legacy. Rather than bearing witness to the impact of her motherlessness, Morrison's narration articulates Jadine's approach to survival in terms of her ability to perform her femininity: "The handsome raucous men wanted to marry, live with, support, fund and promote her. Smart and beautiful guest, playmate, host, servant, student or simply near. A lucky girl—why leave the show?" (47). Her view of her own life as a performance of sorts is bolstered by her ability to see reality according to her illusions rather than historical accuracy. For example, rather than advocating for Sydney and Ondine, who have cared for her since the death of her parents, Jadine takes great comfort in what she sees as their secure situation with the Streets and thus understands her role as simply "playing daughter" to them, for she does not have a rooted understanding of history and she therefore cannot grasp the reality of abuse around her (68). Indeed, her perception and negotiation of racial and gendered relations are based on game playing. While Valerian seems oblivious to his gamesmanship, Jadine intentionally ignores her past and assumes whatever societal role will preserve her power. Morrison conveys what Henderson calls the "interrelationships between race and gender," arguing through Jadine that racialized and gendered understandings of oneself are formed, in part, in response to relationships with others (349). Jadine describes Valerian as "playing white people's games" (125), and espouses to know "the rules" when white people "played the game" (126). Sydney and Ondine, who firmly embrace their racial identities, associate game playing with "white people," arguing that Valerian's motivation in all his relationships is to "entertain" himself (162). Jadine's participation in such gamesmanship, then, is a symptom of her ambiguous racial self-understanding and her historical alienation, and

Morrison uses this fraught identity to reveal Valerian's insincerity, ultimately undermining the basis of his authority.

Jadine's false perception of reality lays the foundation for a life in which she simply "plays" the various roles which ground the relational life of most people, leaving her emotionally alienated, although she appears unaware of such displacement. Further, she is familiar, but not at home in France, Dominique, or in her hometown.²⁵ Morrison makes it clear that this homelessness is not a result of her status as seasoned traveler but is rather a function of her nomadic displacement, a common reality for those in the African diaspora. The only place she feels welcomed and at home is in New York, an anonymous city full of visitors. Jadine's marginality is further seen in what Gideon calls her "yalla" skin; she is neither black nor white.²⁶ The ambiguity of her racial markers is evident in the way those markers play out at the dinner table, for Jadine's place is neither secure in the Street's formal dining room nor in the servants' kitchen; she instead aimlessly floats between the two. Rather than being a victim, however, Jadine's marginal status fuels her confidence and functions as a platform from which she can escape traditional boundaries. Indeed, the first time Son hears her speak in the novel he understands the message under her voice: "'I'm never lonely,' it said. 'Never'" (6). She interprets her own marginal reality and displaced status not as endemic restlessness, but as empowerment. In this way she models hooks' notion that black feminists should

²⁵ Higgins argues that in *Tar Baby*, Morrison conflates the briar patch with the "African's ancient homeland", and goes on to demonstrate that Eloë and the Isle des Chevaliers both function as such briar patches. She explains, "Both places are identified as home, as a place of origin, an authentic place where one's roots are deep. In the briar patch can be found one's ancestors, one's heritage" (49). Higgins' claim can be further supported by the fact that Jadine encountered and was actively invited to embrace the ancient properties by women in these two places. Her avoidance of the briar patch, to use Higgins' understanding, signals her more sober rejection of her African homeland, and thus, the racial and gendered subject positionalities provided by such ancient rootedness.

²⁶ Indeed, Gideon goes on to warn Son, "Look out. It's hard for them not to be white people" (155).

transform their marginal labels into foundations from which they can resist and confront hegemonic forces. However, because she is more committed to successfully playing Valerian's games than recognizing her own history of disempowerment, Jadine does not confront his false performance of paternal patriarchy, nor does she successfully position herself as a self-actualized subject.

In *Tar Baby*, then, Morrison undermines understandings of history based on selective memories. Valerian, for example, manipulates the past in order to create a narrative of himself as a generous, paternalistic, patriarch. In order to do this, he must ignore the reality that his candy empire exists because of a history of slavery in the Caribbean. Furthermore, he denies his past abuse of his dependents, instead creating a history of decent partnerships and intimate relationships. Morrison uses Jadine's disavowal of her "ancient properties" (Morrison in Ruas 104) to explore the disastrous effects of a self-inflicted erasure of history. Although she moves seamlessly throughout various spaces and communities, Jadine is without foundation because of her divorce from history and is therefore incapable of creating sustainable understandings of herself or of others. Valerian, too, ignores history, recasting it and his role in it as he exhibits allegiance only to those living with him in the present tense. This is a new move for Morrison, who treats history as a force with which to be reckoned rather than ignored in many other works. In *Beloved*, for instance, Sethe's commitment to her history and her having sustained consistent, long term trauma is demonstrated in her creating a space in her psyche in which Beloved can exist. Not only this, but Morrison figures history—or perhaps Sethe's witnessing of historical trauma—as so powerful that historical contracts are literally revisited as Schoolteacher comes to Ohio to reclaim his past property.

Similarly, in *Sula*, Morrison writes Sula's past as a figure which often influences action. As we'll see in the next section, the appropriation of history is the basis of power struggles in *Paradise*. Her treatment of Jadine, then, is an interesting departure in how history and historical ties function both in relationships and within the text. Jadine's allegiance clearly is to her own agency, and while Morrison reveals the ways in which her disavowal of history severely limit her resources, Jadine effectively shuts herself off from any recognition of history.

Morrison offers little resolution to any of these projections of self, for I read the end of the novel as intentionally ambiguous. Son, previously secure in his embracing of history and his understanding of his racialized and gendered self, waivers in this security as he considers denying his history in an effort to win Jadine back. Although Therese interferes, it is ultimately unclear whether or not he will join the horsemen, affirming his place in the diaspora, or simply pass by on his way after Jadine. Jadine, in fast and furious fashion, retraces her steps to Paris with an empty security that she is moving quickly and therefore must be making a good decision. She proceeds with the confidence of her lonely, marginal status, apparently unchanged by her encounter with the ancient properties. Jadine argues, "there is nothing any of us can do about the past but make our own lives better...to forget the past and do better" (271), even as she admits, "of course I'm by myself. When haven't I been by myself?" (275). Sydney and Ondine, unsure of their futures, are simply bewildered and saddened by their own complicity in ignoring their histories in an effort to secure their futures, even as self-actualization eludes them. Valerian, the former patriarch, is rendered back into a pseudo-intimacy with his wife as he is emasculated, losing his human dignity as he is stripped of independence. These

Americans, having been forced to reckon with how their approaches to history often dictate their understandings of themselves and others, appear, at best, to be incapable of forward progress, and at worst, paralyzed by their disavowals of history. *Tar Baby* allows Morrison to explore a community in which individuals and communities are limited by their historical delusions. Although her characters' paths are ambiguous, Morrison's comment on the danger of ignoring or manipulating history is clear.

Paradise

Similar to the social structure she establishes in *Tar Baby*, in *Paradise* Morrison creates an isolated town whose center of power resides in twin brothers who manipulate memory by limiting the community's access to history. Morrison again explores the nature of patriarchy here through a multi-vocal narrative. She employs a variety of voices to undermine the integrity of the internal source of patriarchal power by challenging and even editing the twins and the historical approach on which they base their power. In *Paradise* then, Morrison offers multiple figurings of the past and explores how the act of testifying can be used to harness power and to control the present and future. While in *Tar Baby* Morrison advocates an intimate knowledge of the ancient properties, in *Paradise* she illuminates the danger of stubbornly privileging ancestry.²⁷ Morrison demonstrates her interest in historiography rather than simple history by presenting conflicting narratives of those who demand access to history.²⁸ Because the spatial orientation of the novel is confined to a small, isolated town, Morrison also

²⁷ Tally calls this "Morrison's revisionist meta-historical project" as she announces the "thematic components" . . . "memory is fickle, story is unreliable, and history is subject to manipulation" ("The Morrison Trilogy" 80). "Storytelling is historiography in Morrison's fiction, and in each novel she carefully examines the role of narrative in the reconstitution of both the individual self and society at large" (Davidson 355).

²⁸ As Ryan asserts, "If contestation characterizes the novel's internal dynamic, supratextually it facilitates a decisive resolution in mediating these differing visions toward the construction of a critically enabling double-vision. Indeed, the narrative structure expresses and participates in this double-vision" (73).

examines the impact of such manipulative testimony on the town's community.²⁹

Morrison's multi-vocal narrative approach enables her to explore how power is attained, preserved and passed down in terms of individual and communal historical appropriations.

Rhetorically, Morrison's narrative layers allow her to explore notions of the American dream vis a vis racial and gendered oppression, illuminating the shortcomings of a hegemonic approach to history and exposing the inconsistencies necessarily therein.³⁰ Although she presents the very real danger that results from attempts to control the past, Morrison also undermines this approach to power as ultimately unsustainable.³¹

²⁹ Katrine Dalsgand goes on to argue that, "Morrison suggests that the price of Ruby's insistence on maintaining a morally superior master narrative may well be the sacrifice of that very narrative. Rather than a perfect paradise, Ruby ends up as a conservative, patriarchal, thoroughly racialized, and violent community" (233).

³⁰ I read *Paradise* as an extension of Morrison's aforementioned claim that American history and culture have been and are defined, in large part, by the presence and contribution of African Americans. In *Playing in the Dark*, Morrison's thesis is clear:

I want to suggest that these concerns—autonomy, authority, newness and difference, absolute power—not only become the major themes and presumptions of American literature, but that each one is made possible by, shaped by, activated by a complex awareness and employment of a constituted Africanism. It was this Africanism, deployed as rawness and savagery, that provided the staging ground for the elaboration of the quintessential American identity. (44)

I am arguing here that Morrison conflates the twinned leadership of Ruby with these "major themes and presumptions of American literature," for they define themselves through their difference, their authority, and their absolute power. Not only this, but their own conception of themselves is defined in part by their exploitation of and assumptions about those who surround them. I therefore read *Paradise* as a metaphor for Morrison's theory of the development of American literature. Deacon and Steward Morgan need the history to which they cling because it proves that they are distinct from those whites and even blacks around them; they establish their own unique, chosen status by relating a history of those lost and in need of guidance. Morrison has defined "Africanism[as] the vehicle by which the American self knows itself as not enslaved, but free; not repulsive, but desirable; not helpless, but licensed and powerful; not history-less, but historical; not damned, but innocent; not a blind accident of evolution, but a progressive fulfillment of destiny" (*Playing* 52). The Morgans' exceptionalism and claim to absolute power is directly dependent on the weaknesses and needs of the citizens of Ruby.

³¹ This again reflects her troubling of American literature, as she argues, "the consequence was a master narrative that spoke *for* Africans and their descendents, or *of* them. The legislator's narrative could not coexist with a response from the Africanist persona" (*Playing* 50). As Tally asserts, "Paradise is devoted to the cultural production of History... and its unstable relationship to both memory and story" (*Paradise Reconsidered* 14). In this way, "Morrison actually uses this intensive story telling to tell a story precisely about the construction of official discourse. Concern with the dominant and controlling narrative" is a central theme here (*Paradise Reconsidered* 39). As Morrison articulates, "Studies in American Africanism,

Indeed, the Morgan's creation of a master narrative is proven to need revision through counter narratives of diasporic consciousness from Pat Best, Richard Misner, and Consolata Sosa. Morrison's *Paradise* is, in large part, an argument against the corruption of a singular, unchallenged narrative which exists to define and control the experiences of others. This section investigates both the ways in which the Morgans empower themselves by defining others, and the manner in which those imagined others resist oppression by creating diasporic counter narratives that challenge the hegemonic grip of patriarchal history.

This town structure, based on a monopoly of memories of the past and therefore irretrievably stuck in the glory of that past, leads to Deek and Steward's deadly patriarchy.³² The foundation of their power is the unquestioned and much heralded fact that, "they have never forgotten the message or the specifics of any story, especially the controlling one told to them by their grandfather" (*Paradise* 13). Rather than a financial inheritance, they received from their ancestors the legacy of a painful history. The power of their patriarchy is thus based both on their control of communal history and on their performance of dominance in public settings.³³ Like Valerian Street, even as the Morgans try to display their mastery over others, however, their vulnerability is revealed. They need the full participation of Ruby, lest they appear weak.³⁴

in my view, should be investigations of the ways in which a nonwhite, Africanist presence and personae have been constructed—invented—in the United States, and of the literary uses this fabricated presence has served" (*Playing* 90).

³² Davidson argues that "they understand, on some level, the power of narrative to establish moral authority, and that is why communal historiography—that is, a tightly controlled version of the town's history—becomes paramount" (359).

³³ Although some of his most compelling work tracks the bourgeois' use of seventeenth-century French coffee houses and salons, the work of Jürgen Habermas on the "feudal society of the High Middle Ages...in which a public sphere in the sense of a separate realm distinguished from the private sphere cannot be shown to have existed" is helpful here (Habermas 7). In such societies, the public space becomes an arena of private endowment, "for representation tended to make something invisible visible through the

Like feudal lords, the Morgans' identity as town founders and leaders demand utter obedience and respect from everyone with whom they have contact. Indeed, of all the founders of the town, Deek thinks, "He and Steward were truer heirs, proof of which was Ruby itself. Who, other than the rightful heirs, would have repeated exactly what Zechariah and Rector had done?" (113). Like Valerian, they describe their relationship with Ruby as generous paternalistic town founders who take their positions of honor only because they led the people in the migration and are most responsible for the town's success and stability, having also taken the most risk. The urgency with which they see the centrality of their roles feeds their delusion: "Now everything requires their protection. From the beginning when the town was founded they knew isolation did not guarantee safety. Men strong and willing were needed" (*Paradise* 12). They justify all their actions by claiming fidelity to the past or protection of the future. For instance, they defend their uninstigated violence at the Convent because they have "to make sure it never happens again. That nothing inside or out rots the one all-black town worth the pain" (*Paradise* 5).

public presence of the person of the lord" (Habermas 7). For Deek and Steward Morgan, the power of their patriarchy is very much linked to the public performance of their unquestioned authority over the past, present and future.

Habermas claims that in such feudal societies, the lord exposed his private reality to the public in a very controlled environment which would heighten his own authority, implying that public recognition is necessary for the validating of internal characteristics. Such public approval requires the opening of the private sphere to the public, as "activities and dependencies hitherto relegated to the framework of the household economy emerge from this confinement into the public sphere" (Habermas 19). This move obviously provides a greater realm of authority, but it also implies that private characteristics and power structures must be performed for, and indeed, approved by, a public audience. Thus, Deek and Steward must constantly perform their impeccable grasp of history and their absolute power over the function of legacy.

³⁴ Morrison's presentation of the Morgans' understanding of themselves as elite patriarchs models Judith Butler's notion of performative identity; throughout *Paradise*, Deek and Steward are "recuperating [and] reconstructing" themselves in terms of their class and gender (Butler, "Account" 27). Butler, as noted in footnote three, argues that identity is not fixed but is instead performed in an attempt to construct racialized and gendered identities.

Although Ruby's past forms the basis of their current community, full access to that past, and the power created out of that knowledge, is granted to only a privileged few. Morrison thus conflates access to the past with access to power, and sets up a central conflict between the egalitarian notion of historical exploration and the potentially excluding power of witness. This tension is explored primarily through the patriarchal gestures of Deek and Steward Morgan. Morrison presents their foundation of power as a monopoly of the past through strict memory. Philip Page agrees that the Morgans refuse, "to tolerate divergent interpretations of the family's past. The men seek to preserve the town's identity by freezing its past, allowing only their own official reading of the treks, the Disallowing and the establishment of the town" (644). Indeed, they effectively transform knowledge of the past into unquestionable authority: "The twins have powerful memories. Between them they remember the details of everything that ever happened—things they witnessed and things they have not" (*Paradise* 13). This is possible, in part, because Ruby is a town whose present identity is consumed with its historical legacy. The town was intentionally formed a generation before the action of *Paradise* occurs, but the everyday realities of life in Ruby are almost entirely performed as a direct result of those earlier events. In the early twentieth century, the racial inequalities of the United States fostered attempts to establish several racially segregated towns. Searching for a less oppressive way of life, a group of men gathered their families and headed out, on foot, for a new community which could ensure their independence and safety. Their sense of hope and camaraderie with other African Americans was destroyed with the First Disallowing, when they were offered refuge for one night, but refused long term access to the community as a home.

Shocked by complete ostracism from “their own,” the nature of their endeavor took on a new significance; rather than distinguishing themselves from racist white Americans, now they expected similar antagonism from anyone outside their band of travelers. This paranoia became a foundational aspect of their new community when they settled in Haven. This paranoia is the impetus for action, and after meeting with early success which quickly faded into a mediocre existence, nine men again uproot their families and move them further outside civilization. Morrison makes it clear that the founding of Ruby was a clear repetition of the founding of Haven, and that the Morgan brothers’ instigation of and leadership in the journey to, settling, and naming of Ruby promotes them, at least in their eyes, to status equal with their grandfather, who originally led the families in search of racial refuge.³⁵ This determination to live up to their perceived destiny is overt in the narration: “As new fathers, who had fought the world, they could not (would not) be less than the Old Fathers who had outfoxed it; who had not let danger or natural evil keep them from cutting Haven out of mud” (6). The Morgans are simply an extension of the past.

Thus, Morrison’s presentation of their leadership roles reveals their stagnation. Although they establish a bank, dole out land, and help develop businesses and livelihoods for their townsmen, the Morgans are primarily concerned with an allegiance to the past, not a progressive future. Morrison uses Richard Misner’s narration to undermine the twins’ patriarchal preservation of the past by highlighting the difference between celebrating the past and stagnating the present. Misner is baffled by this inconsistency:

³⁵ Fraile-Marcos argues that “their mimicry is simultaneously an act of inclusion and exclusion, of asserting both their similarity to and their difference from the rest of Americans” (4).

Of all people, they understood the mechanisms of wresting power. Didn't they? Over and over and with the least provocation, they pulled from their stock of stories tales about the old folks, their grands and great-grands; their fathers and mothers. Dangerous confrontation, clever maneuvers. Testimonies to endurance, wit, skill and strength. Tales of luck and outrage. But why were there not stories to tell of themselves? About their own lives they shut up. Had nothing to say, pass on. As though past heroism was enough of a future to live by. (161)

Although controlling the past empowers their performance of power, their function as patriarchs—like Valerian Street—is hollow and defunct.

While in *Tar Baby* problems arise from ignoring the past, here Morrison attributes this stagnation to backward looking leadership. The narration reads, “The twins were born in 1924 and heard for twenty years what the previous forty had been like. They listened to, imagined and remembered every single thing because each detail was a jolt of pleasure, erotic as a dream, out-thrilling and more purposeful than even the war they had fought in” (16). Indeed, they compulsively tell the stories of the past, not in order to give a greater sense of meaning, purpose and productive direction to the future, but simply so they can preserve the bravery and forward thinking of their ancestors. Morrison fills the text with storytelling, as if it cannot be controlled, and is in fact, the central reality of the town: “Unembellished stories told and retold in dark barns, near the Oven at Sunset, in the Sunday afternoon light of prayer meetings” (14). Morrison’s use of commas with no other conjunction, the repetition of “told” and “retold,” and the inclusion of day (“afternoon light”), dusk (“Sunset”), and evening (“dark”) contribute to the constant presence of these tales. Morrison makes it clear that although the twins often bear witness to the stories of racialized and gendered injustice, they do not seek resolution or healing. Instead, they are threatened by change and thwart it at all costs.

Morrison underscores the importance of memory as the basis of their power by employing magical realism in several references to the clarity of their memories. It is as if the Morgans are mere repositories for the past, and they protect and preserve all that has been deposited in their storehouse. Not only do they pride themselves on their memories, they control, with strict attention to detail, the memories of all the townspeople. No unsanctioned interpretation of events is overlooked, but all are confronted; indeed, “neither one could put up with what he couldn’t control” (278-279).

Indeed, women in the novel embody their lack of control, and their aggression against women is therefore deeply rooted in their commitment to a patriarchal world view. In interacting with his own wife, Deek assumes she doesn’t understand town details and tells her, “You don’t need to” because he did, implying that she could not understand even if she tried (107). Morrison undermines Deek’s arrogance by narrating Soane’s thought process: “She had not meant she didn’t understand what he was talking about. She’d meant she didn’t understand why he wasn’t worried enough by their friends’ money problems to help them out...But Soane didn’t try to explain” (107). This dynamic in Deek’s most intimate relationship makes it clear that Soane knows the futility in either revealing her own intelligence or in confronting the vast incoherency between Deek’s paternalistic thoughts about himself and his selfish actions. Similarly, when Anna asks Steward if being a twin prevents him from feeling lonely, he answers, “Well, yes. Like that. But more like...superior” (116). Indeed, Misner describes them as, “behav[ing] as if God were their silent business partner” (143). Although the twins might care for their fellow townspeople, their first priority is to maintain their authority which is rooted in the past and founded on their control of memories.

For Deek and Steward, their authority is very much about preserving the image of a thriving town. As Deek's narration testifies,

Unique and isolated, his was a town justifiably pleased with itself. It neither had nor needed a jail. No criminals had ever come from his town. And the one or two people who acted up, humiliated their families or threatened the town's view of itself were taken good care of. (8)

Deek's focused attention on saving face is revealed as he equates criminality with humiliating one's family and changing the town's perception of itself. The Morgans place elevated importance on visibility in part because of their childhood experiences.³⁶

As Deek grows into a man, he projects his own obsession with image onto other townspeople, assuming that they even admire his pride in his car: "He laughed along with his friends at his vanity, because he knew their delight at his weakness went hand in hand with their awe: the magical way he (and his twin) accumulated money. His prophetic wisdom. His total memory" (107). For Deek—who constantly performs his patriarchy—image reflects reality; he is therefore convinced that his ownership of a nice car elevates his status and extends his superiority in every way. Indeed, much of the Morgans' decision making is dictated by appearances, even if the desired presentation of image represents no such reality. For example, while driving to work one winter morning, Deek, the self-proclaimed protector of his town, sees a scantily clad grown woman whose

³⁶ The twins were exceptional students in school, "but none of it was as good as what they learned at home, sitting on the floor in a firelit room, listening to war stories; to stories of great migrations—those who made it and those who did not; to the failures and triumphs of intelligent men—their fear, their bravery, their confusion; to the tales of love deep and permanent" (110). As they participated in the oral tradition of passing on the historical legacy through storytelling, the boys learned to create their own visual images to pair with the stories they heard. Similarly, when they were adolescents, they visited other Negro towns as their father and grandfather compiled information. In one town they were imprinted with the image of "nineteen Negro ladies . . . on the steps of the town hall" (109). This experience gave them an image to encapsulate their idea of prosperity, and nearly 40 years later Deek remembers every single action of the women: "They wore summer dresses of material the lightness, the delicacy of which neither of them had ever seen. Most of the dresses were white, but two were lemon yellow and one a salmon color" (109).

family helped found the town wondering aimlessly down the street, clearly in need of assistance. Rather than helping her, as any paternalistic leader should, Deek decides instead to ignore her and go directly to his bank, justifying his inaction with the weak claim that, “There should be no occasion when the bank of a good and serious town did not open on time” (114). Always keeping up appearances, Deek overlooks his own responsibility to protect the women of the town in order to ensure that his town appears “good and serious.”³⁷

Similarly, Deek constantly drives by the Oven to “check on things,” ensuring they are clean as the town’s center (115). Again, the irony is that while he wants it to appear orderly because it is the only gathering place in the town, none of his generation meet there to talk, and Deek is infuriated when teenagers adopt it as their own place of gathering. In other words, he wants to protect an image that represents no reality. Morrison juxtaposes his domineering commitment to the appearance of a clean, prosperous town with his equally fervent commitment that no visitor will be extended any basic courtesy: He insists that Ruby have no public seating, restrooms, telephone or place to dine (*Paradise* 12). Through such inconsistencies, Morrison undermines the logic of the Morgans’ definition of success.

Morrison does not simply reveal the irony of the Morgans’ commitment to impeccable appearances in light of their prevention of visual or relational access to any outsider. She elides their strict patriarchal practices with the white American, hegemonic power structure from which their ancestors so desperately fled. In their attempt to protect themselves and Ruby from outside attack or judgment, the Morgans’ begin to mimic

³⁷The irony here is that his decision is based on the fact that the bank’s one employee, a receptionist, does not even report to work until ten o’clock, clearly signaling that this bank is not the professional institution Deek pretends it to be.

those very exclusionary practices which originally caused their ancestors so much pain.³⁸ In fact, the Morgan criteria for exclusion are even more strict than those that fueled their own rejection. These standards reveal the fact that their past pain in no way humbled the twins, but instead allowed them to “Become stiffer, prouder with each misfortune, the details of which were engraved into the twins’ powerful memories” (*Paradise* 14).

Earlier in the twentieth century, their families had been denied jobs and respect as servicemen because they were not white. In the Disallowing, they were refused access to the all Black communities they approached because “they were too poor, too bedraggled-looking to enter, let alone reside in, the communities” (14). In short, their rejection was based upon a clear white/black color line and a disdain for poverty. In contrast to this standard, Ruby’s exclusionary practices are not as distinct or even logical. For instance, their rejection of outsiders is not simply based on a perceived lack of earning potential which might lead to their being a drain on the society as a whole; rather, access is denied simply because their families did not settle with the town when it was founded. Their very status as outsiders ensures their continued status as outsiders.³⁹ To use the text’s own words, “Neither the founders of Haven nor their descendants could tolerate anybody but themselves” (13). Furthermore, they do not settle for an obvious black/white racial distinction, but instead demand complete racial purity. If light skin or racial impurities are detected, then the pure, 8-rock families reject that person, and any who might associate with them, as a liability threatening the integrity of the town. In keeping with

³⁸ As Ingrid G. Daemrich states, in narratives which reflect a “patriarchal order”, “male guardians and interpreters” decide how to respond to “seekers and intruders” because, “like a desired woman, paradise becomes an object to be manipulated” (214).

³⁹ Jenkins highlights the absurdity of the Morgan insistence that they are distinct from all others: “Refusing to be African, but refusing also in spite of tangible evidence to the contrary in certain of their own bodies—to be anything other than a rigidly ‘pure’ type of black American, the 8-rocks depend on a kind of historical, genealogical transparency that is impossible without total segregation from the world ‘Out There.’ Yet such total segregation is also impossible” (289).

the Morgans' primary commitment to their power to control the past rather than to preserve it as it serves to promote the present and future of the citizens of Ruby, they destroy the lives of the people they appear to protect.

That the power of the patriarchy is unchecked becomes obvious when "nine men decided" to "take matters into their own hands" (11). Relatively innocent "matters" like a mother and daughter fighting, teenagers getting sexually transmitted diseases, and sick children are considered a threat not only to the self-proclaimed mythical status of the town, but also, and more seriously, as an infringement on the power of the patriarchy to control the past and future of the people. This is the true offense for which the Convent women are attacked. Although nine men are involved, Lone, who influences this section of the narration, makes it clear that, "two said nothing at all, but silent though they were, Lone knew the leadership was twinned" (274). For Steward's part, the existence of these women—and particularly of Connie, who successfully tempted Deek—represents "that barely averted betrayal of all they owed and promised the Old Fathers" (278); in short, their presence attacked the very root of the twins' identity. Even more alarming to Steward is the "permanent threat to his cherished view of himself and his brother" that they pose (278). Deek's primary motivation is his "personal shame [and] how important it was to erase both the shame and the kind of woman he believed was its source" in order to save his "glacier"-like "pride" (279). Indeed, as Megan Sweeney asserts,

In order to protect the earthly paradise—their hard-worn, male-defined standards of racial purity, sexual morality, economic security, and communal safety—the men of Ruby ultimately wield against the women of their own community the discriminatory forms of policing that they have attempted to escape themselves. (43)

For both Steward and Deek, these women must be killed because they embody the most threatening weakness the twins perceive about themselves; they expose the inconsistencies in the performance of their patriarchy.

Morrison thus reveals the dangerous potential of absolute power by demonstrating the ease with which the Morgans' mimic the performance of power of those who originally excluded and abused them. Rather than promoting power and control based on historical hegemony, Morrison revises the twins' version of history using alternate points of view. In this way, I argue that Morrison reveals the real evolution of Ruby as having been shaped by divergent understandings of history and the future, rather than by a singular, fixed notion of the past. Although the Morgan patriarchy maintains control over both private and public realms, these power structures are threatened when the public stops observing the narrative power of the twins and instead engages in their own accounts of creating witness out of their consciousness rooted in their understandings of the diaspora.

Morrison weaves a multi-layered narrative throughout the novel in an effort to edit and undermine the twins' powerful narratives and historical interpretations which seem impervious to correction. For instance, Morrison offers Pat Best's delving into the past as a critique on the basis and function of patriarchy and power. Pat tries to construct a written account of the history of Haven and Ruby families: "It began as a gift to the citizens of Ruby—a collection of family trees, the genealogies of each of the fifteen families" (187). However, the more she delves into this history, she becomes convinced "that a new species of tree would be needed to go further, to record accurately the relationships" (188); she imagines "upside-down trees, the trunks sticking in the air, the

branches sloping down” (187).⁴⁰ In an effort to preserve the precious past to which Deek and Steward cling, Pat instead discovers inconsistencies and creates her own account of witness which undermines the ordained version of events.

Pat’s account of the Morgans serves as a critique which challenges their patriarchal power in at least two ways. First, she begins to mock the pride they show in both the subject of their memories and in the impeccable accuracy with which they remember it.⁴¹ As she discovers elisions, inconsistencies, and gaps, Pat becomes convinced that this ancestry so highly touted by the twins was actually an embarrassment. Soon, the “project became unfit for any eyes except her own. It had reached the point where the small m period was a joke, a dream, a violation of law that had her biting her thumbnail in frustration” (*Paradise* 187). Because the twins use their control of history to legitimize not only the town of Ruby, but also their position as patriarchs, Pat’s understanding of the course of history leads her to mock them privately. Indeed, she even begins to laugh out loud as she realizes the historical narrative and resulting power structure of Ruby is a joke: “She began to laugh. Lightly at first and then heavily, her head thrown back as she sat at the table. Did they really think they could keep this up? The numbers, the bloodlines, the who fucks who?” (217).

Morrison further undermines the testimony of the twins through Pat’s doubting the legitimacy of oral history. Pat does not accept the official patriarchal storyline, but instead insists on other sources of documentation.⁴² Morrison is certainly not devaluing

⁴⁰ As Page argues, Morrison condemns “such a monologic, deterministic and authoritative” approach to history by allowing Pat to abandon “her project” after finding the “inherent limitations of such an approach” (641).

⁴¹ Davidson asserts that rather than towing the ‘party line’, “Patricia believes the rejection by fellow blacks is the great unspoken, unacknowledged keystone of the town’s identity and definition of self” (364).

⁴² She perhaps makes this choice because in watching the Christmas play which recreates the Disallowing, the all-important history is changing as the number of families involved decreases. As she wonders who

the oral tradition, but is rather admitting that offering a narrative alternative to the accepted doctrine of American history is a difficult proposition, one that takes persistence, and one that might necessarily isolate. Replacing a dominant written history with an oral master narrative is not helpful in Morrison's view. Nevertheless, questioning accepted historical narratives can undermine, and eventually change, the status quo. Pat's ability to see beyond the performance of the twins' power allows her to articulate the racism they claim in order to set themselves apart and above all others: "light-skinned against black. Oh, they knew it was of consequence, serious consequence to Negroes themselves. Serious enough that their daughters would be shunned as brides; their sons chosen last; that colored men would be embarrassed to be seen socially with their sisters" (194). Pat is appalled by such selfishness, and is able to see beyond the performance of paternal patriarchy in order to challenge such accepted value systems by providing her own account of their communal past.⁴³

Similarly, Misner—an outsider who has been tolerated because he is a minister—explores the twins' monopolized version of history, and ultimately reads between the lines in an effort to transform the past into an impetus for forward progress. At the end of the novel, Misner revises the Morgan narrative by articulating their attempt to honor their ancestors led them to "betray it all" (306). He understands that the twins "think they have outfoxed the white man when in fact they imitate him. They think they are protecting their wives and children, when in fact they are maiming them. And when the

would dare to change such a foundational part of their communal history, Pat quickly answers her own question: "The Morgans, probably. They ran everything, controlled everything" (217). Her reading against the grain of the Morgan memory is hard work, for "any footnotes, crevices, or questions to be put took keen imagination and the persistence of a mind uncomfortable with oral histories" (188).

⁴³ Pat understands that such thinking, used to increase the power of the Morgans, simultaneously weakens families (like Pat's own) and destroys lives (Menus).

maimed children ask for help, they look elsewhere for the cause” (306). His view of their betrayal of history is a revision of their master narrative.

Indeed, while Misner acknowledges the Morgans’ control of history as their foundation for power, he again attempts to revise their version of history to locate an even deeper source of power which is rooted in Africa. He tells Pat that rather than settling for a “home” chosen out of despair, African Americans must locate their

own home, where if you go back past your great-great-grandparents, past theirs, and theirs, past the whole of Western history, past the beginning of organized knowledge, past pyramids and poison bows, on back to when rain was new, before plants forgot they could sing and birds thought they were fish, back when God said Good! Good!—there, right there where you know you own people were born and lived and died. Imagine that, Pat. That place. Who was God talking to if not to my people living in my home? (213)

Morrison thus revises the Morgans’ historical foundation through Misner’s deeper grasp of the history of the African diaspora. Morrison herself advocates this approach to history in an interview with Christina Davis:

Yes, the reclamation of the history of black people in this country is paramount in its importance because while you can’t really blame the conqueror for writing history his own way, you can certainly debate it...The job of recovery is ours...You have to stake out and identify those who have preceded you—resummoning them, acknowledging them is just one step in that process of reclamation—so that they are always there as the confirmation and the affirmation of the life that I personally have not lived but is the life of that organism to which I belong which is black people in this country. (224)

Misner encourages young people to engage in this process of recovery not in order to challenge or blame the Morgans’ conquering narrative, but so they can understand the legacy they’ve been given in an effort to identify themselves by developing diasporic consciousness and witnessing a history of abuse.

Because Misner is an outsider, and because he is reading the same history with a different end in mind, Deek and Steward perceive him as a threat, and go to battle to thwart momentum Misner's approach might yield. At a town meeting, his group of progressive thinkers try to engage the New Fathers in a dialogue about the function of their shared history in the decisions of the future; as Fraile-Marcos notes, "the fifth generation wishes to share in the creation of a new myth: the sacred mission of liberating not just their own tiny community but all African Americans and with them, the whole country" (19). When these young men attempt to utilize their own understanding of history, one of the teenagers addresses what he sees as an inconsistency in the courage of the ancestors of the town's founders: "No ex-slave who had the guts to make his own way, build a town out of nothing, could think like that. No ex-slave—' Deacon Morgan cut him off. 'That's my grandfather you're talking about. Quit calling him an ex-slave like that's all he was'" (84).

I hear echoes of Morrison's Nobel Lecture here in the complaints of Misner's young men, for in her address young people accuse an older woman of jading the history she shares: "Our inheritance is an affront...How dare you talk to us of duty when we stand waist deep in the toxin of your past...Is there no context for our lives? No song, no literature, no poem full of vitamins, no historical connection to experience you can pass along to help us start strong?" (205). Here Morrison demonstrates the danger inherent in not recognizing, witnessing and integrating both the traumatic past and the available cultural legacy for those in the African diaspora. Misner's revision of the Morgan approach to history simply calls for exposure to the past, a transparent view which can transform their approach to history, empowering them to "start strong." Rather than

expanding the influence of the memory of great men like his father, Deek prevents access to his legacy. He not only disagrees with Misner's interpretation, Deek denies him access to this history out of hand. In fact, he goes on to say, "understand me when I tell you nobody is going to come along some eighty years later claiming to know better what men who went through hell to learn knew," stating in no uncertain terms that only his interpretation of history is accurate (86). When Misner presents another way "to deal with whites" (104), Deek assumes the presentation of a different *modus operandi* is a personal rejection of him, rather than even considering the value of an alternative approach to race relations. Even more alarming is the establishment of a pattern: Like Steward, Deek's final coping mechanism to a challenge of his authority is violence; he goes hunting, "blowing out the brains of quail to keep his own from exploding" (104). This is a function of Deek's understanding of his own patriarchal power for he will not engage in a debate over interpretations or how to proceed; rather, his belief in his own power as beyond contestation requires him to dismiss the very right of anyone to even approach this history. In addition to promoting diasporic consciousness, Morrison presents Misner's alternative approach to power and progress as a revision of the Morgans' attempt not only to manipulate the past, but also to control access to this past.

While much has been said about the central conflict of the matriarchal pattern of the Convent and the patriarchal system of Ruby, I argue that Morrison presents Connie's matriarchal view of history and healing as a distinctly African American approach. Morrison makes it clear that typical power structures do not sustain life at the Convent when Mable, the first guest, arrives. Upon seeing the house, she notices that, "Either the house was backwards or it had no driveway" (37). After finding the entry, she notes that

the driveway leads “not to the front door but around to the side,” signaling, literally, that a different approach is required here (37). Morrison revises the Morgan patriarchy, an imitation of the white, American power structure, using Connie’s matriarchy.⁴⁴ This presentation of an alternative power structure allows for the insertion of an African American point of view of both how and why to approach the past of the United States.

Rather than the controlling approach to history exhibited by the patriarchy, Connie does not try to dictate either the memories or the interpretation of memories in the Convent, saying, “In this place every true thing is okay” (38). Here in the Convent, bearing witness to a traumatic past is encouraged and serves as a foundation for a culture of community and for healing which leads to self-actualization. Indeed, Connie leads the other four women in a process of “loud dreaming” in which they told “stories”, “half-tales and the never-dreamed” (264). That Morrison is offering a revision of the Morgan grip on history is made obvious through the diction used to describe these acts of witness. This is not simply telling about the past. Morrison also challenges the notion that knowledge of history can be used as a basis of power, for in the Convent, “It was never important to know who said the dream or whether it had meaning” (264); there is no attempt to manipulate or correct here. In fact, there is not even a need for the clear transfer of meaning; “In loud dreaming, monologue is no different from a shriek; accusations directed to the dead and long gone are undone by murmurs of love” (*Paradise* 264). In this alternative social structure, communal healing, rather than

⁴⁴ As Stave asserts, “The women of the Convent, merely by their presence provide an alternative paradigm of womanhood that confounds the Ruby patriarchs” (68). Michal argues that, “the novel reimagines community as having the potential of creating a space for difference,” in stark contrast to the patriarchal approach of Ruby in which difference is attacked as dangerous (645).

personal power, is attained through their witnessing of traumatic history.⁴⁵ While white patriarchy manipulates the past to justify their own power, African American matriarchy creates a route to healing past harm. Further, patriarchy demands a singular approach to the past in order to preserve independent power, yet the matriarchal system of the Convent calls for a communal sharing of trauma whose yield is the productive dialogue of shared healing. In case the revision of the Morgans' history is unclear, Morrison directly compares the outcome of the two approaches through Lone, "Unlike some people in Ruby, the Convent women were no longer haunted" (266).

After the massacre at the Convent, Morrison reveals a deep split between the twins, as if to offer two routes forward from a painful history. While the "distinguishing features" of the twins "were eroding", the "inside difference was too deep for anyone to miss" (299). Steward represents the status quo, and continues to practice his patriarchal approach to history, remaining "insolent and unapologetic" (299). Lone observes this return to the manipulation of history for power, becoming "unhinged by the way the story was being retold; how people were changing it to make themselves look good" (297). In fact, those who follow Steward do not simply affirm the status quo, but fiercely cling to their strategy of controlling the past. They "accuse [Lone] of lying" about the Convent violence even though they "had been nowhere near" it (297-8). In Morrison's construction, choosing to control the past inevitably leads to the destruction of community.⁴⁶ The layers of telling surrounding the Convent raid simply mirror the layers

⁴⁵ Indeed, Michal points out that "A form of collective agency thus results that depends on neither fixed subjectivity, nor hierarchical structures, nor totalizing metanarratives" (647).

⁴⁶ Page is helpful here as he argues that, "the repetition of the telling suggests that, from the authorial and narrative perspectives, there is always more than one version, more than one authenticated rendition, and already therefore more than one interpretation of the event" (640).

of narrative Morrison has already employed. Morrison thus highlights the isolating danger of manipulating history to serve one's own ends.

In contrast to Steward, Morrison offers an alternative historiography and approach to the future in Deek. Lone notices he "had changed the most" (300), and that "he had nothing to say" about the morning at the Convent (297). As if to ensure that Morrison is offering Deek as a direct rejection of the status quo and an affirmation of revision, the narration notices, "It was as though he had looked in his brother's face and did not like himself anymore" (300). His change is drastic, and is best manifested through his communication and understanding of history. Previously, he "had never consulted with or taken into his confidence any man. All of his intimate conversations had been wordless ones with his brother or brandishing ones with male companions" (301). In contrast, after the Convent he spends time with Misner in which he attempts, for the first time, "to translate into speech the raw matter" within him (*Paradise* 301). That this is a new approach to history for Deek is clear, for "his words came out like ingots pulled from the fire by an apprentice blacksmith—hot, misshapen, resembling themselves only in their glow" (301). For the first time, Deek has lost the ability to control history or even to organize his own speech.

Most telling, perhaps, is Deek's choosing to tell Misner his personal history rather than only repeating the stories of his ancestors. This recognition of his individual history empowers him to witness the traumatic past his family has endured, to revisit the history of the Old Fathers and to realize his deep betrayal of that history in the process. He admits "his long remorse at having become what the Old Fathers cursed: the kind of man who set himself up to judge, rout and even destroy the needy, the defenseless, the

different” (302). The self revelation is the result of Morrison’s alternative historiography. Here she promotes an approach to history in which one’s own experience is read with and against one’s history in order to better define one’s current paradigm. This provides a markedly different outcome than the previous historiography, still heralded by Steward, which controls access to and distorts history in order to manipulate the present and garner power.

Like *Tar Baby*, *Paradise* ends in ambiguity. Some read this ambiguity as an affirmation of the true healing and access to free life found by the five female victims of the Convent massacre.⁴⁷ Rather than reading Morrison’s quick gesture as the promotion of matriarchy, I see the ambiguity of the ending as Morrison’s last offering of a revision to the dominant patriarchal course of history. I agree with Ellen Friedman, who argues that, “it is the disappeared convent women, not missing patriarchs, who live in the culture’s unconscious” because they “remain an unnamed underground, emerging from time to time to challenge the paternal realm, destabilizing it and thus opening up to change” (704).⁴⁸ Carnal violence, which perpetuates a history of abuse, serves as the final word in male-dominated societies, and yet Morrison perhaps erases or at least problematizes the effectiveness of a resolution so manipulated by power here. Whether the women live or their spirits visit their left behind lives, their final act of witness is not defined by their victimhood, but by their own positions as subjects, suggesting that manipulative patriarchs cannot control their histories or legacies. Indeed, the presence of

⁴⁷ Sweeney reads the ending as “a political necessity precisely because the Convent women’s processes of healing and continued survival cannot fully be mapped onto the social real”; it is merely an extension of the a-patriarchal approach to history already promoted in the social practices of the Convent itself (58).

⁴⁸ The ongoing and unstable presence of the women of the Convent is reminiscent of *Beloved*’s presence in Morrison’s earlier novel. Morrison draws a distinction between this allegiance to the dead, or, perhaps more accurately, the permeable nature of the divide between past and present, with the distinct experiences of Valerian and Jadine, whose only allegiance is to themselves in the present.

the Convent women at the end of the text, in whatever form, suggests Morrison's advocacy for both the healing of traumatic pasts through witness and the revision of history through many narratives.

In the next chapter, I examine Ernest Gaines' *A Gathering of Old Men*, and explore challenges to the status quo of hierarchy through multiple reclamations of the past. Gaines attributes healing to the witnessing of one's traumatic history, even as he also recognizes the destructive power of a master narrative imposed in unequal power relationships. In fact, like Morrison's figuring of Misner, Gaines promotes the notion that for the African American community, resistance to hegemonic historical narratives must be rooted in diasporic consciousness. Gaines further echoes Morrison's claim that empowered positions of agency result from the sharing of trauma in communal spaces. The old men who challenge the status quo in Gaines's text do so as integrated individuals within a community, each, like the women from the Convent, determined to offer accounts of personal witness within the framework of the African diaspora.

Chapter 3
Getting To Be Brave:
Narratives of Resistance in Gaines's *A Gathering of Old Men*

*His eyes was saying: We wait till now? Now, when we're old men, we get to be
brave? -A Gathering*

Ernest J. Gaines places most of his work in spatial and temporal settings defined by the national effort to grant civil equality to African Americans, allowing him to explore the ways in which this movement both inspired effective efforts at resistance and, from his view, exposed spaces within African American communities in which the desire for such rights did not change the culture of passivity. His novels are, in large part, metacognitive in nature, exploring the interior lives of African Americans living in, and more often, oblivious to, the Civil Rights Movement. Gaines writes about communities who are deeply committed to land they never call their own; he writes about communities, like the Street's home in *Tar Baby*, in which people too often participate in their own oppression by maintaining the status quo established by outside forces; he writes about communities where acts of resistance against oppression are often first encountered with conflict from others within their own networks; he writes about people, like Morrison's Convent women, Richard Misner, and Pat Best, who tell stories of the past to each other even as their oppressors erase and ignore these accounts of history.

Born in 1933, Gaines grew up on the River Lake Plantation in Pointe Coupee Parish, Louisiana. His marked intelligence distinguished him from his peers, but his early education was not rigorous. In fact, Gaines did not step into a library until he moved to California when he was fifteen. Although this exposure helped him discover great works of literature, he did not read books in which he recognized anyone from his childhood. Never having read Jean Toomer, Zora Neale Hurston, Richard Wright, Ralph

Ellison or James Baldwin, Gaines could not consciously become a part of the African American literary tradition they had established.⁴⁹ He began writing to give his own

⁴⁹ In an interview in 1990, Gaines claimed, “No black writer had influence on me” (Gaudet and Wooten 33). At the beginning of the 20th century, W.E.B. DuBois articulated African American cultural and literary perspectives in his seminal text, *The Souls of Black Folk*. Building on the slave narratives of those before him, DuBois helped shape the unique experiences of and the challenges facing African American artists who would soon join him in representing themselves in American literature and culture, rather than reacting as outsiders to stereotypical projections of themselves. Early in the twentieth century, Harlem displayed black potential as the location of synergistic formations of African-American culture and style. In the Harlem Renaissance, James Weldon Johnson’s *The Autobiography of an Ex-Colored Man*, Jean Toomer’s *Cane*, Nella Larsen’s *Passing*, Zora Neale Hurston’s *Their Eyes Were Watching God*, and the poems of Langston Hughes and Claude McKay helped establish and draw attention to African American voices in the American arts scene. Soon afterward, Richard Wright and then Ralph Ellison and James Baldwin used the platform provided by the Harlem Renaissance to challenge mainstream American literature through what came to be known as the Black Protest novel tradition. While these writers imagined and recorded African American experiences of abuse within and resistance against American culture, African American literary theory quickly developed, contextualizing this literature and, indeed, creating a narrative of the African American experience.

In fact, scholarly and popular contributions of James Baldwin, Malcolm X, Martin Luther King, Jr., Henry Louis Gates, Jr., Amiri Baraka, and Houston A. Baker, Jr., helped shape the Black Arts Movement, Black Power, Black Internationalism, and then the Civil Rights Movement. At the same time, the important influences of women like Barbara Christian, Barbara Smith, Gwendolyn Brooks, and bell hooks did much to theorize the black female experience and to call attention to avenues of resistance through their Black Feminist Thought. African American Theory developed as a contextualization for the African American experience by “raising up repeatedly the contemporary questions of Black life distorted and smashed by national oppression” (Baraka 150), and thus emphasized the ways in which African Americans created a diasporic connection with other cultures, affirmed their own system of values and aesthetics, highlighted avenues of resistance, and nurtured a community of support within which African Americans could position themselves as self-possessed subjects with a rich vernacular tradition which relied heavily on music, spirituality, and self-expression. At the same time, critics explored how African Americans were displaced, disempowered, and abused, creating a framework for such experiences and suggesting spaces of autonomy and “self-determination” through literature and popular culture (Baraka 142).

Recently, African American theory has explored why and to what effect the past exists and even haunts the African American community’s understanding of itself and its agency. Indeed, Ashraf Rushdy argues that narratives in the last third of the twentieth century not only show “the continuity and discontinuities from the period of slavery” (*Remembering* 5), but also “that historical events have enduring afterlives” (*Remembering* 6). He claims that writers now must examine the “political underpinnings of racial identity” by exploring past manifestations and understandings of race (*Remembering* 8). Susan Willis asserts that “history is what the novels are about” (13), and that “there is a direct relationship between history and community, just as the meaning of stories include the meaning of the group” (16), so that the stories African Americans are telling are always rooted in history, and reflective of the ways in which communities identify and align themselves, even as they also reflect on the way history continually impacts, and often detracts from, self-actualization. Since African American theory recognizes the presence of the past in all new writing, dual emphases have developed on the prevalence of the African diaspora as a shaping force, and our need to recognize and appropriate the lasting effects of trauma on African American literature and culture. Marking the intersection between those of African descent and the various hegemonic forces that shaped their distinct experiences, much of the literature of the African diaspora has redefined the black experience and challenged the power dynamics of the status quo. For instance, writers like Dionne Brand and Lean’tin Bracks argue Black women, like Paule Marshall, “look to

people a place in literature, but did not utilize the protest novel tradition; in fact, his representational practices present a full picture of the internal work necessary for black men in various temporal and spatial situations to affirm their positions as self-actualized subjects with agency.

In this chapter, I view Gaines's *A Gathering of Old Men* as a text, like Morrison's *Paradise*, which explores the usefulness of diasporic consciousness in developing communal agency, for his narrative echoes African acts of resistance all over the world. My reading of *A Gathering* is primarily concerned with a group of men who confess their participation in their oppression, reject their oppressor's value system, and reclaim their cultural authority and historical legacy by witnessing their histories of abuse and challenging the status quo.⁵⁰ I use postcolonial studies to provide a framework for

African roots for identity and power" (Bracks 6). Further, critics like Keith Byerman have contextualized African American literature and the black experience by borrowing from Jewish history and the trauma theory of the Holocaust studies. In this effort, Saidiya Hartman's 1997 *Scenes of Subjection* has done much to legitimize the study of abuse and trauma in African American studies as she explores how power was created and how ideologies of inequality and victimhood have a lasting impact on African American heritage. I situate this chapter here within African American theory, as I attempt to expand the existing work on how diasporic consciousness might provide platforms of agency, even as the historical trauma of diaspora continues to demand attention and to challenge notions of self-actualization.

⁵⁰ Much of the critical work done on Gaines focuses both on his narrative choices and how his work situates itself within the African American literary tradition. Rushdy claims that Gaines "produces choral and communal voice in an effort to capture the kind of spirit also evinced in those antebellum slave narratives where the authors revealed that they spoke not only for themselves but for a captive community whose voices they represented" ("Neo-Slave Narrative" 99). Rushdy gets at the delicate balance which Gaines responsibly performs between private and public memory and assertion. Herman Beavers investigates the power of this storytelling in reclaiming an "ancestral voice" (*Wrestling Angels* 166), and Karen Carmean points out, "rather than individualize a single character to represent a group of people and/or an idea, Gaines creates a group as his 'principle' character" (107). The care and consistency with which he writes the novel is clear as his rhetorical decisions emphasize his aim to give a voice to voiceless members of a silent community. Maria Hebert-Leiter affirms that "the African American men discover their ability to see themselves as individual men who have the right and the courage to stand against white notions of superiority through their rebellion against the law and against the past" (111). Keith Clark takes her assertion further in his study which situates Gaines' work in context with other African American writings. Gaines, who, as I've mentioned, was not influenced in any way by black, protest writing, does not fit into the footprint laid by Richard Wright or James Baldwin. Clark claims, "Gaines aesthetic endeavor involves the re-centering not merely of the black male voice, but of a black male communal voice which contrasts sharply with the mono-voicedness of protest discourse" ("Re-(W)righting" 196). While

reading Gaines because of the useful ways in which such scholars have examined the nature of colonial power and the personal and cultural disempowerment that results from the long term othering of colonial subjects, or, in Gaines's case, African Americans in the American South.⁵¹ Furthermore, approaching the text through a postcolonial lens allows me to place the accounts of witness and resistance in *A Gathering* within the greater context of Africans in diasporic situations worldwide.

Gaines's work most often focuses on how race affects relationships, dignity, agency and images of manhood. His fiction explores the opportunities and challenges for men growing up in the American South where the color of their skin too often dictated not only their external choices but also their self-possession. In the novel *In My Father's House*, Gaines emphasizes the ultimate futility of the Civil Rights Movement if African American men and women do not take personal responsibility for themselves and their children. For Gaines, the heart of the Civil Rights Movement is boys developing into autonomous, responsible men and fathers. Phillip, a local hero of the movement who

such scholarship examines how Gaines writes with and against the black protest novel tradition, my project creates a dialogue with more recent African American scholarship, describing how Gaines confronts both the history of trauma and the existence of what Morrison calls the ancient properties of Africa within a community taking their place as subjects and changing the balance of power. Even as these characters invoke the past's legacy and enunciate its grip on the present, Gaines evokes the distant diasporic past of slaves' storytelling. Indeed, Jeffrey J. Folks acknowledges that "Gaines urges his reader to consider the relationship of present to past, and to ponder the continuing existence of ethical choices of individual and political bodies" (46). While many scholars have situated Gaines within the context of African American writing and have contributed to our understanding of the role of point of view, community, storytelling, and reclaiming one's manhood, few, if any, have commented on how Gaines's fiction speaks to the resistance of oppression and the assertion of identity in a postcolonial context. My project will push the existing scholarship on Gaines to converse with postcolonial discourse by explicitly recognizing both his evocation of the African diaspora and the impact of publicly bearing witness to past trauma.

⁵¹ I'm thinking here among others, of Frantz Fanon's insightful explaining of the ways in which France colonized the Antilles, systematically creating colonized people who believed themselves to be inferior—outside of acceptable culture—in every way. See my mention of Fanon's *Black Skin, White Masks* in the introduction. Edouard Glissant's *Caribbean Discourse* also explains the ways in which those in the African diaspora, specifically in the Caribbean, have allowed "others the job of defining their culture", even understanding their distinction as Africans to "represent an insult" (6). Glissant and Fanon get at what Homi Bhabha later calls "the deep psychic uncertainty of the colonial relation itself" (63).

exhibits great wisdom and agency in speaking for and leading the region's efforts for equality, loses the ability to speak or even move when he sees the son he had long ago abandoned. While Phillip does not possess agency in the face of his failures as a father, his son, Robert X, does not even possess a full name. Gaines thus complicates the possibilities for black men growing up in the South; they are not merely victims of abuse, but are often participants in a larger dysfunctional system.⁵²

In fact, Gaines argues that corruptive white power demands the endorsement of African Americans. In his most recent work of fiction, *A Lesson Before Dying*, Gaines again reveals the injustice of a southern legal system. Rather than write a novel promoting the Civil Rights Movement and objecting to the imposition of laws and practices which unfairly target and prosecute black men, Gaines offers a more subtle but deeply provocative path of resistance.⁵³ Jefferson, the novel's protagonist, is unjustly accused, tried, and sentenced to death for the murder of a white man. Although Gaines implies that Jefferson is innocent and has been falsely convicted, he makes clear that the real travesty here is that Jefferson's defense describes him as a hog who is incapable of making premeditated decisions. Here one can see Gaines at work, for he does not simply spin a tale of injustice that must be fought; rather, he presents the deep hardship any

⁵² In his short story, "Three Men" (1963), Gaines argues that white men set up a cycle of incarceration for black men which prevents them from making healthy choices for themselves and their families. This cycle is necessary for white men to feel human; their own humanity and progress are bolstered by the destructive choices black men make. Gaines also reveals an implicit attack on the solidarity of the black community by conflating the efforts of some white men and black preachers to help the victims of the cycle. This 'help' is exposed as another way for incarcerated African Americans to participate in a system set up by white men to continue an oppressive cycle. Rather than attempting to quickly get out of jail, thereby indulging the cycle of oppression by indebting himself to a white man, Gaines's protagonist resists the white paradigm by arguing that the best way to assert his manhood is to stay in jail. In "Three Men", the only way to stand against white hegemony is to assert one's autonomy, refusing the favors of white men and even black preachers.

⁵³ Philip Auger acknowledges that "these discursive structures—of ideology, law, and ultimately language itself—are, literally and figuratively, structures designed to preserve white forms of power" (60).

young black man in the American South must face in order to become human. As Auger asserts, “In effect, for any act of redefinition on Jefferson’s or Grant’s part to have any lasting impact, the totality of systematic networks of authorization must be breached” (59). In other words, oppression here is not simply a false arrest, but is rather imbedded in a system in which the humanity of African Americans is so easily denied. Postcolonial scholars have long argued that in order for an empire mentality to exist, the humanity of the victims of conquest must be questioned. Paradigms of hierarchy, like those Gaines confronts in the South, are established on the premise that oppressed persons are less cultured, noble savages, who are incapable of functioning as autonomous people. Because of this, at the most basic level, in Gaines’s view, resisting oppression first requires reclaiming one’s position as a subject by asserting humanity.

Gaines is not only interested in asserting the humanity and autonomy of black men, he is also concerned with how private choices impact the well-being of a community. In *Of Love and Dust*, Gaines follows the disastrous effects the decisions of one man can have on a community. Marcus is a young black man recently released from prison whose grandmother finds him work as a sharecropper on a plantation. The narrator of the novel appears to be a good friend who will look out for Marcus and show him the ropes, but Gaines again complicates the delicate balance of life on this plantation by ultimately revealing that the narrator, rather than being wise, is merely a keeper of the status quo and therefore a promoter of a system whose foundations are violence and racial inequality. Gaines further complicates notions of individual agency by positing that Marcus’s attempt to become an autonomous, courageous man is a direct threat to the well-being of the community at large. The narrator explains to Marcus that if he pursues

the white woman with whom he is infatuated, her husband, “and his brothers would burn you alive. You and half of the people around here” (*Of Love* 122). Not only does the narrator reveal the potential violence that will result from Marcus’s actions, he also explicitly lists the ramifications on the entire community: “if they found out about him, every man, woman and child’s life would be in danger” (*Of Love* 171).

Gaines spends much of the novel setting up the conflict between Marcus’s desires and the community those desires threaten to destroy. However, rather than accepting the status quo as the good to be protected, Gaines ultimately argues that maintaining a situation which severely limits personal autonomy is foolish. As Marcus, albeit rashly, decides to run away with a white woman, the narrator—the keeper of the status quo—eventually comes to “admire Marcus. I admired his great courage...I was afraid I wouldn’t be able to tell him how much I admired what he was doing. I wanted to tell him how brave I thought he was. He was the bravest man I knew, the bravest man I had ever met” (*Of Love* 270). Gaines continually challenges the status quo and argues that often resistance against insidious hegemonic forces will appear to be a threat to the community. This relationship between personal and communal resistance that Gaines explores is one established in postcolonial discourse, and in my reading of *A Gathering*, I note the community’s role both in maintaining the status quo of inequality, and, finally, in asserting a diasporic consciousness which encourages accounts of witness and transforms their disempowered positions.

Because Gaines explores the dynamics of outside oppression and historical erasure on communities and individuals who engage in various acts of resistance, I will read his representational practices through the work of Homi K. Bhabha. As mentioned

in the Introduction, Bhabha investigates and theorizes not only the process of oppression and marginalization, but also offers strategies for self-identification for colonized ‘others.’ In his groundbreaking work, *The Location of Culture*, Bhabha helps shape the direction of postcolonial theory by asserting that culture is not a fixed tradition on a linear continuum. His challenge to the concept of culture as a predictable set of values held by a given community is evidenced by his use of fluid terms. For instance, instead of accepting a top down model of consistent, representative culture, he talks of “the competing claims of communities” (2), and acknowledges that part of any discussion of culture must look for “the interstices” (2) between the groups that comprise a culture; in fact, he calls meaning making the “borderline work of culture” (7), a phrase that captures the tenuous nature of this task. For Bhabha, then, identifying culture is a “complex, on-going negotiation” (2) that recognizes “minority perspectives” (2) and “cultural hybridities” (2). In other words, contemporary notions of culture cannot be seen as inclusive or as able to “totalize experience” in any meaningful way (5).

His ideas about the ambivalent nature of cultural identity also impact his understanding of time and history. Bhabha claims, “there is no master narrative or realist perspective that provides a background of social and historical facts against which emerge the problems of the individual or collective psyche” (61). He argues that just as there is not one authoritative view of history, time itself is not linear: “The struggle against colonial oppression not only changes the direction of Western history, but challenges its historicist idea of time as a progressive, ordered whole” (59). His understanding of time and history lead Bhabha to see art not as an avenue through which one can “merely recall the past as social cause of aesthetic precedent, it renews the past,

refiguring it as a contingent ‘in-between’ space, that innovates and interrupts the performance of the present” (7). For Bhabha, art does not simply commemorate the past or capture a present cultural moment; rather, he argues art is a means of opening up a “space of intervention emerging in the cultural interstices that introduces creative invention into existence” (9). Gaines’s *A Gathering* highlights such “cultural interstices” as he challenges the notions of master narratives and linear time through his literary art.

Because of the fluid nature of time and history, Bhabha argues that any attempt to articulate oneself or one’s culture in the present moment must recognize the shaping influence of absence. For Bhabha, an individual or communal identity cannot be asserted through affirmation alone, but is partially revealed through lack, as well. In fact, he argues that such an awareness of the discontinuity of both time and individual identity,

establishes a boundary: a bridge, where ‘presencing’ begins because it captures something of the estranging sense of the relocation of the home and the world—the unhomeliness—that is the condition of extra-territorial and cross-cultural initiative. To be unhomed is not to be homeless, nor can the ‘unhomely’ be easily accommodated in that familiar division of social life into private and public spheres...The recesses of domestic space become sites for history’s most intricate invasions. In that displacement, the borders between home and world become confused; and, uncannily, the private and the public become part of each other, forcing upon us a vision that is as divided as it is disorienting.⁵⁴ (9)

⁵⁴ Bhabha’s line of thinking here is rooted in Sigmund Freud’s 1919 essay, “The ‘Uncanny.’” In it, Freud investigates our experiences with the uncanny, and starts his explanation by looking at the German roots of the word: “The German word *unheimlich* is obviously the opposite of *heimlich*, *heimisch*, meaning ‘familiar’, ‘native’, ‘belonging to the home’” (370). Freud then begins to explore what it is that can make one feel disoriented, or un-homed, and asserts there is a “factor which consists in a recurrence of the same situations, things and events...awakens as uncanny feeling, which recalls that sense of helplessness sometimes experienced in dreams” (389). His argument, like Bhabha’s, is that the uncanny is experienced when borders between past and present, and fact and fiction, are blurred. Freud, like Bhabha, believes that the past cannot be quarantined from the present, if only because truths we claimed to know in the past can be undermined. Indeed, he argues that, “this uncanny is in reality nothing new or foreign, but something familiar and old—established in the mind that has been estranged only by the process of repression” (394). Experiencing the uncanny, in Freud’s view, can be disorienting and extremely disempowering as a person feels helpless to change his experience in a setting, or even understand it. For Freud and for Bhabha, these

This lengthy quote from the *Location of Culture* is warranted because it is here that Bhabha establishes the relationship he sees in the “binary division of the past and present” (35) which results from “history’s...invasions” (9). Furthermore, he argues the complicated border of the private and public spheres creates a necessary dialogue between the two. Indeed, he goes on to claim that this dialogue, what he calls an “interstitial intimacy”, relates apparent “binary divisions” such as “private and public, past and present, [and] the psyche and the social,” creating an “in-between temporality” and space in which the work of witnessing the past and signifying oneself can occur (13).

This dialogue is one that Gaines brings to life in *A Gathering*. Viewing this text as a work situated within the African diaspora, it becomes clear that these Gainesian figurings of resistance are not offered in the vacuum of the rural South; rather, they are in dialogue with all other displaced Africans who resist oppression. Just as the personal testimonies of each of these men serve as an impetus for the others to “stand up,” patterns of resistance for African Americans in the American South are connected to those affirmations of self-actualization by other Africans in diaspora. The old men in this text have been “unhomed”, and they attempt to relocate themselves in time by creating a “space of intervention,” by giving witness to their absent histories of loss and by taking a stand in front of homes to which they have a lasting claim but which they do not own (Bhabha 9). Although Bhabha’s notion of *unhomeliness* refers to those imperial invasions

moments are beyond one’s control and “this factor of involuntary repetition which surrounds with an uncanny atmosphere what would otherwise be innocent enough, and forces upon us the idea of something fateful and unescapable where otherwise we should have spoken of ‘chance’ only” (Freud 390). He goes on to assert that understanding assumptions made in the past and the reality of the overlapping of time can reduce the disempowerment of the uncanny. Freud thus informs Bhabha’s reading of the disorienting effect of history on the present, and the displacement that results from boundaries that are fluid.

which forced disempowered peoples into extra-territorial spaces and cross-cultural situations, the African Americans living in the quarters suffer the same oppression.

Most of the public speeches which comprise the bulk of Gaines's text are made on the land surrounding the front porch of Mathu's house. The spatial orientation Gaines employs reflects the internal realities at work here for I argue that Gaines creates an "interstitial" space and an "in-between temporality" in the front yard of Mathu's house in the quarters (Bhabha 13). Keith Byerman argues that "the narrative is situated at a moment of transition, a moment at which the social order itself must pay attention to black experiences so as to sustain itself" (41). He sees this transition resulting from the reversal of "conventional" white on black violence (Byerman 39); I would simply add that this "moment of transition" is mirrored in the spatial orientation Gaines employs. Mathu's home sits on the edge of a field that holds the graveyard of the ancestors of the current inhabitants of the quarters. Cherry, one of the text's narrators, claims, "That old graveyard had been the burial ground for black folks ever since the time of slavery" (44). The men gather by this cemetery, and each man visits the graves of his ancestors as he prepares to challenge the power structure which has subjected his people for generations, demonstrating that Gaines prizes diasporic consciousness in the positioning of oneself as a subject. This house, that literally occupies the interstitial space between the past and present, and whose front yard serves as a border between public and private spheres, is the setting in which these African Americans defend their ancestors' burial ground, and therefore, their right to remember a historical tradition which predates the current one of their oppression.

The text is aware of the fact that these men and women, while at home here in the quarters, were forced, generations earlier, to pass through what Dionne Brand calls the Door of No Return.⁵⁵ Gaines brings their African heritage to the surface through their reverence for and awareness of their endangered cemetery. Furthermore, like those who have passed through the Door of No Return, those men and women have no true home; they are attached to the quarters, but they don't own their homes, and this land that comforts them is also a site scarred by reminders of generations of slavery. Although they now have a vested interest in maintaining the status quo of their own oppression, tension has been surfacing in their community. The increased mechanization of plantation work has already started to erase their contribution to the land, eliminating potential jobs for their sons and daughters. Even more alarming is the fact that the Boutans seem intent on expanding the crop yield, and in this process their tractors creep ever closer to the burial grounds.

Gaines's use of the graveyard, and the connection with African ancestors it implies, explicitly demonstrates the present history of the residents of the quarters;⁵⁶ in effect, the cemetery reminds readers of a long historical relationship between Africans, the land and the power of what Morrison calls the ancient properties. Gaines thus creates a setting for his narrative that Bhabha might call an "in between temporality," one that is infused with histories of Africa, slavery, abuse, and the Civil Rights Movement

⁵⁵ For more on this, see my discussion of Brand's contextualization of the African diaspora in my introduction.

⁵⁶ Here Gaines implicitly reveals the foundational presence of Africa in this community that does not appear to situate itself around their position in the African diaspora. His figuring of the importance of the burial grounds "demonstrate that ancestral communion is one of the significant cultural patterns in African America that reflect the influence of African cultural imperatives, distilled and evolved over the centuries" (Kemayo 218)

simultaneously (Bhabha 13). Anissa Wardi writes that imbuing the land with cultural importance is common in African American writing. She argues,

The American South, a landscape of contradiction and continuity, is cast as a repository of cultural memory in twentieth-century African American literature. Many writers recuperate the South as a site of reconnection with ancestral history as this symbolic geography bears witness to what Jean Toomer labels the ‘pain and the beauty’ of African American history. (35)

In the text, Johnny Paul claims, “that tractor is getting closer and closer to that graveyard, and I was scared if I didn’t [kill Beau Boutan], one day that tractor was go’n come in there and plow up them graves, getting rid of all proof that we ever was” (92). The elimination of the cemetery by motored farm equipment not only symbolizes the displacement of a black work force, it literally could erase the historical presence of African Americans in this community. In this way, inhabitants of the quarters have been the victims of “relocation” for generations, and Gaines creates a space in this text in which they recognize their “unhomeliness” by confronting the status quo (Bhabha 9).

Gaines also chose this setting between the front of a private house and the public road because it literally embodies the space between the public and private spheres. Public space is often used by those in power to reflect private realities. According to a Bhabhian reading of this text, such a bordered, interstitial space is the only appropriate setting for confronting the “binary division of past and present” and for articulating one’s position as a subject (Bhabha 35). The work of the men in the borderland of public and private space of Mathu’s front yard solemnize

that place as a space of negotiation. Gaines literally remakes boundaries in *A Gathering*, expanding the borderland between the past and present in a space that complicates simple notions of public and private spheres.

This notion of willingly displaying private certainties for a public audience implies that internal security requires the participation of the public.⁵⁷ I would argue that Gaines agrees, for in *A Gathering*, autonomous subjectivity is best asserted when it is recognized by others. Bhabha claims that, “in the postcolonial text the problem of identity returns as a persistent questioning of the frame, the space of representation, where the image—missing person, invisible eye, Oriental stereotype—is confronted with its difference, its Other” (66). In Gaines’s textual frame, elderly African American men and women confront their Other as they challenge the identities the white sheriff and Cajun farmers have placed on them. These challenges fruitfully disregard the images projected onto them and replace these stereotypes with their own self-actualized accounts of witness.

Furthermore, the invisible eyes of the African Americans who have lived in these homes for generations are tangible, as is the person of Charlie, who does not appear until much later in the text. Gaines chose this frame, this “space of intervention,” intentionally, for the very presence of generations of these men marks the space as their own, and yet it is always clear that these homes, this land, and their graveyard is,

⁵⁷ Jürgen Habermas, in his study of Medieval France, argues that the security of nobility depended upon their ability to publicly display their private authority and value. For more on the public nature of private projections of power, see footnote 33 in Chapter Two.

ultimately, not their own (Bhabha 9).⁵⁸ In the spatial context of Gaines's novel, Bhabha's argument for the creation of interstitial spaces in which self-actualization can be accessed and history can be witnessed is realized.

In the midst of the story, each of Gaines' protagonists stand in this interstitial space and tell a bit of their personal past injustices in order to justify their role in allegedly killing Beau Boutan, the Cajun face of white oppression in this community.⁵⁹ From the perspective of postcolonial resistance, these men are not simply telling old stories; rather, their remembering of the past creates Bhabha's "in-between space" that figures necessarily in their eventual affirmation of their own humanity and agency (7). These voices are important in a Bhabhaian reading because he would argue that too often, when cultural difference is suppressed, "The Other loses its power to signify, to negate, to initiate its historic desire, to establish its own institutional and oppositional discourse" (Bhabha 31). Gaines empowers his elderly men to issue their own discourse as they challenge the status quo and establish their positions as subjects in an affirming community by publicly witnessing the shame of their traumatic pasts.

Gaines acknowledges the productivity of asserting cultural difference through his representational practices, for he engages a multi-narrative approach in *A Gathering*. Rather than representing a "homogenous, consensual community" (Bhabha 146), Gaines presents "counter-narratives of the [community] that continually evoke and erase its totalizing boundaries—both actual and conceptual" (Bhabha 149). The presence of many

⁵⁸ This is a consistent Gainesian representational practice, as Beavers asserts that "Gaines's fiction is driven by its strong sense of place, its use of ritual sites" (*Wrestling* 26).

⁵⁹ This is not simply recalling on the past; I see these narratives within the framework of Bhabha's "newness": "The borderline work of culture demands an encounter with 'newness' that is not part of the continuum of past and present. It creates a sense of translation. . . . The 'past-present' becomes part of the necessity, not the nostalgia, of living" (Bhabha 7).

distinct narrative voices is significant not only because it models the nature of history, it is also necessary for each individual to participate publicly in the recovery of his personal agency.⁶⁰ In short, Gaines invokes a postcolonial perspective which recognizes the limits of a “collusive” “sense of cultural community. It insists that cultural and political identity are constructed through a process of alterity” (Bhabha 175).

The representational practices of Gaines refuse stereotypical offerings of either victims or victimizers; neither party can be reduced to simple motives or succinct histories. In fact, Gaines delicately negotiates the African American communities’ role in willingly participating in their own oppression by articulating the ways in which modes of interaction and ways of behaving are protected as tradition. Indeed, as Carmean asserts, “as long as the men collude in their own abasement, they perpetuate a system, even though it has become completely ineffectual” (109). The acknowledgement of such complicity plays a key role in Gaines’s understanding of the path to equality, echoing Caribbean thinkers who challenge island peoples to reject the master’s culture that they have codified and into which they have attempted to earn a place.⁶¹

Gaines’s challenge to resist oppressive traditions is echoed in the text by figures who challenge the status quo. The Boutan family built their reputations and based their financial stability on an ability to control those around them. The Boutans walk the fine line between races in a racially tense Louisiana, for Cajuns were not considered white,

⁶⁰ Edward Said, in *Culture and Resistance*, asserts, “Memory is a powerful collective instrument for preserving identity. And it’s something that can be carried not only through official narratives and books, but also through informal memory. It is one of the main bulwarks against historical erasure. It is a means of resistance” (182). According to Said, then, Gaines’s evocation of several informal voices telling stories and initiating resistance is not merely the only tool available to these elderly men, it is one of the most effective means of resisting historical erasure.

⁶¹ I explore this idea more fully in the work of Paule Marshall, in Chapter Four.

and therefore had no access to the social rights and privileges granted to land owning whites. Furthermore, Cajuns certainly did not embrace African Americans, and thus distinguished themselves as a class above these former slaves.⁶² Social distinctions based on racial lines affected every demographic in the American South. Even Mathu, heralded in the text as the only autonomous African American in the community, “always bragged about not having no white man’s blood in his veins. He looked down on all the rest of us who had some, and the more you had, the more he looked down on you” (Gaines 51).

Because of the strict racial hierarchy which governed the socio-economic dynamic of the South in the 1960s, most Cajun families found themselves frustrated by their constant exclusion from the highest levels of society. This frustration often resulted in the violent assertion of their rights in sharp contrast to the subjugated existence of African Americans. In Gaines’s text, the Boutan family exerts great authority over the African Americans also working on the Marshall land. Candy, a prominent Marshall, claims, “There’s not a black family in this parish Fix [Boutan] and his crowd hasn’t hurt sometime or other” (18). This tension is heightened by the fact that these African Americans know the Marshall family gave the Boutans better land on which to work, despite the fact that they “had worked for [the Marshall’s] for so many years” (Gaines in Gaudet and Wooten 84). Furthermore, these share croppers already have to face the stifling frustration of working and living in a system which effectively prevents them from ever getting out of debt, let alone owning property or having expendable income.

Indeed, Hartman, in her important work on the effects of the trauma of slavery on identity

⁶² Hebert-Leiter points out that, “the Cajun community acts as a buffer that protects white society from any threat from the black community they control. At the same time, these Cajun neighbors also remain part of the inferior population that the wealthy whites attempt to control through economic and political means” (109).

formation, argues that for most African Americans, “self-possession,” in the literal sense, did not “liberate the former slave from his or her bonds but rather sought to replace the whip with the compulsory contract and the collar with a guilty conscience” (6). The Cajun Boutans compound the difficult situation in which these African American men and women find themselves by venting their own frustrations with the illogical cruelty of the racially driven hierarchy of the South. This ‘venting’ presents itself practically through unwarranted violence toward and the inhumane treatment of these black men.

Because the ill treatment they received was a reality of life and often unprovoked, the men and women who live in the quarters are conditioned to behave in ways that edify the Marshalls and prevent the Boutans from getting angry. The primary objective of these men and women is therefore to maintain the status quo, avoiding all potential conflicts. Implicit in this attempt to avoid further cruelty by satisfying the whims of the Boutans is a system of valuing based on a culture that is not their own. Rather than behaving in a fashion congruent with their own cultural values, they choose instead to displace their agency with the cultural system of their oppressors. In privileging the white, hegemonic perspective in terms of how they make decisions, these men and women participate in their own oppression. In effect, they abandon their cultural legacy, disowning their people as a group with a distinct value system. Like Morrison, Gaines challenges any notion of history that identifies people as absolute victims; instead, he complicates oppression in the American South, implicitly revealing how easily African Americans actively give away their cultural authority to those who subjugate them. Rather than overtly waging war on the cultural heritage of the black community, the Boutans simply create an environment of fear in which their subordinates must live by

the Boutans' standards in order to survive. In an attempt to maintain the status quo, this African American community willingly displaces their autonomy with choices dictated by the powerful Boutans. The cultural authority and historical legacy of those whose families have lived and worked this land for generations is thereby ignored, and often, denied.

In situations of unequal proportions of power, the group with less power is often inadvertently controlled through their privileging of the values of the hegemonic power. Postcolonial discourse has theorized this privileging, and has attested to the ways in which colonial peoples participate in their own oppression.⁶³ In the Caribbean arena, European conquerors and plantation owners, although a greatly outnumbered minority, imposed their racial and cultural values onto the peoples they enslaved. In many postcolonial situations, attempts to end the complicit cooperation in one's own oppression are thwarted by the deeply ingrained invasion of history and culture by those in power. Jennifer Griffiths, who theorizes trauma in African American writing, agrees that when victims of trauma bear witness to that past, they are confronting the entire system which enabled their abuse: "Survivors, in attempting to place their experience into

⁶³ For example, long after slavery was abolished in much of the West Indies, lighter skin ensured greater access to social hierarchy, while darker skin prevented social mobility more than any other factor, including financial status. This reality can also be seen in the ways in which language evolved in the Caribbean. Carib languages often disappeared as the languages of conquistadors—European languages—became dominant. Not only were Carib and AmerIndian people, cultures and languages often eradicated, but the cultures and languages of the work force of the Caribbean—African slaves—were never openly tolerated. Thus, slaves soon had no formal avenue through which they might assert cultural authority, or even maintain the semblance of a historical legacy. In fact, even as postcolonial scholars in the Caribbean call for the abolishing of white, hegemonic, cultural values, the problem of language persists. Efforts to reject the colonizer's measures of worth are complicated by the fact that the only means through which they can challenge hegemonic influences is the language of their oppressors. In other words, oppressed peoples must privilege the cultural practices of their oppressors even as they seek to reject that basis of authority. For relevant postcolonial theory on the displacement of cultural values, see footnote fifty-one.

words, must confront language itself and their position within the dominant sign system” (5).

Gaines reveals the same postcolonial reality as these African American men and women acknowledge the ways in which they participate in their own subjugation by adopting the cultural values and language of the Boutsans. For instance, as Mat prepares to meet the gathering fellows, his wife calls him an “old fool” and asks him if “Y’all gone crazy?” (36). Mat responds, unable to look at her, by saying, “That’s right”...“anytime we say we go’n stand up for something, they say we crazy. You right, we all gone crazy” (36). Gaines’s use of pronouns here conflates Mat’s wife with the dominant Boutan paradigm. As Sandra G. Shannon points out, “both black and white residents have become so accustomed to the contagious passivity displayed by many of the old black men that any deviation from such behavior is seen as more of a confirmation of senility than of courage” (204). Mat’s wife clearly participates in her own oppression by not considering the possibility of effective, warranted resistance.

Gaines further exposes the ways in which the men and women of the quarters have continually participated in their own subjugation through Mat’s response to his wife’s lack of support. First, he reveals his understanding of a system in which his own tireless efforts enrich George Medlow—the man who owns the field in which he works—while Mat himself gets “poorer and poorer” (Gaines 38). Having acknowledged this reality, Mat confesses he displaces his anger at an unjust system onto himself and his wife. He asks, “The years I done stood out in that back yard and cussed at God, the years I done stood out on that front garry and cussed the world, the times I done come home drunk and beat you for no reason at all—and, woman, you still don’t know what’s the

matter with me?” (38). The rush of loosely connected phrases and the repetitive use of commas imply this realization has been just under the surface of Mat’s consciousness for a long time. He admits that these actions were perpetrated by him, and finally acknowledges the impetus behind his behavior was his inability to fight a system he willingly served.

Because Gaines’s text consists primarily of men rehearsing their stories, these testimonies serve as the action in the text. In fact, Gaines’s choice to present these accounts of witness as the core movement of the novel belies the greater work of his text. His representational practices not only break with the traditional black protest novel, he also refuses to indulge stereotypes associated with black men. Clark addresses this shift from traditional black protest writing:

Physical violence as a central component of black manhood is not necessarily displaced but is de-emphasized; as an alternative Gaines proffers voice and community as the principle means of resisting erasure...the characters interrupt historic deformity through the stories they tell, and the mutual confessions inaugurate their re-formation—their unification and atonement for the sins of self-erasure. (“Re-(W)righting Black Subjectivity” 200)

Thus, Gaines offers not only a different image of black manhood, but also a non-violent alternative to productive resistance models. Rather than downplaying past oppression and its dangerous effects, Gaines argues, like bell hooks after him, that, “the oppressed struggle in language to recover ourselves—to rewrite, to reconcile, to renew. Our words are not without meaning. They are an action—a resistance. Language is a place of struggle” (hooks, *Talking Back* 28). In fact, as discussed earlier in this chapter, African American literary theory has celebrated the ways in which the African American experience must be described and confronted with such narratives. Griffiths theorizes

this relationship between private and public witness when she writes, “testimonial encounters are transactions between individuals and make public the private knowledge of trauma” (5). Gaines therefore offers language not as a weaker substitute to organized, violent resistance; he rather presents it as an effective step of action that resists erasure, affirms one’s subjectivity through addressing the effects of trauma, and directly rewrites history.

In an essay, Beavers argues that Gaines’s *A Lesson Before Dying*, “is concerned with the community’s search for an adequate witness, with the importance of instituting a poetics that can shape collective acts of testimony to counter the narratives produced by white supremacy” (“Prodigal Agency” 141). While Beavers affirms the communal power of witness, he does not fully explore the ways in which acts of witness not only confront white supremacy, but also confess how past abuse makes people silent participants in their own oppression. I am arguing that Gaines’s figuring of the public witnessing of past experiences, like Morrison’s multi-narrative approach in *Paradise*, not only provides a counter narrative to America’s national narrative of white supremacy, it also helps restore individuals and communities to a space in which they can realize their positions as subjects in the African diaspora. Byerman argues that Gaines—and other African-American writers—choose to write about history and history-telling in order to present “a reconceptualization of black experience as a survivor narrative and thus a rewriting of the American grand narrative” (3). Gaines is not simply writing about black men resisting white-washed versions of history in rural communities after the Civil Rights Movement; he is resisting such erasure himself by empowering decrepit old men to speak and stand up. One of Gaines’s strongest comments on the silencing of black

culture in the South before and after the Civil Rights Movement can be seen implicitly through his decision to give the task of narrating to fifteen different characters.⁶⁴

In his book on notions of manhood in African American literature, Clark goes on to argue that, “voicing their common histories inaugurates the renegotiation and reclamation of subject status. This accounts for Gaines’s works being so firmly rooted in orality, his texts unfolding as multitiered verbal performances” (*Black Manhood* 72). Rather than emphasizing his own narration, Gaines decides, in the writing process, that the most effective way to convey accounts of witness (and to engage in the act of witnessing himself), is to allow multiple narrators to tell their stories.⁶⁵ The creation of this cacophony of voices allows Gaines to focus the action of the text on the interior lives of these characters, while also acknowledging the necessity of communal participation. From Gaines’s perspective, the struggle black men face to resist oppression and erasure is a private one; however, as we have already discussed, this struggle is often fought on a public stage.

The care and consistency with which he writes the novel is clear as Gaines’s rhetorical decisions emphasize his aim to give a voice to voiceless members of a silent community. Even as these characters invoke the past’s legacy and enunciate its grip on the present, Gaines evokes the distant past of slaves’ storytelling. In their introduction to

⁶⁴ Gaines furthers the possibility of uttering a narrative alternative to the history promoted by white, hegemonic forces in his narration. Byerman agrees that the “use of multiple voices” promotes a “counter history” by finding ways “to let the past speak”, “insist[ing] that what is spoken is profoundly different from the dominant discourse” (24).

⁶⁵ Mary Ellen Doyle asserts, “the switch to multiple narrators is possibly the single most significant decision made in executing this novel” (193). This decision is from a writer whose fiction, according to Doyle, is “best known” for “the creation and effects of voice, in both dialogue and narration” (2). Beavers investigates the power of this storytelling in reclaiming an “ancestral voice” (*Wrestling* 166), and Carmean points out, “rather than individualize a single character to represent a group of people and/or an idea, Gaines creates a group as his ‘principle’ character” (107).

a book of conversations with Gaines, Marcia Gaudet and Carl Wooten remind us that because he grew up “in the quarters” not unlike the street in which *A Gathering* is set, “Gaines was part of an oral culture that was rural, black, and bilingual” (1). African American culture prizes story telling, for it developed as the primary means of resisting erasure in a history-keeping environment entirely dependent upon reading and writing. Not only this, but by utilizing storytelling, Gaines legitimizes African American culture and their ability to remember their own historical legacies. Jack Hicks affirms that,

the power lies in Gaines’s careful assimilation of Afro-American folk materials, particularly those of the South, in which his historical vision is absorbed and vivified. His debt is the rich fund of customs and folkways of black American pasts, to the unique forms grown out of them. (18)

It is appropriate that these men and women access their heritage of agency by orally witnessing the trauma of their pasts; each individual’s story is strengthened by the community’s endorsement, and yet each person must make his or her own stand.⁶⁶

Beavers goes further to argue that, “Gaines [has a] deep investment in an oral tradition in which people’s lives are rendered through the act of telling stories...Here Gaines captures storytelling as it unfolds within the web of communal activity” (*Wrestling* 26).

Particularly in communities whose cultural authority and historical legacies are intentionally degraded or even erased, storytelling becomes an important action that contributes to the formation and continuation of communal identity and personal orientation. The representational choices Gaines makes in the writing of this text are significant, then, to his larger postcolonial statement on the appropriation of history for

⁶⁶ Byerman agrees that “memory has played a special role in the shaping of African American culture generally and in contemporary literature specifically...It affects the way the individual relates to the group, specifically in an environment where both personal and group identity have been denigrated, as in much of the history of the United States” (27).

those whose historical significance has been systematically erased or denied.⁶⁷ Griffiths agrees that “testimony offers a public enactment of memory, and clearly, the cultural context and content work collaboratively to shape testimony” (5). Gaines examines this common history on three levels: Creating fifteen distinct narrative voices ensures the reader understands the personal nature of these tales. The symmetry of the consistent setting within which they speak attests to the shared, communal oppression they have encountered together as one people. Finally, the larger setting of the text in the American South in 1970 implicitly reminds us that although the proper Civil Rights Movement in which most of the country engaged and through which the reality of everyday life for all African Americans theoretically changed, life for the aged folks on the Marshall land hardly changed at all.⁶⁸

Indeed, Gaines’s old men do not casually tell stories that are insignificant to them or to their community. Rather, their testimonies are acts of witness they painstakingly

⁶⁷ African Americans living in the South in the twentieth century experienced racially-driven prejudice and suffered the trauma of wide-scale abuse. While they were not subjected to the same level of elimination in a brief period of time, first, second and third generation African American survivors deal with issues similar to those explored in Holocaust studies. Efraim Sicher, who studies trauma and the Shoah, argues that “it is storytelling above all that shapes collective and personal memory in that transmission, and the way the story is told, the issue of narrativity itself, therefore must be central to any discussion of the situation of the post-Holocaust generation” (13).

⁶⁸ Tee Jack, a local bartender in the text, narrates a chapter in which a professor of black studies at the University of Southern Louisiana implicitly reminds the reader of the disparity between the belief systems of this little town and the majority of the country. The professor first confronts the men in the bar who naturally anticipate the lynching of Beau’s suspected murderer by saying, “That kind of thing doesn’t happen anymore” (157). He continues to hope this rural community “had progressed some” (158), insisting that although the “law seems to work slow at times . . . it’s still the best thing that we have” (161). His attitude is dismissed as one of the teenagers hoping to help in the lynching, a boy Gaines makes clear is uneducated and literally filthy, asks the professor if he is a “New York Yankee NAPC Jew” (162). Despite the apparent lawlessness in this part of rural Louisiana, Gaines implicitly reminds his readers that race relations and the law that guides them are quickly evolving. Orly Lubin gets at this personal/communal/national relationship in approaching Holocaust narratives: “By testifying about an extreme event, they gain entrance into the national narrative as full participants. Their testimonies, therefore, simultaneously constitute ‘the self’ autobiographically and submerge it in collective history” (135). The number of narratives Gaines issues reminds us not only of each personal experience, but taken together, he conveys the systematic abuse of this community.

tell in a conscious effort to stand up to the system of oppression under which they have lived and to confront the private shame victims of unacknowledged trauma often experience. Gaines makes these communal stakes clear as Chimley narrates an unspoken conversation he has with Mat as they consider confronting white injustice. “His eyes was saying: We wait till now? Now, when we’re old men, we get to be brave?” (32).

Chimley and Mat contemplate the enormity of challenging the status quo by witnessing their own histories of abuse; they know that their decision could have personally and communally harmful ramifications. As Bhabha asserts, “remembering is never a quiet act of introspection and retrospection. It is a painful re-membering, a putting together of the dismembered past to make sense of the trauma of the present” (90). Gaines’s setting and narrative choices convey the fact that he is offering his own resistance to a dominant narrative which erases African American histories on personal, communal and national levels.

Gaines, like Morrison through the Convent women, utilizes this medium, not only challenging the grand American narrative promoted by white history keepers, but also legitimizing African American cultural authority that has been informally transmitted orally since the arrival of Africans to the Americas. Beavers is again helpful in explaining the significance of Gaines’s choice to use storytelling and to literally engage in it himself through the form of his text.

What makes it significant is that storytelling works toward a deeper purpose: the quarters, as Gaines depicts them, are most often places where to talk about racial injustice is to risk one’s life. Telling stories, as Gaines asserts, has a great deal to do with intervening on conspiratorial, exclusive forms of history, though the act of storytelling is often dismissed as no more than an instance of quaint entertainment. But as Gaines’s narrators utilize

it, storytelling ultimately has a great deal to do with how communities are formed and sustained, a process that occurs across barriers of race. (*Wrestling* 26)

Thus Gaines infuses the act of storytelling with the power of intentional resistance, as each man purposefully uses the typically casual forum to bear witness to his past abuse. The novel's spatial orientation furthers this juxtaposition of maintaining the status quo and boldly resisting white hegemony. A gathering of old men telling stories in someone's front yard is not a drastic act; however, a gathering of old men bravely testifying about their past abuse and confessing their own participation in an oppressive system in a site that has witnessed generations of trauma is a bold act of asserting autonomy, initiating healing, and resisting historical erasure in the African diaspora.

As Gaines sets the stage for this resistant strand of storytelling to occur in a private space with public access, he presents a confrontation with Sheriff Mapes. Mapes arrives in front of Mathu's home because Mapes is certain Mathu murdered Boutan. Rufe, one of Gaines's narrators, tells us that Mapes "was big, mean, brutal. But Mapes respected a man. Mathu was a man, and Mapes respected Mathu. But he didn't think much of the rest of us and he didn't respect us" (84). The text earlier confides that "Mathu was the only one we knowed had ever stood up" (31); Mathu did not participate in his oppression, and never allowed his values to be displaced by the assumed cultural authority of white hegemonic power. He was therefore seen as an exception by both whites and blacks alike, and was treated in a distinct way. In fact, Mapes admits, "I admire the nigger. He's a better man than most I've met, black or white" (74). Despite his respect for Mathu, Mapes comes to his home to arrest him, and he is certain to accomplish his task.

When Mapes arrives, it becomes clear that the men he neither respects nor fears will no longer be spoken for, but will speak to him, the symbol of white authority, on their own terms. As Mapes tries to dictate the path the afternoon will follow, Clatoo speaks up: “It ain’t go’n work this time, Sheriff” (86). Convinced “Clatoo wouldn’t own up to it”, Mapes asks who contradicted him (86). To his surprise, Clatoo takes responsibility and says, “I did, Sheriff” (86). Clearly Clatoo is signifying the fact that he is no longer interested in maintaining the status quo, just as he is not now willing to be a participant in his own oppression by immediately acquiescing to any white authority. As hooks claims, “speaking becomes both a way to engage in active self-transformation and a rite of passage where one moves from being object to subject. Only as subjects can we speak. As objects, we remain voiceless—our beings defined and interpreted by others” (*Talking Back* 12). Clatoo’s speaking up, even before he bears witness to his own abuse, confirms his creating a space in which he is a subject with autonomy.

Gaines’s use of personal testimony to empower communal resistance in a public space is particularly meaningful because of the long history of slave owners and overseers who made a public spectacle of disciplining black bodies in an attempt to control and subdue any attempts at resistance in the slave population. Doyle points out that “the one thing above all others that blacks traditionally could not do in the plantation culture was to ‘stand’ in opposition to white power, to defend themselves or others against it” (175). This history is present as this historical routine is disrupted. Mapes, unsure of how to react to African American men and women who are speaking on their own terms,

pretend[ed] he couldn't find Clatoo in the crowd...Then when he did, he stared at Clatoo long and hard. He thought if he stared at him long enough, Clatoo was bound to look down. But Clatoo didn't look down. He sat there with that shotgun over his legs, looking straight back at Mapes. 'What's the matter with you, Clatoo?' Mapes said. 'You're the last person I thought would be looking for trouble.'(86)

Gaines makes it clear here that the status quo has changed through systematically presenting Mapes's expectations and then upsetting each one. First, he expects to find Mathu alone; he finds instead an organized effort at communal resistance. Secondly, he expects the gathered men to obey him without a second thought; he is baffled instead when Clatoo speaks up to him. Furthermore, he expects Clatoo neither to assert a verbal response nor to hold his gaze; Clatoo shocks him by doing both. In fact, Clatoo responds to Mapes's claim that he should not look for trouble by saying, "That's been my trouble" (86).

Gaines implicitly empowers Clatoo here by allowing him to redefine Mapes's terms. Mapes uses "trouble" to describe Clatoo's attempts to challenge the status quo; Clatoo immediately responds by claiming that avoiding Mapes's definition of "trouble"—asserting his own autonomy—has been his "trouble." This word play effectively allows Clatoo to reject Mapes's terms and to redefine them in his own way. As Beavers asserts, "Storytelling destabilizes the regulatory machinery that has shaped their sense of possibility and becomes the vehicle that carries the old men into transgressive space. The negations that have shaped their lives became sites of affirmation because they enter the realm of narration" (*Wrestling* 167). Clatoo here transforms the negation of authority into his own assertion of agency. Such an effort is a key component in any colonial effort to reject the ruling class. Gaines thus reveals early

in the text that the status quo of hegemonic power over tradition and present interactions is under attack. Mapes reacts by slapping each man who looks him in the eye and confesses to the murder, effectively demonstrating his reliance on the status quo of racial hierarchy and abuse. Indeed, the text reads, “[Mapes] had already used his only little knowledge he knowed how to deal with black folks—knocking them around. When that didn’t change a thing, when people started getting in line to be knocked around, he didn’t know what else to do. So now he just stood there” (93). The public display of their oral challenge is immediately effective.

Mapes then expects to give the men a little leeway in exchange for full cooperation, and he begrudgingly acquiesces to Johnny Paul’s request to speak his mind. Mapes says, “All right,”...“Tell me. But make it quick. I can still get in some fishing” (89). In effect, he admits he will let them play their little game, but he is still making the rules by which they all will abide. Despite his willingness to listen, Mapes insists on his hierarchical power over them. As Zora Neale Hurston argues, “An ongoing struggle for authority and domination is present in any speech situation interfacing former slaves with former masters, minority with majority culture, spoken with written” (*Every Tongue* xv). Again, Gaines sets up this expectation only to be denied. Johnny Paul says, “You still don’t see. I don’t have to make nothing quick. I can take all the time in the world I want, and it ain’t nothing you can do but take me to jail. You can’t slap me hard enough to hurt me no more, Sheriff” (89). Johnny Paul’s resistance is not just a small challenge to Mapes’s authority; he denies the effectiveness of Mapes’s entire system of discipline.

After years of silence and passivity, Johnny Paul cannot not speak up in this hour. Lori Daub, in an article on accounts of witness and survival, argues, “there is, in each

survivor, an imperative need to tell and thus to come to know one's story....One has to know one's buried truth in order to be able to live one's life" ("An Event" 78).⁶⁹ Johnny Paul is compelled to tell his story; it is necessary for him to keep on living. Gaines does not simply let Johnny Paul's story stand alone, but reveals the previously discussed threat the Boutans posed to the entire history of his people. He claims that the Boutans intend,

to get rid of all proof that black people ever farmed this land with plows and mules—like if they had nothing from the start but motor machines. Sure, one day they will get rid of the proof that we ever was, but they ain't go'n do it while I'm still here. Mama and Papa worked too hard in these fields. (92)

Johnny Paul's source of resistance and claim as an autonomous self thus stems not just from himself, but is tied to the white attempt to erase his contribution to the land and his people's historical presence. He is protecting his legacy. Indeed, he starts his "confession" by bearing witness to what they can no longer see; he gives voice to the homes, the flowers, and the people who used to tend them but who now lay in the graveyard. Wardi asserts that, "Gaines recognizes that the community is connected to the ancestors who are, because of their lives and their deaths, part of the cultural geography" (40); this explains why "the maintenance of the gravesites is a necessary act in the preservation of ancestry" (Wardi 39). Johnny Paul's challenge to Mapes signifies his awareness that maintaining the status quo will effectively erase the memory of his people from the Marshall plantation.

In the person of Gable, Gaines presents another instance in which an African American man is willing to issue his own narrative in direct contradiction to the codified

⁶⁹ Daub has written important work on theorizing the trauma of the Holocaust; as I assert in the introduction, because African American theory has turned to trauma, Daub's work, despite the context, should inform these arguments.

history under which he has lived. Gaines describes Gable as a man of no consequence who is accustomed to maintaining the status quo essentially by remaining invisible. Gable's presence is so unassuming that Rufe says, "I didn't hear Gable when he first started speaking. He spoke so softly you had to be right on him to hear him" (100). Rufe then tells us that Gable does not live at the Marshall plantation with many of the gathered men; he is from Morgan, a nearby town where he has "a little shotgun house, behind the willows" (100). That his coping mechanism has been to stay invisible is clear when Rufe again says he was "just staying there behind them trees there at Morgan. Had his little garden, a few chickens—staying behind them trees" (100). Gaines mentions the unassuming, hidden nature of Gable three times, indicating his typical silence. Gable's presence then is unexpected, and his calling attention to himself by speaking is an even greater aberration from the status quo.

Gable's son had long before been arrested and sentenced to death by the state of Louisiana. Gable relates that a woman—who had "messed around with every man, black or white, on that river,"—had accused Gable's sixteen year old son of raping her (101). Gable reveals the depth of the affront by arguing that "they knowed what kind of gal she was," that his son was only sixteen, and that "they knowed he was half out his mind" (101). Although it appears that no trial was ever convened, Gable objects to his son's injustice by offering a defense of sorts here in Mathu's yard.

Having objected to the system which killed his son, Gable then rejects the history the white hegemony has given him and the role to which this history assigned him. He bears witness to the trauma he experienced which killed his son while also recasting the story through the power of his own agency to speak. First, he remembers the white

system told him, “it was best we just forgot all about it and him” (102). He then immediately confronts the order they gave him by saying, “But I never forgot, I never forgot. It’s been over forty years now, but every day of my life, every night of my life, I go through that rainy day again” (102).⁷⁰ Rather than allowing his memory of his son to be erased, it is as if Gable objects by saying, ‘No, I have not forgotten, and these forty years of silence will not erase my son’s existence or the wrong done to us.’ Gaines makes it clear that for Gable, the path to integrity and autonomy leads him to finally ignore the suggestions or orders of the ruling class.

Gable must now reject the role into which the hegemonic power has placed him. From a postcolonial point of view, Gaines argues Gable must label himself, rather than assuming the position given to him by a foreign power. He recounts the phone call they received telling them what had happened: “Called us and told us we could have him at ‘leven, ‘cause they was go’n kill him at ten” (101). Having rejected the order to forget this bit of history, Gable now renames himself on his own terms.⁷¹ Gaines uses rhetorical questions as Gable resignifies himself, rejecting the labels placed on him by the power over him. He asks, “Is that something to say to a mother? Something to say to a father?” (101). Gaines’s characters are not only liberated here, the notion of black manhood is empowered as well.

⁷⁰ In Richard Glejzer’s article on the idea of witness in Art Spiegelman’s *Maus*, he asserts that “at the heart of any memory is a forgetting, the loss of the original event and that loss’s destructive force on any subsequent testimony; this is all the more true of traumatic memory” (213). Gable’s testimony is indeed marked by Glejzer’s “loss of the original event,” and yet Gable counters the erasure the white legal system intended.

⁷¹ This is indicative of how Gaines is distinct from traditional African American male writers: Rather than positioning black men as “social subjects menaced by Anglo-American culture” (Clark, *Black Manhood* 69), Gaines portrays “black men’s complexity not only as individuals but as fathers, sons, husbands, and brothers engaged in collective struggle. The broad scope of his portrayals constitutes a radical reconfiguring of black literary subjectivity” (Clark, *Black Manhood* 68).

Gable's journey into his self actualization—his clear visibility—is finally accomplished when he rejects the dominant narrative with which he was told to understand his son's death. He confesses his inability to confront the way in which this hegemonic power abused his son, his own awareness of himself, and then asserts his ability now to offer a counter narrative. In an article on Fanon and Said and decolonization, Paul Nursey-Bray and Pal Ahlumalia argue that colonized individuals "have been robbed of their history as they have been robbed of the view of themselves as capable of independent action. The debasing of the national culture and the history of the colonized is the way the consciousness of the colonized is controlled and channeled" (28). Having been robbed of his history, Gable was indoctrinated to believe that a black man should be thankful for being killed by an unjust system as long as he dies like a white man. This belief robbed him of any assertion that would prize his heritage or give him a foundation on which he could fight the trauma he and his family endured. He is all too aware of this now, asking,

And what did I do about them killing my boy like that? What could a poor old nigger do but go up to the white folks and fall down on his knees? But, no, no pity coming there. Some went so far to say my boy shoulda been glad he died in the 'lectric chair 'stead at the end of a rope. They said at least he was treated like a white man. (102)

Jeffrey Blustein explains how silence exacerbates the trauma of abuse:

The victims of trauma are harmed twice over: First, by the violent acts and, second, by their remaining silent about them. If they are to recover psychologically and emotionally from the trauma, they must be able to tell their stories of what was done to them and these stories must be heard by caring others who are able to listen sympathetically to them. The stories must be *theirs* not only in the sense that they must be told from *their* point of view. (339)

While Gable recognizes his own silence, Gaines empowers him to resist the inertia of the status quo which would ensure his future cooperation, and thus prevent his recovery.

Although silent and invisible until now, Gable ignores this intimidation by refusing the intentional erasure of his past.⁷² Here Gaines also reveals the necessity of rejecting both the narrative imposed upon an oppressed people by a more powerful other, and the implication that oppressed people should strive to be treated like the dominant group. Gable asserts his autonomy by rejecting the historical mandates and values of white power and by replacing them with his own historical account and self-awareness.⁷³

Gaines continues to address the steps of resistance necessary for one to reclaim himself in the person of Coot. Coot fought for the United States in World War One, where he was awarded a medal for his brave service. Coot instinctively takes pride in his service, and is as “proud as [he] could be” for his wartime effort and experience (104). Having treasured this personal history, Coot comes home and encounters a white man who tells him how to feel about his service and how to remember his own history.

Coot says that upon returning home,

The very first white man I met, the very first one, one of them no-
English-speaking things off that river, told me I better not ever

⁷² As Byerman argues, “[Gaines] is refusing any sense of an erased past. Rather, he is concerned with the continuing effects of impotence and cowardice in the face of past (and present) oppression” (39).

⁷³ Gil Boutan, Beau’s younger brother, similarly challenges his family’s traditional behavior and replaces it with a new historical understanding. While all the Boutan men are comfortable in the assurance that they will use violence to put the African American community back in its place, Gil fights inertia. He looks at each face in the room and says, “Won’t it ever stop? I do all I can to stop it. Every day of my life, I do all I can to stop it. Won’t it ever stop?” The people did not look at him” (122). Gil has the courage to question the status quo, issuing a direct challenge to his father’s way of life in the process. He then bears witness to the humanity of these men: “Old men, Papa. Cataracts. Hardly any teeth. Arthritic. Old men. Old black men, Papa. Who have been hurt. Who wait—not for you, papa—what you’re supposed to represent. Ask Sully. Tired old men trying hard to hold up their heads” (137). Gil revises the history of this family’s relationship to these men by lengthening it to include the generations of hurt inflicted upon them by the Boutans. He resists the short-sighted view promoted by all the other men present. This bearing witness is not just an alternative perspective; it is a direct challenge to Fix Boutan’s way of life.

wear that uniform or that medal again no matter how long I lived. He told me I was back home now, and they didn't cotton to no nigger wearing medals for killing white folks. That was back in World War One. And they ain't change yet—not a bit. (104)

In situations of systematic inequality, action and even emotion and intellect can be controlled by the party with greater power. In addition to attempting to erase Coot's historical bravery and patriotism, this hegemonic power also tried to sanction Coot's feelings about his personal experience. Furthermore, Gaines depicts powerful white men as static in their opinions and prejudices over a fifty year period that witnessed drastic changes in industry, labor, agriculture, and in gender and race relations in the United States. Bhabha is helpful here as he explains,

An important feature of colonial discourse is its dependence on the concept of 'fixity' in the ideological construction of otherness. Fixity, as the sign of cultural/historical/racial difference in the discourse of colonialism, is a paradoxical mode of representation: it connotes rigidity and an unchanging order as well as disorder, degeneracy and demonic repletion. (94)

Coot's despair is largely rooted in his perception that those who erased his history and controlled his response to his own experience are unchangeable both in their access to power and in their treatment of him.

Hartman, in her important work on the effects of the trauma of slavery on identity formation, argues that often the awareness of loss is the most poignant memory a subjected person could possess. She asserts, "This past cannot be recovered, yet the history of the captive emerges precisely at this site of loss and rupture. In the workings of memory, there is an endless reiteration and enactment of this condition of loss and displacement" (74). For Coot, his reality has been controlled by the absence of pride or even remembrance of his story. His life in a racially fraught American South effectually

erases his service in the United States military. His memory, then, is not governed by positive instances of action, but is rather haunted by an empty space, an absence.

Dominick LaCapra, in his book on history and trauma, agrees that, “Trauma is a disruptive experience that disarticulates the self and creates holes in existence; it has belated effects that are controlled only with difficulty and perhaps never fully mastered” (41). Upon returning from World War One, one imagines that the young Coot feels empowered to articulate his position as a subject for perhaps the first time in his life. He has played by the ‘rules’ of American manhood and patriotism established by the white hegemonic power, and he not only survived but even thrived (with a medal to prove it). His experience at home then, crushing as it disappointed expectations, effectively “disarticulates” him (LaCapra 41).

This absence clearly leads to the loss of his agency, and perhaps even his identity, for his lifetime has been defined by this absence, this lack of integration. Hartman argues that this dis-integration can act as a marker of memory in a person who has undergone trauma: “It is a sentient recollection of connectedness experienced at the site of rupture, where the very consciousness of disconnectedness acts as a mode of testimony and memory. The recognition of loss is a crucial element in redressing the breach introduced by slavery” (73-74). Coot’s acknowledgment does not stop with his disappointment in his rejection fifty years ago; he begins to hint at his anger and sadness over losing the sense of himself such pride could have developed in him every day for the past fifty years. His own continued lack of self-actualization is a direct result of each day that “they ain’t change” (Gaines 104). Gaines makes it clear that a key point in the “return of the subject” is recognizing absence, claiming one’s own history, and rejecting the

hegemonic attempt to control not only actions, but emotions and intellect as well (Bhabha 191). That Coot does just this is evidenced most obviously by the fact that, “Coot was there in his old First World War Army uniform. The uniform was all wrinkled and full of holes, but Coot wore it like it was something brand new. He even had on the cap, and the medal” (103).

Gaines presents the most dramatic challenge to the power structure, reclamation of history, celebration of the relationship between public and private resistance and affirmation of self-actualization in the real murderer, Charlie Biggs. Having gained strength from the challenges offered by the men he grew up watching, Charlie returns, confesses, and asserts his manhood. Charlie listens to the many accounts of witness these men utter, aware that each speaks on his own terms and addresses his personal trauma in an attempt to reclaim himself while also contributing to the community’s effort to protect Mathu and together challenge the status quo of oppression. I would argue that Charlie is only empowered to return, confess, and resignify himself as a man of consequence because of the hours he spends listening to these men tell their stories. Daub, in an article on listening and bearing witness to experiences of trauma, explains:

While overlapping, to a degree, with the experience of the victim, [the listener] nonetheless does not become the victim—he preserves his own separate place, position and perspective; a battleground for forces raging in himself to which he has to pay attention and respect if he is to properly carry out his task. The listener, therefore, has to be at the same time a witness to the trauma and a witness to himself. (“Bearing Witness” 58)

Gaines places Charlie in the position of anonymous listener, but as he listens, he is clearly empowered to give witness to his own narrative. The success of the other men’s stories is not dependent upon Charlie’s response, and yet his overwhelming statement of

strong resistance certainly dignifies the effort of the entire community. Gaines's representational practices thus insist that preventing historical erasure by resisting the status quo of hierarchy is necessarily a personal and communal effort. Each man's act of witness honors the men who spoke before him while also serving as an impetus for those still listening. The interstitial space of Mathu's front yard is, again, like all witnessed memory, on the borderland between private and public spheres.

When he returns to confess, Charlie uses history on his own terms. In fact, he insists on being addressed with "a handle...like Mister. Mr. Biggs" (187). His self-actualization as a man has so drastically changed his paradigm that he wants the labels others use for him to reflect this internal change. He is not ashamed of his actions or embarrassed that he has been hiding; rather he says, "I ain't Big Charlie, nigger boy, no more, I'm a man. Y'all hear me? A man came back. Not no nigger boy. A nigger boy run and run and run. But a man came back. I'm a man" (187). Charlie appropriates the word *nigger* for his own use here. From the white, hegemonic point of view, a "nigger" obeys, maintaining the status quo. Charlie redefines the term, arguing that a "nigger boy" runs from responsibility, while a "man," a mantle he now proudly takes, returns to take responsibility for his own actions.⁷⁴ This confrontation with himself is crucial to Charlie's self-actualization and his taking responsibility, for "the capacity and standing to speak for oneself about one's experiences, interests, and values, and about one's relationship with others—what we call the capacity for self-representation—is ultimately connected to, indeed partly constitutive of, one's having the status of a moral agent"

⁷⁴ Carmean points out that, "for the most part, the standard of manhood has depended upon the subjugation of someone or something...Most of all, manhood includes taking responsibility for one's actions and a willingness to face the consequences of those actions" (108).

(Blustein 344). Charlie's awareness of how the actions of his community have affected him, as well as how his actions might affect the greater community in which he lives, are necessary in his assertion of vocal and active agency. In addition to challenging an authoritative history within the context of the novel's plot, Gaines's representational practices also decenter any white, authorized, version of history or masculinity.⁷⁵

Charlie's self-possession is further revealed in the fact that his confrontation is not primarily with his accusers, but with himself. For instance, when he bears witness to his own history, he says,

‘All my life, all my life,’ Charlie said. Not to Mapes, not to us, but to himself. ‘That’s all I ever done, all my life, was to run from people. From black, from white; from nigger, from Cajun, both. All my life. Made me do what they wanted me to do, and ‘bused me if I did it right, and ‘bused me if I did it wrong—all my life. And I took it.’ (188)

His testimony is for himself, not for others; his journey is one that insists that he has been complicit in his own abuse and now must challenge that participation from his own place of autonomy. Charlie's life is transformed, and the freedom he finds to chart his own course strengthens the community, for Gaines has each member of the quarters touch him, “hoping that some of that stuff he had found back there in the swamps might rub off” (210).⁷⁶

Gaines's text is concerned with preventing historical erasure by challenging the status quo. These men have lived long lives; most of them are in their seventies, and are

⁷⁵ Beavers reads the end of the novel as a deconstruction of “the primacy of the white male voice, because the novel's narrative format has argued that voices are contingent on other voices whether they are discordant or not” (*Wrestling* 173).

⁷⁶ Lee Papa argues that, “Only in seeing one man take on the consequences of completely owning his identity—Charlie goes from coward to named leader with the course of a single day—are the people on Marshall able to complete their self-realization” (189). Papa makes a compelling case for the divinity of Charlie as he transcends the bounds of an “imposed religious or legal system” (188).

thus less concerned with a system of injustice than with bearing witness to their traumatic pasts and acknowledging their personal participation in their oppression. Gaines tracks the return of the subject through small steps of resistance offered by each man who speaks up to Mapes; these men assert their agency first by bearing witness to their stories of trauma and loss, and then reclaiming their positions as self-actualized subjects, allowing them to remember, mourn or celebrate history. Gaines is thus, ultimately, hopeful in *A Gathering*. His representational practices provide patterns of resistance which effectively challenge, and then change, the status quo. These acts are necessarily personal and public in nature, as each man must confess his own participation in his oppression even as he bears witness to the abuse he has suffered and articulates the history he will now claim. Situating their accounts of witness in an interstitial space, Gaines places this gathering of elderly, now empowered, men, into context with African men and women in diaspora who give voice to their own histories to resist oppression globally.

Our attention now turns to the work of Paule Marshall, who is concerned, like Gaines, with the ways in which those of African descent lose their ability to witness their own pasts by replacing their diasporic consciousness with the value system of the hegemonic power structure under which they struggle. Similar to Morrison and Gaines's writing, Marshall figures the role of ancestors as empowering, highlighting the importance of physically recognizing their influence in any diasporic attempt at self-actualization. Just as Gaines's men find the strength to witness their past traumas in the "interstitial space" of Mathu's yard, Marshall explicitly emphasizes the crucial role community must play in her portrayal of diasporic consciousness. In fact, Marshall's

interests exceed those of Gaines, for she not only demands the changing of the status quo, she also insists on the integration of one's consciousness of a rich, African heritage into one's understanding of herself and her community.

Chapter 4
The Past as (Dis)Orienting Force:
Diasporic Consciousness in *Praisesong for the Widow*

The theme of separation and loss the note embodied, the unacknowledged longing it conveyed summed up feelings that were beyond words, feelings and a host of subliminal memories that over the years had proven more durable and trustworthy than the history with its trauma and pain out of which they had come. After centuries of forgetfulness and even denial, they refused to go away. The note was a lamentation that could hardly have come from the rum keg of a drum. Its source had to be the heart, the bruised still-bleeding innermost chamber of the collective heart. – Praisesong

Born in New York to Barbadian parents in 1929, Paule Marshall negotiates cross-cultural identities within the African diaspora in her writing. Although she grew up in Brooklyn, her family was deeply imbedded in the Barbadian community there; this reality shaped her awareness of a doubled ostracism that prevented her acceptance both into the African American community and by hegemonic white culture.⁷⁷ Rather than promoting resistance or assimilation into any set community, Marshall's writing explores how diasporic consciousness affects subject positionality. In the twentieth century in New York, the Harlem Renaissance of the 1920s and the broader New Negro Movement helped create and sustain the notion of African American culture and artistic ability, while the development of the Black Protest novel illuminated ways in which black men were excluded from mainstream, white American culture as they were marginalized and rendered powerless. Marshall, incorporating elements of both of these traditions, writes in a new vein. It is as if she attempts to answer a question proposed by bell hooks:

How do we create an oppositional worldview, a consciousness, an identity, a standpoint that exists not only as that struggle which also opposes dehumanization but as that movement which enables creative, expansive self-actualization? Opposition is not enough.
(*Yearning* 15)

⁷⁷ As Dorothy Hamer Denniston asserts, "Marshall's uniqueness as a contemporary black female artist stems from her ability to write from these three levels of awareness, [black, Caribbean and American]" (xiii).

Indeed, Marshall's novel, *Praisesong for the Widow* (1983) responds to hooks' call for creating an oppositional consciousness; this novel not only resists hegemonic forces, but also "enables creative, expansive self-actualization" (hooks, *Yearning* 15).

Although she acknowledges the frustrating limits placed on African and Caribbean Americans, Marshall is most interested in synthesizing a diasporic identity that celebrates the positive cultural elements of African heritage while also illuminating an awareness of a shared history which provides the foundation for communal narrative making and personal agency.⁷⁸ In *Praisesong*, Marshall promotes a notion of cyclical

⁷⁸ Scholars have assessed Marshall's work as representative of a unique Caribbean perspective of Civil Rights era New York (*Brown Girl, Brownstones*), as well as illuminative of the ongoing, exploitative influence of Western hegemonic powers on West Indian spaces and culture. Marshall's work has in fact been claimed by several fields, including African American, Caribbean, Black feminist, immigrant, and postcolonial studies. In 1974, Lloyd Brown notes Marshall's "Pan-African sensibility" (159), while Marcia Keizs similarly reads Marshall as a "synthesis of Black people—of Third World people" (71), and Keith Sandiford claims that, "all her major fiction so far has brought the compelling durability of ritual to figure in the encounter between African-descended peoples and the New World" (371). Indeed, Black feminist scholar Barbara Christian establishes Marshall's penchant for critically "explor[ing] the cultural continuity of peoples of African descent" even as she recognizes Marshall as an important voice in examining and "delineat[ing] the values of the new World" ("Ritualistic Process" 74). Barbara Frey Waxman argues that Marshall creates a "new, differently energized novelistic genre" by integrating Caribbean and African rituals and speech patterns, and "by bringing together elements of fiction, history, music and dance" ("Dancing" 97). Stelamaris Coser makes a cogent argument that Marshall has "reread and better comprehend[ed] [her] own past as [a] woman and black in the United States by setting history within an inter-American framework" (19). While much of the scholarship has examined Marshall's view of West Indian and African American communities as contentious and yet connected, I examine the ways in which she figures diasporic consciousness as threatened by Western cultural norms and as necessary for personal agency. In this way, this chapter takes scholarship a step further, not merely recognizing African elements and places of conflict between Caribbean and American culture, but, by using Edward Said's postcolonial theory on resistance and culture, illuminating the positive spaces of intersection Marshall highlights as she figures cyclical time in *Praisesong for the Widow*.

Shanna Greene Benjamin argues that Marshall resolves this hybridization by infusing her work with a "distinctly African presence," emphasizing the "central role of African ways of knowing as an alternative to Western individualist values" (49). More specifically, Elizabeth McNeil reads *Praisesong* as, "a Gullah initiation journey" (186). Rather than add to the significant body of scholarship tracing the African mythology and symbolism Marshall's work exhibits, I explore the way in which she figures an African legacy capable of acting on the present. Similarly, not only delineating the binary of the Western obsession with money and a rich African heritage of language, dance, and community, I go on to analyze how Marshall in fact breaks down binaries and instead holds a fluid view of integrated identity based on African diasporic consciousness. For Marshall, such individual autonomy is necessarily linked with the experience of the diasporic community.

Much of the remaining work done on Marshall centers on her figuring of womanhood and sexuality, as Eugenia L. DeLamotte argues: Marshall is always "interested in the interplay between

time that enables history to act on Avey Johnson, who has divorced herself from her past and culture. Marshall's figuring of history differs widely from what we have seen in Gaines's approach, which requires men to act as a result of bearing witness to a silent past. While her approach also challenges the view of Morrison we discussed in *Paradise*, which figures history as a thing to be manipulated in order to establish power, Marshall's representational practices are congruent with the portrayal of the ancient properties which Morrison imbues with physical agency in *Tar Baby*. In *Praisesong*, the physical action of the past and her encounter with her African heritage leads Avey to develop a diasporic consciousness, allowing her to reclaim her history, connect with her community and revise her future.

Consciousness of the African diaspora informs much of Marshall's writing. Paul Christopher Johnson's work on diaspora is helpful in defining this term, for he asserts that, "diasporas are social identifications based on shared memory bridges linking a lived space and a left-behind place. The remembered land must be sustained through periodic physical returns, imagined and ritualized returns, or both" (48). In an interview with

women's agency and oppression, which has always to do, in her work, with women's struggle for an individual autonomy strong enough to support a significant connection with a broader, collective struggle for independence" (4). Further, Missy Dehn Kubitschek has read Marshall as "highlighting age, continual process, and female mentoring and its relationship to empowerment and subsequent articulation as significant elements of her women's quests" (44), while Ann Armstrong Scarboro describes a "paradigm of self-renewal" which occurs in all of her novels (28). Joyce Pettis has done some of the most thoughtful work on Marshall as she argues that, "Marshall uses the journey motif to communicate the necessity of movement away from the debilitation caused by fracturing" (*Toward Wholeness* 1) from the "consequences of cultural displacement for people of African descent" (10). Heather Hathaway reads Marshall in a similar light, finding that, "the forces of migration, racial and national affiliation, and 'Americanization' can merge to produce uniquely hybridized and at times profoundly homeless, black American immigrant identities" (5). I appreciate Marshall's focus on spaces and moments of fracture and displacement in terms of gender, language, and nationality, for I read her as challenging master narratives—much like Morris on—as she explores issues of identity and belonging in contentious spaces. Indeed unlike many scholars, I do not read Marshall advocating a disavowal from the African American community in order to discover Avey's African roots in *Praisesong*; instead, I look for spaces of intersection, where the past acts on and productively transforms the present.

Pettis, Marshall articulates her understanding of these two spaces: “It was very early on that I had a sense of a very distinct difference between *home*, which had to do with the West Indies, and *this country*, which had to do with the United States” (117). Johnson goes on to clarify how the notion of diaspora helps one negotiate these spaces, explaining that, “being ‘in diaspora’ is best understood not as the final closing of those gaps [in space, in time and in memory], but rather as the active engagement with, and evocation of, such gaps as a source of meaning” (48). In *Praisesong*, even more explicitly than in the oppositional narratives of *Paradise* or *A Gathering*, Marshall engages such gaps in order to develop a diasporic consciousness which provides a framework for how Avey will position herself as a self-actualized subject within a community.

Marshall’s approaches to history not only highlight the pain and exclusions faced by African and Caribbean Americans but also celebrate the cultural legacies imbedded in the African diaspora. Indeed, Denniston claims that “Marshall reclaims African culture for black diasporan peoples” (xiv). Like Morrison and Gaines, Marshall promotes a view of history which necessitates an affirmation of identity rooted in diaspora. First, there is the simple reality that her novels and short stories in large part contain Caribbean and American elements; Marshall’s own experience of life reflects the African diaspora internationally.⁷⁹ Her exploration of the processes of reclaiming one’s history and developing self-actualization therefore promotes an inclusive view that prizes connections over differences.

⁷⁹ Hathaway agrees that because Marshall is “a second-generation immigrant who identifies equally with United States and Caribbean culture, [she] creates characters who feel intimately linked to and move freely between both worlds” (10).

Marshall rejects the idea that legitimization can be achieved through work or white notions of success and instead insists that agency is rooted in self-understanding *and* in the affirmation of the larger diasporic community. She exposes what Mervyn C. Alleyne has called “the corruption of the minds of those African slaves who come to accept the race and culture hierarchy” (82). Growing up in Brooklyn, Marshall heard her mother and her friends talk every afternoon after long work days cleaning the homes of white women. Such talking “restored them to a sense of themselves and reaffirmed their self-worth. Through language they were able to overcome the humiliations of the work-day” (Marshall, *Reena* 6). Asserting the power of language reveals Marshall’s notion that self actualization cannot be achieved through financial success or routine work but must be founded on an understanding of how one’s current place fits into a shared history of oppression and resistance. Indeed, Marshall admits that her mother’s peers

suffered a triple invisibility, being black, female and foreigners. They really didn’t count in American society except as a source of cheap labor. But given the kind of women they were, they couldn’t tolerate the fact of their invisibility, their powerlessness. And they fought back, using the only weapon at their command: the spoken word. (*Reena* 7)

For Marshall, the interior lives of Africans in diaspora are most important to their empowerment.

For example, in *The Fisher King* (2000), Marshall writes of a little boy whose parentage is questioned. After asserting that his father is African, he is charged to make something of himself not because it will improve his situation in New York or as a West Indian, but because he is part of a much bigger legacy. He is asked, “you got some of all of us in you, dontcha? What you gonna do with all the Colored from all over creation

you got in you? Better be somethin' good" (34). Marshall figures the creation of self-awareness based on his connection with the greater African diaspora, not simply the West Indian community in New York. Indeed, Marshall advocates celebrating rootedness rather than only mourning the difficulties associated with an African heritage in Westernized nations. *The Fisher King* depicts a community fraught with the divisions perceived between West Indians and Americans, and yet Marshall acknowledges both that their heritage unites them in victimization and that they can come together in constructive change. She argues that, "West Indian and American alike—everybody catching it but a hundred times worse if you black—crowd together" (*Fisher* 99). In Marshall's view, racism in the United States can effectively unite minorities, not only through hardship but also through resistance. She says of a community destroyed by the race riots of the sixties, "You even see a number of young people moving in, young folks who understand it's up to us to save what's ours" (*Fisher* 49). This character understands that the purpose of identity rooted in diaspora is not only to acknowledge common abuses but to assert common agency.

In her most celebrated novel, *Brown Girl, Brownstones*, Marshall explores this tendency to allow diasporic consciousness to cause conflict and the loss of empowerment rather than to promote a sense of belonging which fosters resistance and hope. For instance, Silla and Deighton adopt very different understandings of history and security. Silla tries to prove her worth in a materialistic American culture by working and saving in order to buy her own brownstone. Having adopted a white measuring stick, Silla recognizes the difficulty in finding success in either New York or Barbados:

The white people treating we like slaves still and we taking it. The rum shop and the church join together to keep we pacify and in ignorance. That's Barbados. It's a terrible thing to know that you gon be poor all yuh life, no matter how hard you work... You does kind of die inside. (70)

Silla resists this temptation, though, and is convinced that she is capable of working hard enough to have a “little something so you can keep your head up and not have these white people push you ‘bout like you’s cattle” (172). Indeed, her determination to find American-style success amazes her friends engaged in the same attempts. Florrie Trotman says of Silla, “you’s a real-real Bajan woman. You can bear up under I don know what” (200). Silla’s husband, on the other hand, listlessly pursues artistic integrity as a basis for his identity and jumps at the chance to own land in the Caribbean. This reveals the fact that his foundation remains in Barbados, because for him, security comes from returning home as a successful, wealthy man. He is unconcerned with American paradigms of value, and yet he is eventually destroyed by his inability to live up to his own expectations. Although her determination is admirable, Silla is ultimately portrayed as harsh and unrelenting in her desire to throw off white oppression by adhering to white standards of success. Marshall thus complicates the notion that assimilation into American culture is a worthwhile goal for Caribbean Americans, while she also acknowledges that possessing a diasporic consciousness can weigh one down in hopelessness, rather than empowering individual autonomy.

Similarly, Selina is torn between cultures—fascinated by the Barbadian influence on her mother’s and father’s self-awareness and relationships and ashamed of the pervasiveness of that influence in her life as an American teen. As she is confronted with

her racial and ethnic ambiguity, her lover helps her understand that choosing one group with whom she might identify will ultimately limit her autonomy. Clive argues,

You can't do that because then you admit what some white people would have you admit and what some negroes do admit—that you are only Negro, some flat, one-dimensional, bas-relief figure which is supposed to explain everything about you. You commit an injustice against yourself by admitting that, because, first, you rule out your humanity, and second, your complexity as a human being. Oh hell, I'm not saying that being black in this goddamn white world isn't crucial. No one but us knows how corrosive it is, how it maims us all, how it rings our lives. (252)

Marshall here clearly reveals the underlying complexities behind movements like Black Power or the Black is Beautiful campaign: Claiming one's blackness is important in affirming one's subjectivity, but such assertions can also be limiting in Marshall's view. She instead argues that Selina must work to affirm a more complex understanding of both her image and her identity.

Marshall challenges the notion made popular in these movements that claiming blackness will somehow help African Americans resignify the label *black*. At the end of the novel, Selina realizes that

their idea of her was only an illusion, yet so powerful that it would stalk her down the years, confront her in each mirror and from the safe circle of their eyes, surprise her even in the gleaming surface of a table. It would intrude in every corner of her life, tainting her small triumphs—as it had tonight—and exulting at her defeats. She cried because, like all her kinsman, she must somehow prevent it from destroying her inside and find a way for her real face to emerge. (291)

Marshall suggests that in order to develop agency, Selina must connect with her “kinsmen,” a word connoting her connection to the greater African diaspora, even as she views her face—her personhood—as more than simply brown.

In her collection of writing called *Reena and Other Stories* (1983), Marshall furthers this idea that black women must confront the image placed upon them by others. She claims,

that definition of me, of her and millions like us, formulated by others to serve out their fantasies, a definition we have to combat at an unconscionable cost to the self and even use, at times, in order to survive; the cause of so much shame and rage as well as, oddly enough, a source of pride: simply, what it has meant, what it means, to be a black woman in America. (73)

For Marshall, like Gaines's Gable and Charlie, black women must be aware of how they are labeled even as they work to resignify themselves. Empowered agency is not achieved simply by proving a stereotype wrong through one's participation in a system that was developed primarily to oppress those in the African diaspora. Rather than only thinking defensively, Marshall promotes the hard work of resignification as African and Caribbean Americans celebrate their unique cultural heritages and their common ancestry. Indeed, in "Reena", Marshall claims she must physically go to Africa

for myself and for my children. It is important that they see black people who have truly a place and history of their own and who are building for a new, and, hopefully, more sensible world. And I must see it, get close to it, because I can never lose the sense of being a displaced person here in America because of my color. (90)

For Marshall, her Caribbean and American labels make sense in light of her position in the African diaspora. Any attempt to justify her place as a minority who is only part of an immigrant community is portrayed as a failed positioning. As Simone A. James Alexander argues, "Marshall conceives the struggle of Afro-Caribbean women and African American women for self-worth and recognition as a struggle of universal capacity and capability, directly linked to the struggles of the mainland Africans" (39).

In short, Marshall argues that identity must be understood in terms of the engaging realities of the African diaspora.⁸⁰

In *The Chosen Place, The Timeless People* (1969), Marshall reveals that this diaporic perspective is rooted in a shared history of colonialism. Bourne Island is the setting of this novel which explores ongoing colonial effects. Merle, who is the product of a black woman and a wealthy, land owning white man, was born on this Caribbean island but has spent significant time in the metropole of Britain. In many ways she physically represents the postcolonial situation with which many Caribbean islands are still grappling. Indeed, the text describes Merle as “some larger figure in whose person was summed up both Bournehills and its people” (160). Referencing the ongoing investment of the United States into Bournehills, Merle says “signed, sealed, and delivered. The whole bloody place. And to the lowest bidder. Who says the auction block isn’t still with us?” (148). In this way, Marshall demonstrates the relationships between individual choices and greater systems of racial inequality worldwide.

Merle wants to right the wrongs of the past, but Saul helps her understand that the injustices of her family are related to global problems. He tells her that her family’s particular courses of action “all go back to the same goddamn inhumane system that began before you were born, here in Bourne Island, in my country, all over the hemisphere. You know that. So how can you blame yourself for her death? That’s like blaming yourself for the entire history that brought it about” (178). It is no easy task to explore one’s past for present resolution in Marshall’s fiction, and yet it is necessary to look to the past for common experiences of oppression and for the actions of resistance

⁸⁰ See the Introduction for theorization of my views of African diasporic identity.

that can be found there. Merle illuminates the realities of postcolonial islands now dependent on the United States for aid and investment, even as Marshall demonstrates the connectedness of all those in the African diaspora and the importance of understanding the past. Merle argues, “it’s a good thing. More of us should try it. It’s usually so painful though, most people run from it. But sometimes it’s necessary to go back before you can go forward, really forward” (179). Indeed, this history often haunts, as past trauma represents an extreme moment in which escape or even avoidance are not in one’s control, often leading to overwhelming disempowerment.⁸¹ For Marshall, the history of colonialism is not an isolated episode of the past but continually determines and influences the present.

Edward Said agrees with Marshall here, for in *Culture and Imperialism* he argues that, “even as we fully comprehend the pastness of the past, there is no just way in which the past can be quarantined from the present. Past and present inform each other, each implies the other and, each co-exists with the other” (4). He does not argue that one must simply consider history but that the past is an actor in the present alongside people attempting to shape their realities. Indeed, for Said, understanding the dynamics of the present necessarily involves looking beyond the immediate, both in perspective and for actors influencing each moment. For example, in speaking of American identity in his introduction, he argues,

The battle within it is between advocates of a unitary identity and those who see the whole as a complex but not reductively unified one. This opposition implies two different perspectives, two historiographies, one linear and subsuming, the other contrapuntal and often nomadic. My argument is that only the second

⁸¹ See the Introduction for contextualization on the disempowering effects of trauma.

perspective is fully sensitive to the reality of historical experience. Partly because of empire, all cultures are involved in one another; none is single and pure, all are hybrid, heterogeneous, extraordinarily differentiated, and unmonolithic. (*Culture and Imperialism* xxv)

Marshall's representational practices reflect this second perspective, for she illuminates the reality of the ongoing influence of empire even as she reveals a rich African or Caribbean culture that might be losing its influence, but whose evolving effectiveness cannot be denied. In this chapter, I read Marshall's *Praisesong* in light of Said's three demands of resistance: First, "to see the community's history whole, coherently, integrally" (*Culture and Imperialism* 215); Secondly, the "idea that resistance, far from being merely a reaction to imperialism, is an alternative way of conceiving human history" (*Culture and Imperialism* 216); and thirdly, the ability to "pull away from separatist nationalism toward a more integrative view of human community and human liberation" (*Culture and Imperialism* 216). Marshall's promotion of diasporic consciousness as crucial to an integrated sense of identity allows her to develop a congruent view of history which prizes African cultural legacies and modes of resistance in her inclusive notion of the diaspora.

Because Said sees art as a means of analyzing and preserving history, he recognizes the novel as a product of and a commentary on postcolonialism, and argues that we must see the novel in "its position in the history and world of empire" (*Culture and Imperialism* xii). This surely alludes to the reality of biased publishing practices which honor the white, male, point of view; indeed, until recently, novels published and taught were products of this hegemonic world view. Said reads more deeply into novels, however, when he asserts their use as both a tool of subjection and a means of resistance.

He claims, “stories are at the heart of what explorers and novelists say about strange regions of the world; they also became the method colonized people use to assert their own identity and the existence of their own history” (*Culture and Imperialism* xii).⁸² Marshall certainly uses *Praisesong* to celebrate the African diasporic culture even as she also tracks the difficulty of ignoring the alluring power of empire. Said argues that, “we must take stock of the nostalgia for empire, as well as the anger and resentment it provokes in those who were ruled, and we must try to look carefully and integrally at the culture that nurtured the sentiment, rationale, and above all the imagination of empire” (*Culture and Imperialism* 12). Said’s phrase exposes the power of empire to dictate desire and cultural legitimacy even in a *postcolonial* world.

For instance, in *Praisesong*, the Johnsons lose themselves in their effort to establish themselves in white, American culture even as their motivation for success is their disdain for white, elitist culture. Marshall exposes Avey and Jay’s former lives as devoid of meaning because they try to assert their self-actualization by meeting white cultural benchmarks. hooks has argued that,

many black men who express the greatest hostility toward the white male power structure are often eager to gain access to that power...[they offer] less a critique of the white male patriarchal social order and more a reaction against the fact that they have not been allowed full participation in that power game. (*Ain’t I A Woman* 94)

Marshall’s presentation of Jay implicitly reveals this truth, for Jay loses his soul not by becoming successful on *his* terms in black America but by trying to mimic white,

⁸² Indeed, he argues that, “as we look back at the cultural archive, we begin to reread it not univocally but contrapuntally, with a simultaneous awareness both of the metropolitan history that is narrated and of those other histories against which (and together with which) the dominating discourse acts” (*Culture and Imperialism* 51).

hegemonic culture. Marshall's diasporic consciousness, like Gaines's, is rooted in her belief that a postcolonial paradigm shapes all aspects of the African diaspora.⁸³

Much of Said's postcolonial discourse derives from his analysis of Western culture. He suggests that "studying the relationship between the 'West' and its dominated cultural 'others' is not just a way of understanding an unequal relationship between unequal interlocutors, but also a point of entry into studying the formation and meaning of Western cultural practices themselves" (*Culture and Imperialism* 191). Marshall engages in this analysis as she describes the ways in which Western cultural goals subsume Avey's more deeply treasured African sensibilities. In *Praisesong*, Marshall painstakingly explains how Avey and her husband, Jay, like Morrison's Jadine and Morgan twins, systematically deny their complex cultural heritage and gradually re-center on the single focus of financial stability and American success. Dionne Brand argues that those in diaspora are always in contention with their host culture as they slowly replace their own cultural values with those of the hegemonic power:

Blacks in the Diaspora obscure themselves as much as they are obscured. They observe and rectify incessantly. Hair, skin tone, talk, fashion. Fashions are not fashions at all but refashioning; language is not communication but reinvention. They are never in place but on display. (Brand 50-51)

Like Gaines, Marshall illuminates the ways in which Jay and Avey participate in their oppression as they ignore and distance themselves from their own culture and instead work to establish their worth in white, financial standards.

⁸³ Christian agrees, arguing, "one could posit that African Americans, although they lived within the United States, were, because of their historical experience of slavery and contemporary experience of racism, an internally colonized group just as the colored folk in the majority of the world were oppressed under the yoke of colonization" (*New Black* 191).

Said recognizes that the ability to distinguish one's own cultural goals and allegiance from the dominant culture is significant and rare: "We must not minimize the shattering importance of that initial insight—peoples being conscious of themselves as prisoners in their own land—for it returns again and again in the literature of the imperialized world" (*Culture and Imperialism* 214). Said agrees with Marshall and hooks that defensively resisting oppression cannot alone establish healthy understandings of self; in fact, he argues that, "culture is a way of fighting against extinction and obliteration. Culture is a form of memory against effacement" (*Culture and Resistance* 159).

He goes on to say that because "culture is a concept that includes a refining and elevating element, each society's reservoir of the best that has been known and thought" it is "in this sense, a source of identity, and a rather combative one at that" (*Culture and Imperialism* xiii). Marshall portrays the fluid culture she prizes in *Praisesong* in this light, for it provides a wealth of dance, song and movement that connects all those in the African diaspora. Culture, as the key to repositioning herself as a subject that Lebert Joseph reveals to a lost Avey, serves as "a source of identity" as it is protected as the best of the people of Carriacou (Said, *Culture and Imperialism* xiii). Indeed, Marshall posits here that developing a consciousness of one's heritage which both resists oppression and celebrates a complex African cultural authority is a crucial aspect of asserting empowered agency. Courtney Thorsson anticipates my argument in her claim that, "it is indeed crucial that Avey decides at novel's end to spread the foundational story of this [diasporic] consciousness; the work of *Praisesong* is primarily to demonstrate how such a consciousness is formed" (646). This is not to suggest that African culture is a static

importable item; nevertheless, Marshall figures diasporic roots as a unifying and empowering aspect of one's historical foundation, even as she also recognizes that the trauma of the past must be acknowledged.

Avey's isolation from her familial roots and her complete break from the diaspora has been well documented by scholars.⁸⁴ At the age of ten, she responds with skepticism to Aunt Cuney's tales of the Ibos. After hearing this awe-inspiring story of resistance, Avey asks, "But how come they didn't drown, Aunt Cuney?" (39). Avey's disbelief signals her future disengagement from a collective, diasporic consciousness. As a young married couple, Avey and Jay use blues music to transform them from the reality of the discrimination they face and the poverty in which they live. Jay, coming home from a day of being overlooked and abused at multiple jobs, listens to music in order to affirm his distinctive, vital cultural heritage and thereby to assert his own identity as a man capable of vision and provision for his wife and children. This habit ends, as has been much discussed,⁸⁵ and Jay and Avey substitute integrated selves and firm links with their pasts and their community for selves devoid of historical grounding who exist only to achieve financial stability. This transition is made particularly evident when the Johnsons move from an apartment on Halsey Street in the heart of Brooklyn to a house in suburban White Plains.

⁸⁴ Lean'tin Bracks notes that, "[Avey] and [Jay] embrace the American dream of success, abandoning the truths of the African American community of Harlem for a white suburb" (18). Pettis explains why this disavowal of the past is dangerous, by claiming, "Marshall sees cultural continuity among black people as an essential component of their wholeness" (*Toward Wholeness* 29).

⁸⁵ Alexander has pointed out that, "Employing the blues as a vehicle of and for self expression, Jay accordingly vents his anger and displeasure with his life" (169), while he also "exerts power, control and independence" through the medium of a genre of music which represents the African American experience (170). Jay's choice, then, to stop this musical ritual signifies his distance from the African American struggle and represents his personal disempowerment. Christian similarly argues that in an effort to protect themselves, "[Jay] and Avey commit a kind of spiritual suicide, for they give up their music, heritage and sensuality, their expression of themselves" ("Ritualistic Process" 77).

While Avey and Jay prize their connections at their club and in their suburban community, Marshall exposes them as insubstantial. Marshall's troubling of Avey's markers of success is manifested on the *Bianca Pride* cruise ship—a fraught space for those in the African diaspora—as Avey's relationships with her best friends are portrayed as shallow because they relate to each other as static stereotypes of upper class women. Avey's isolation is finally clear through her referring to Jay as “Jerome Johnson”, her inability to grieve him upon his death, and her utter disconnection from her daughter, Marion, who celebrates her African heritage. Indeed, Marion's embracing of those roots confronts Avey's distance. Avey is conscious of her isolation from her greater community as she rhetorically asks,

Hadn't she lived through most of the sixties and the early seventies as if Watts and Selma and the tanks and Stoner guns in the streets of Detroit somehow did not pertain to her, denying her rage, and carefully effacing any dream that might have come to her during the night by the time she awoke the next morning. (140)

Early in the novel, Avey intentionally avoids history which provides her a foundational space within a larger community.

Although Marshall asserts the importance of a diasporic consciousness throughout *Praisesong*, the text begins with a view of Avey which reveals her fragmentation and passivity as the unacknowledged results of a traumatic past. For instance, when Joseph, who embodies this diasporic consciousness, asks her to what tribe she belongs, Avey cannot answer him, and in fact does not even understand to what he refers. As I have previously noted, Brand argues that Avey's experience is common to all those in diaspora, saying, “we were not from the place where we lived and we could not remember where we were from or who we were” (5). Brand frames those in the African

diaspora as having passed through the Door of No Return, arguing that this reality both unites all those whose ancestors were slaves stolen from Africa, and haunts those in diaspora as an elusive, unknowable point of origin. Marshall utilizes such a conflicted, passive process in her portrayal of Avey's leaving the ship. Avey is conscious of a haunted feeling, for she constantly looks over her shoulder. She is passively propelled by a force outside of herself that she does not understand. Brand argues that one can travel "with a will" or "in disarray, undone, a consciousness formed around displacement, needing nothing that one can put a finger on, needing a centre" (92). As noted in the Introduction, this disorientation and fragmentation are results of trauma so overwhelming that the self cannot integrate the experience, and thus becomes fractured, losing agency. As *Praisesong* opens, Avey is clearly traveling "in disarray," for she frantically and furtively packs, unconscious of why (Brand 92).

Further, Avey's dreams reveal the conflict in which she is engaged. Brand argues that those in the diaspora are facing cultural erasure, and that "even our dreams [are] not free of this conflict" (17). She asserts,

This existence in the Diaspora is like that—dreams from which one never wakes...One is not in control in dreams; dreams take place, the dreamer is captive, even though it is the dreamer who is dreaming. Captured in one's own body, in one's own thoughts, to be out of possession of one's mind; our cognitive schema is captivity. (28)

Indeed, Marshall's Avey is on a psychological journey which begins with dreams she neither controls nor fully understands.⁸⁶ While on a cruise with two of her middle/upper class friends, Avey's sleep is invaded by a dream of her Aunt Cuney "waiting for her on

⁸⁶ Christian claims that, "Marshall develops Avey Avatara Johnson's journey to wholeness by juxtaposing external reality with memory, dream, hallucination—disjointed states of mind—in which the past and the present fuse" ("Ritualistic Process" 75).

the road beside Shad Dawson's wood of cedar and oak" (*Praisesong* 40)—the same road Aunt Cuney led her on when she took a young Avey to the Landing to tell the story of the Ibos. In her dream, Aunt Cuney moves from simply "patient[ly] summon[ing]" Avey, to "coaxing her forward, gently urging her" to come with her to the Landing (41). As Avey grows more and more annoyed, Aunt Cuney becomes "more impassioned" (41), until she is "pleading with her now to join her, silently exhorting her" as "a preacher" might (42). Although Avey tries to resist and assert her own agency in contrast to her ancestor's summons, Aunt Cuney denies Avey the agency to refuse. As Waxman explains, "Cuney is committed to enacting and preserving her cultural heritage, and her intention in telling the child Avey the story of the Ibos is to elicit the same commitment from her niece, to join Avey's mind to the Ibos" ("Widow's Journey" 95). Instead, she is locked in a "silent tug-of-war" with her aunt that eventually ends in Avey beating Aunt Cuney until the two "began trading...blow for blow" (*Praisesong* 44).

The shocking physicality of this dream is significant, as is Avey's sense that she is trapped against her will, for both illuminate the traumatic past as a physical actor on the present. Thus, Marshall uses language suggesting restriction—"locked" (43), "tightly clenched" (44), and "manacle" (43)—in order to convey the captivity the past imposes upon Avey. The subtext for this physical confrontation is the way in which Avey has rejected her Aunt Cuney's legacy, and, by extension, the trauma of the diaspora and her African cultural rootedness.⁸⁷ Avey cannot exhibit autonomy while she avoids Aunt Cuney, and thus her own history.

⁸⁷ This separation from Aunt Cuney, which leads to Avey's increasing isolation from her past, reflects Susan Willis's argument that, "the black woman's relation to history is first of all a relationship to mother and grandmother" (5).

Marshall's representational practices clearly reflect Brand's notion of the "body [as] a place of captivity" (35). Not only are Avey's wrists sore following the dream, but she begins to lose control of her body. For the next two days, Avey is nauseated at the mere thought of food and is compelled to flee the presence of people. She starts to experience what Brand describes as being "captured in one's own body" (28). I am arguing that Marshall brings a diasporic consciousness to bear on Avey's unsuspecting mind. Without her knowledge or endorsement, Avey begins to experience dissociation from her body that is, according to Brand, a result of trauma and common for those in the African diaspora. This reference is clearly intentional, for it is here in the text that Marshall explicitly references the presence of postcolonial history. Avey has a flashback in which she describes the *Bianca Pride's* Versailles Room to her daughter Marion. Marion, conscious of greater African American and Afro-Caribbean communities, asks Avey, "Do you know how many treaties were signed there, in that infamous Hall of Mirrors, divvying up India, the West Indies, the world?" (47). Indeed, in Marshall's writing, the diasporic past becomes an agent acting of its own accord. Avey's own passivity, as she becomes increasingly fragmented and unfamiliar to herself, is in direct proportion to the acting power of past trauma. For Marshall, as for Said and Brand, history is not a passive reality isolated from the present; rather, the past has the ability to act on and shape present realities for those in diaspora.

Not only is she attacked by a dream outside her control, but Avey's body—a physical marker of time in itself—acts of its own accord, refusing to comply with her desires to eat or to enjoy others on the cruise. As referenced earlier, the novel begins as Avey packs her bags, compelled by an outside force; Marshall makes this clear through

the frantic language she uses to describe Avey's flight. The text reads, "Giving the apprehensive glance over her shoulder, she immediately headed toward them, not even allowing herself a moment to rest her back or wipe the perspiration from her face—or to consider, quietly and rationally, which was normally her way, what she was about to do" (16). Here, the text draws a clear distinction between Avey's typical behavior and this irrational, compelled self. Marshall presents her as a woman usually concerned with measured behavior and appropriate dress, someone who would never cause a scene or be dissuaded from what she perceives to be the correct course of action. hooks comments on the endorsement of the type of life Avey is leading: "Many black women, irrespective of class status, have responded to the crisis of meaning by imitating leisure-class sexist notions of woman's role, focusing their lives on meaningless compulsive consumerism" (*Yearning* 47). Marshall reveals how fully Avey has bought into this notion of womanhood through the shock of her departure from it as she leaves the ship.

Having explicitly shown this aberration in her behavior, Marshall implies there is a post-traumatic force outside Avey's control compelling her to act. This is clear through the unwanted violent dream in which she struggles with her aunt, the involuntary revulsion she feels at food and her cruise mates, the paranoid, irrational packing she completes in a rush, and finally, in the fragmentation she feels toward her body. For instance, she does not recognize herself in the mirror: "She easily recognized [her companions] in the distant mirror. But for a long confused moment Avey Johnson could not place the woman in beige crepe de Chine and pearls seated with them" (*Praisesong* 48). Avey's failure to recognize her body is an obvious sign of her dissociation from herself, and, as discussed earlier, a coping mechanism for victims of trauma. Because

Avey and Jay have created identities divorced from their roots, she must experience fragmentation in order to become one who has an integrative view of history and who is aware of her place in the diaspora. Clearly Marshall argues through Avey that black self-actualization can only be attained through an awareness of and a reckoning with one's historical heritage. Or, as Brand might argue, one must confront and reconcile the absence felt by and the affirmation achieved through the Door of No Return. Marshall's portrayal of living in the diaspora is distinct because she recognizes both the feelings of absence and fragmentation which result from passing through the Door of No Return, and simultaneously affirms the rich cultural heritage that exists. The two realities are not mutually exclusive for Marshall; hope and despair coexist in her fiction.

Marshall's figuring of the past presents history as an agent capable of action. Indeed, I see the unknown force which compels Avey to become ill, disoriented, and, eventually to leave the ship as the traumatic past forcing Avey into action. As she sits on the balcony of her hotel in Grenada, she passively witnesses her past as a child and in her marriage to Jay. As if she is at the theatre, Avey watches as visions of her past self play out in her mind; her state of mind belies her fragmentation, for she simply allows visions to repossess her. Scarborough argues that "Avey's flashbacks purify her, because through them she relives her past and sees it with new vision. Her dreams also serve as cleansing rituals, because it is through their influence that she is put in touch with her deepest fears and longings" (30). She is not summoning memories because of a sense of nostalgia; rather, Avey, like a victim of trauma, appears to have no control and instead is bound to her chair with eyes peeled toward the film which plays before her. These visions, which appear without her request, bring about a physical reaction from her. In fact, she begins

“mourning [Jay], finally shedding the tears that had eluded her even on the day of his funeral” (*Praisesong* 134). Having been isolated from herself and her personal history for decades, the imposition of the past elicits a response of insight and grief that she cannot consciously explain. Indeed, Susan Rogers argues that Avey’s body communicates to her what she has taught her conscious mind to ignore: “her disconnection from her own sense of herself and from the African-American and Caribbean heritage which is a crucial part of that self” (77). Marshall empowers the past not only to act upon a passive Avey, but also to elicit a visceral response that serves as the impetus for emotional and psychological growth after suffering trauma.

Marshall is clear about the very real response the past causes in Avey, even as she also consistently portrays her as passive. Indeed, the morning after she “wildly” sobs, “the tears raining down” (*Praisesong* 135), she awakes with an empty mind. The text reads, “her mind, like her pocketbook outside, had been emptied of the contents of the past thirty years during the night, so that she had awakened with it like a slate that had been wiped clean, a *tabula rasa* upon which a whole new history could be written” (151). Avey is not in possession of her self as she is acted upon by her past, for she then leaves her room as a visualization of a traumatized, fragmented self: “Her hair was half combed. She was without even a little face powder. Her watch, which she never failed to put on after showering in the mornings, had been left on the vanity in the bathroom” (152). Marshall’s Avey—unlike Morrison’s Consolata, Gaines’ old men, or what we will see in D’Aguiar’s Mintah—does not intentionally revisit or reclaim her past in an effort to assert an integrated sense of identity. Rather, she passively flounders and encounters increasingly fragmented notions of herself and her past and is thus compelled to change

her course, not as an act of her own will, but as an instinctive response to the action of the past on her.

I am arguing here that Marshall sees the past as an actor capable of both confronting those disconnected from their diasporic roots and of eliciting physical and psychic responses from them which lead to healing of past trauma. In the figure of Joseph, we can examine Marshall's representational practices as they concern the past. Much has been written about this figure in the text. I appreciate the work that has been done to track the origins and connotations of his figure, primarily for the ways in which such connections bring the African diaspora to the forefront of the text of *Praisesong*.⁸⁸ For my concerns here, however, it is important to point out that Joseph, in many ways, embodies the past. Marshall portrays Joseph as a representation of this powerful expression of time in several ways. First, the text references his ability to embody multiple ages; he is first seen as a very old, and even disabled, man, but as he begins to dance, his body transforms to that of a much younger man:

But gradually, as he kept on, the strain and stiffness became less apparent. His stooped shoulders appeared to come into line. The foreshortened left leg seemed to grow with each step until it was the same length as his right. He once again looked tall enough to reach up and easily touch the thatch overhead. One by one his defects and the wear and tear of his eighty- or perhaps even ninety-odd years fell away and he was dancing after a time with the strength and agility of someone half his age. (179)

Indeed, throughout the novel Joseph eludes a linear, stable notion of age as he appears very old or young depending on his activity.

⁸⁸ Lisa D. McGill points out that Joseph functions as "Papa Legba": "It is no coincidence that the ancestral figure chosen to guide Avey is a deity worshipped by people not only in Haiti...but also in Western Africa, parts of South America, and southern portions of the United States" (111). Benjamin illuminates the ways in which the folkloric Aunt Nancy figures in the text even as she also recognizes that, "Lebert Joseph, scholars contend, represents Esu Legba, Yoruba god of the crossroads and trickster par-excellence" (53)

Not only this, but Marshall actually describes him as possessing the qualities of a clock. Avey vaguely notices his “slight movement, which he seemed unable to control, was as steady and strictly timed as the wand on a metronome or the pendulum of an old-fashioned clock” (182). Joseph is described as eluding a linear notion of time and as being the physical embodiment of time; indeed, his affect on Avey echoes what I describe as the past acting as an agent. I have earlier discussed the physical violence Avey experiences as a result of both her dream of Aunt Cuney and of the force which compels her to leave the cruise ship. In keeping with this representational practice, as Joseph endeavors to convince Avey to accompany him on the excursion, she experiences a similar physical response:

Across the way, Avey Johnson was leaning wearily against the table. She felt exhausted as if she and the old man had been fighting—actually fighting, knocking over the tables and chairs in the room as they battled with each other over the dirt floor—and that for all his appearance of frailty he had proven the stronger of the two. (184)

Marshall connects Joseph with time, and thus figures the past and Joseph as equally capable of acting on and affecting Avey’s course of action. Indeed, Marshall empowers the “Old Parents” with an agency similar to Morrison’s ancient properties in *Tar Baby* (*Praisesong* 165). Joseph articulates the sentiments of ancestors toward people who become intentionally disengaged as Avey has done: “‘You best remember them!’ he cried”... “‘If not they’ll get vex and cause you nothing but trouble. They can turn your life around in a minute, you know. All of a sudden everything start gon’ wrong and you don’ know the reason. You can’t figger it out all you try. Is the Old Parents, oui’” (165).

Joseph's caveat to Avey exists as a prophecy of sorts in the text, for she is experiencing the hell that he describes.

Marshall writes this experience of an outside force acting upon Avey into her journey several times, indicating her intention to render the past as an agent capable of action. For instance, as she finds herself in Joseph's rum shack, Avey, disoriented and confused, begins to recount her tale of experiences that she neither planned nor understood because she is "caught up in the sudden need to talk" (171). She doesn't speak as one in authority, but as someone not fully aware that she is talking at all. Indeed, her words are "drawn" from her, for something is "forcing them out, one by one" (*Praisesong* 170). As she passively begins to tell Joseph her story, Marshall reveals Avey's fragmentation from a history of trauma, and the healing power of witness as the narration reads, "The small part that was still her old self heard her declare, and was astonished. Could this be Avey Johnson talking so freely?" (170). Although Avey begins to witness the effects of her legacy of trauma, her (dis)orientation continues as she journeys back to Carriacou, a place that resembles the old world of Africa.

Her physical response to the imposition of the past becomes more violent on the boat ride from Grenada to Carriacou. There, surrounded by older women with whom she feels an instant connection, Marshall empowers the traumatic past shared by all Africans in diaspora—the Middle Passage—to act upon Avey. This, the deepest, most difficult past trauma which defines all those in diaspora, literally revisits Avey and she loses sense of the present moment as she experiences the past firsthand. In this effort, Avey is rendered helpless, losing control of her stomach as she vomits uncontrollably, and then suffering violent bowel spasms. The language Marshall uses to describe the women

around her as they try to bolster her connotes the crowded setting on ships in the Middle Passage: “They held her. Hedging her around with their bodies” (205). Here, Avey appears to be surrounded on all sides by bodies and voices, and her visceral reaction to this refiguring of the Middle Passage is a wrenching illness.

Marshall does not present Avey as a woman who is consciously disenchanted with her life, who searches her roots in an effort to redefine herself and her possibilities; she instead reveals a woman isolated from her past and therefore from herself, but who is unaware of the impact of such fragmentation on her ability to act with autonomy. Perhaps, for Marshall, when those in the African diaspora experience such radical isolation, they lose the ability to approach their pasts in transformative ways. In Avey’s case, her individual and collective histories pursue her and she helplessly responds, not with agency, but in passive compliance as she physically witnesses and reimagines the trauma of the Middle Passage.

Marshall thus offers an alternative path of resistance against cultural isolation and historical erasure as she figures the past as physically capable of acting upon Avey. Moreover, Marshall argues that resistance is not sufficient to develop empowered agency, but that recognizing traumatic loss and forming diasporic consciousness, which celebrates the African diaspora and its complex cultures, is also necessary. While Avey’s isolation has been much discussed, I am more interested in the ways that the past imposes a diasporic consciousness onto Avey which promotes a sense of community. Marshall’s intention to assert an understanding of historical legacy onto the detached Avey is evidenced first in the spatial setting of the novel. Purely on a geographical level, Marshall places Avey first in New York, a common destination for Caribbean peoples,

and then follows her as she travels more deeply into the heart of the Caribbean with each movement.⁸⁹ The multicultural nature of Avey's journey here mirrors the realities of transnationalism in her interior life and the African diasporic community.⁹⁰ As Willis has pointed out, "by situating [Avey] not in the family and in the home, but on a journey from which she looks back on family and home, Marshall lifts her character out of a purely personal experience and makes her life's story our means of access to the history of black people in the new World" (59). Furthermore, Avey's travel among islands which served as destinations for slaves purchased on or stolen from the West Coast of Africa clearly suggests a diasporic consciousness. As Pettis claims, "Avey's journeys signify the physical and cultural displacement of the African diaspora" (*Toward Wholeness* 125). Not only this, but her constant movement by ship further connotes the reality of the Middle Passage in her ancestral history, while the presence of water throughout the text recalls the motif of the sea in Caribbean diasporic writing. Consciously or not, Avey's vacation travels trace sea paths worn out in the forced creation of the African diaspora through the Atlantic slave trade.

The spatial setting of *Praisesong* suggests this consciousness, and through the experiences of Avey, Marshall further illuminates the reality of diaspora. Avey's disorientation starts with a dream of her Aunt Cuney following a day trip from the cruise onto the island of Martinique, where she overhears Patois. Hearing this language—a hybrid developed by slaves in order to communicate in French colonies—initiates Avey's

⁸⁹ Willis agrees that, "Marshall's arcs [geographically from New York to the Caribbean and back] are multidimensional and simultaneously include the individual and particular as well as the historical and communal" (57).

⁹⁰ Ifeoma Nwankwo has explained that, "transnational engagements are born of the juggling of multiple affinities, multiple ideologies, and multiple modes of defining the self and engaging the other" ("Insider and Outsider" 50).

passive and compelled movement from fragmented object to, eventually, integrated, historically aware, subject. Indeed, the narration reads, “its odd cadence, its vivid music had reached into a closed-off corner of her mind to evoke the sound of voices in Tatem. She hadn’t even realized what had happened, that a connection had been made” (196). The presence of Patois in the text, and particularly the fact that it is the primary language spoken on the Carriacou Excursion even as it also reminds Avey of her past in the American South (which serves as her closest link to Africa through her Aunt Cuney), further connotes the pervasive, transnational reality of the diaspora.

Marshall further emphasizes this interconnectedness through the amiable manner in which Avey is accepted and approached in Grenada and Carriacou. When she initially disembarks from the *Bianca Pride*, Avey feels very claustrophobic on the docks and is disturbed by the islanders who treat her as one of them. Strangers speak Patois to her, wave to her, and even mistake her for people they know. The text reads,

many of them in passing greeted Avey Johnson. A young couple leading two little girls in matching sundresses between them smiled and waved at her. An elderly man looking formal in a dark suit and tie lifted his hat. A woman in a bright yellow print carrying a small suitcase not only waved but called out something to her in Patois. (69)

Although Avey is confused when they do not treat her like a stranger, Marshall here is suggesting that there is a deep connection among all members of the African diaspora that supersedes place, time and experience. Indeed, this connection highlights what Sheila Smith McKoy calls, “the Diaspora notion of time, one that is a fusion of African cyclical time and the disruption of this cycle forced by the Middle Passage” (209), or “limbo time” (216). Avey has grown accustomed to western time, which moves linearly

and therefore distances one from one's past, but in Grenada she is confronted with this limbo time in a way that promotes community.⁹¹

Clearly, the people who remember Avey and welcome her without question adhere to this cyclical nature of diaspora time. This experience reminds Avey of moments when she was a child and a young adult in which she possessed a diasporic consciousness: "she would feel what seemed to be hundreds of slender threads streaming out from her navel and from the place where her heart was to enter those around her. And the threads went out not only to people she recognized from the neighborhood but to those she didn't know as well" (*Praisesong* 190). Before Avey's extreme disconnection from herself and her community, she understood that "she became part of, indeed the center of, a huge wide confraternity" (*Praisesong* 191). This feeling of "confraternity" continues as Avey boards the ship with Joseph. He leads her toward the elderly women sitting on the boat,

And the moment she saw them sitting there in their long somber dresses, their black hands folded in their laps and their filmy eyes overseeing everything on deck, she experienced a shock of recognition that for a moment made her forget her desire to bolt. They were—she could have sworn it!—the presiding mothers of Mount Olivet Baptist Church (her own mother's church long ago).⁹² (193-194)

Marshall, rather than emphasizing only this shared trauma, highlights the ways in which these women immediately welcome, empathize with, and care for Avey, despite their

⁹¹ Denniston argues that "the deliberate overlap of time and place is critical to Marshall's theme, for it illustrates her continuing focus on the need to remember the past, to maintain spiritual ties in the present—especially in the face of economic and so-called social advancement" (131).

⁹² This connection implies what Christian claims; specifically, that Caribbean women, no matter where they live, "share a history of slavery, servitude, colonialism, literary voicelessness, and patriarchal oppression" (*New Black* 199). Indeed, Waxman agrees that, "Avey's mystical reunion with other blacks not only inspires her to assume the role of transmitter of her cultural heritage, but also rejuvenates her because it reorients her to the future" ("Widow's Journey" 98).

never having met. Thus, Marshall's notion of diasporic consciousness is not merely a connection through trauma and loss, but a unifying sense of affirmed identity and common rootedness. Even though she spent her adult life ignoring and even denying its existence, Avey is now again experiencing the reality of the African diaspora.

Joseph articulates this diasporic consciousness, for he explains the friendliness Avey experiences on the excursion docks. He says, "All is Carriacou people. Just because we live over this side don' mean we's from this place, you know. Even when we's born here we remain Carriacou people" (164). Marshall offers here the potential for maintaining a diasporic paradigm no matter one's present setting. Not only this, but when Joseph dances and sings the Beg Pardon at the Big Drum, he says, "I don' be singing just for me one. Oh, no! Is for tout moun', he cried, his short arms in the tieless dress shirt opening as though to embrace the world. 'I has all like you in mind'" (175). Joseph embodies both time and this mindset which promotes an inherent connection within the African diaspora. Marshall first presents this possibility through Aunt Cuney's grandmother. Aunt Cuney says, "my gran' declared she just picked herself up and took off after 'em. In her mind. Her body she always usta say might be in Tatem but her mind, her mind was long gone with the Ibos..." (39).

The greatest evidence of Marshall's promotion of diasporic consciousness is in Avey's participation in the Big Drum. After a journey in which she is passive and disorientated, Avey finally begins to orient herself within a community which celebrates its heritage. For instance, as she observes the various dances, even in their decrepit state with, at times, only a few participants, she finds herself drawn to participate. She observes, "they clung to them with a tenacity she suddenly loved in them and longed for

in herself. Thoughts—new thoughts—vague and half-formed slowly beginning to fill the emptiness” (240). Indeed, these thoughts, from which she is still distanced on many levels, begin to demand new action. Avey moves closer to the dance circle, and while some of her old passivity still exists, she begins to embrace her diasporic heritage: “Her face was expressionless, her body still and composed, but her bottom lip unfolded to bare the menacing sliver of pink” (247). This change in facial positioning is significant because earlier in the text Avey trains her lip to remain tight to her teeth, hiding her gums and therein any connections she might have to African stereotypes. Revealing her teeth thus signifies an acceptance, of sorts, of her personal and collective history.

That Avey successfully affirms her integrated and congruent self on the Carriacou Excursion is evidenced in her participation in the Carriacou Tramp. The Big Drum is the main event of the Excursion, and it serves as a cultural moment which allows people to affirm their ancestry, even as they also celebrate their connectedness to one another through dance and music. Toyin Falola argues that the pieces of African culture that survive and are passed down are significant, for “the cultural bonds have fostered a feeling of diasporic consciousness, an international identity” (301). Marshall chose to make drumming and dance the vehicle for cultural expression and ancestral affirmation intentionally, for these rites were originated “in Africa, where drumming evolved as a system of communication” (Willis 18). Furthermore, Waxman claims that “African cultures also recognize dance’s affective and spiritual powers, giving dance a central place in their communal events, both secular and religious” (“Dancing” 92).

Marshall’s comment on developing an inclusive diasporic consciousness is evident here, for Avey does not learn a new dance, but instead does the Ring Shout Aunt

Cuney taught her in South Carolina. Marshall's views on the cycling of history and the possibilities for integration are clear as Avey's ancestral Ring Shout has the same "restrained glide-and-stamp, the rhythmic trudge" as the Carriacou Tramp (*Praisesong* 250). Indeed, Waxman argues, "In the act of dancing, [Avey] finds and names herself, reclaiming her ancestral name of Avatara and re-experiencing African religious ritual" ("Dancing" 96), while Marshall even goes so far as to call this dance "the shuffle designed to stay the course of history" (*Praisesong* 250). Christian is helpful here in establishing the scope of Marshall's diasporic consciousness, for she asserts that this ritual "is a collective process of begging pardon, correct naming, celebration and honoring. It is also a ceremony that combines rituals from several black societies: the Ring Dances of Tatum, the Bojangles of New York, the voodoo drums of Haiti, the rhythms of the various African people brought to the New World" ("Ritualistic Process" 82). Through Avey's participation in the Beg Pardon, Marshall affirms the continuity that is the legacy of African cultural bonds.⁹³

Much has been said about Marshall's exploration of the challenges inherent for Afro-Caribbean or African American people who successfully assimilate into middle-class, American culture. Scholars have noted that early in the novel Avey is bloated with acquisition, even as Jay began to lose himself and his diasporic consciousness as his commitment to financial success obsessed him.⁹⁴ Similarly, some critics read Avey's

⁹³ Tunde Adeleke asserts the ways in which diasporic consciousness can serve as a foundation for self-actualization: "Affirming African cultural worth thus became for some a weapon of pride, of enhance self-conception, and of psychological, if not cultural, emancipation. . . . African culture thus served as a weapon of struggle, of self-definition and of counter identity construction" (297).

⁹⁴ As Alexander asserts, "the Johnsons. . . foolishly relinquish their ancestral inheritances, thereby becoming vulnerable and powerless, both spiritual and psychic" in the hope of "material gains" (173). Indeed, McGill asserts that Avey "relinquishes the affirming power of her cultural legacy for the (dis)comfort of

journey as one of self-exploration in which she heroically disavows herself of American wealth and all its trappings so that she can pursue a life as the story-bearer she was destined to become.⁹⁵ I am arguing that Marshall's representational practices are more complicated than such analyses seem to suggest; I don't read *Praisesong* as a simple rejection of capitalism or a dismissal of American culture. Just as Avey's reclamation of her ancestral identity does not begin with her actively seeking change, she does not leave the Excursion intent on disavowing all of American culture.

hooks is helpful here, for she argues that the racial oppression and colonization Avey and the people she encounters on her journey have faced, "destroy our capacity to know the self, to know who we are. We oppose this violation, this dehumanization, when we seek self-recovery, when we work to reunite fragments of being, to recover our history" (*Talking Back* 31). Marshall's narrative of Avey's reunited fragments and recovered history is indeed a tale of resistance because it affirms that cultural heritage and diasporic consciousness are possible when a traumatic past, having been witnessed within an empowering community, loses the power to fragment. In keeping with Said's claims concerning the fluid nature of ethnic and national identities, this is neither an African-only consciousness, nor a Caribbean-only consciousness; rather, Marshall "created an imperative that Caribbean (immigrant) and African American communities

middle class American life" (100); while Denniston asserts that Marshall is "concerned with American materialism and how upwardly mobile black people can fend off its spiritually debilitating effects" (127). Heide Macpherson also notes, "by taking on the trappings of the middle class, Avey has lost part of her identity" (84).

⁹⁵ Sandiford claims, "the Avey who left the ship, broken-spirited and distraught, is produced here as a woman possessing an augmented capacity to reinvent primal time and reexperience primal space, to rediscover the world afresh, as would a child" (385). Indeed, Denniston asserts that "at the close of the novel, Avey indeed becomes an avator (Spirit incarnate), for she assumes her messianic role—her mission of old—to continue the storytelling legacy of Great-Aunt Cuney and Cuney's Grandmother" (144). McGill similarly suggests that "*radical* steps must be taken to secure personal and collective independence from white dominance in any form" (104).

recognize their shared interests and join together to challenge white hegemony and thus preserve the best parts of themselves” (McGill 76).⁹⁶ In an interview Marshall explains that Avey is “able to recapture that sense of self, that sense of history, which then permits her to move to another level in her life” (Baer and Marshall 24). Marshall’s nuanced portrayal of the African diaspora suggests to me that developing a diasporic consciousness does not require a disavowal of one’s current place but an awareness of the impact of trauma and a celebration of the “Old Parents” and their culture. Bracks agrees, asserting that Marshall “demonstrate[s] that self-identity directly results from either honoring African-rooted ancestral legacies or ignoring them” (3). Joseph, whose very being embodies the past and cyclical time, still lives and works in Grenada, not Carriacou. Further, Avey flies back home, with a radically different paradigm, but nevertheless intent on living in the United States. Marshall does not suggest that diasporic consciousness requires the blind rejection of other cultures, but affirms instead that agency is experienced in the affirmation of African cultural legacies and the resistance of historical erasure by witnessing trauma.

Finally, Marshall indeed breaks with traditional African American writing in her approach to the past. For Marshall, notions of the past are not primarily consumed by trauma and pain, but hold a rich cultural history that must be celebrated. Her representational practices suggest bearing witness to all the resources from which those in

⁹⁶ Keizs goes on to assert, “[Marshall’s] West Indian heritage expands her vision so that ultimately she seeks a synthesis of Black people—of Third World people” (71). Coser agrees, arguing that, “In the attempt to define [her] own place and identity as a black [woman] in the United States, [Marshall] cross[es] centuries and lands and write[s] a larger American narrative. Even as [she] record[s] the process of reconstructing identity through black protagonists and their specific communities, [she] illuminate[s] forms of resistance by groups oppressed in the neocolonial structure persisting today in the Caribbean-Latin American region and among marginalized groups in the United States” (3-4).

the African diaspora can draw; strong cultural elements of music, dance, religion and community exist in Marshall's figuring of the African diaspora.⁹⁷ For Marshall then, the Door of No Return recognizes absence, but such loss and isolation need not define the diasporic community, for there is an acting history here of culture, creativity and resistance.

The final chapter, in which I discuss Fred D'Aguiar's *Feeding the Ghosts*, physically reimagines Brand's Door of No Return as I contextualize D'Aguiar's project within a body of work troubled by the sea. In African American, Caribbean and postcolonial literatures, the sea, and particularly the ship, are tropes often used to examine whether or not history can be reclaimed, remembered or witnessed through narrative. Like Marshall's *Praisesong*, D'Aguiar's text demonstrates cyclical time, as his heroine, like Avey, is empowered to resist the hierarchical power structure within which she finds herself through the reclamation of her African heritage. Similar to Gaines's gathered men, when Mintah, D'Aguiar's heroine, clings to memories of Africa, she is physically and spiritually empowered to urge her community to challenge their oppressors. D'Aguiar figures history as a force able to act in a physical manner reminiscent of Marshall's treatment of the past as an agent acting on Avey. Finally, D'Aguiar ends my dissertation because his treatment of history for those in the African diaspora honestly reflects the ambiguities and complexities of the work of recovery and self-actualization.

⁹⁷ Indeed, Willis agrees that Marshall has "a visionary sense of renewal through the recovery of culture" (55).

D'Aguiar reminds us that diasporic consciousness does not always empower, resisting the status quo does not always end oppression, just as accounts of witness do not always bring healing.

Chapter 5
Laying the Past to Rest:
Revising History by Resisting Death in D'Aguiar's *Feeding the Ghosts*

The sea was the beginning and end of everything. –Feeding the Ghosts

Fred D'Aguiar, like many Caribbean writers, is ambivalent in his approach to history. Fully aware of the gaps often present in the historical record of those in the African diaspora, D'Aguiar, like Morrison, Gaines and Marshall, explores how historical recuperation might transform a disjointed past into a fluid foundation for personal autonomy. In much of Caribbean literature, the relationship between memory and history shapes individual and communal agency.⁹⁸ Indeed, Ron Eyerman agrees that “memory provides individuals and collectives with a cognitive map, helping orient who they are, why they are here and where they are going. Memory in other words, is central to individual and collective identity” (161). However, the effort to orient oneself through memory in postcolonial, Caribbean writing is problematized by the holes present in any historical record sanctioned with hegemonic cultural values and linear notions of time. Olu Oguibe articulates these elisions in history for those in the African diaspora:

the slave and generations after him were left in the suspense between worlds...Caught between a past that is largely lost, and a present that refuses to be owned, this becomes the greatest curse of

⁹⁸ For instance, the centralization of the past and the challenge of linking self-actualization with communal history are highlighted in Jamaica Kincaid's *Autobiography of My Mother*. Dionne Brand's *At the Full and Change of the Moon* explores how individual memory can shape communal resistance, inspiring the mythologizing of entire cultures of resistance. At the same time, she recognizes the loss of intergenerational narratives, and examines how a lack of tradition impacts the agency of individuals. Wilson Harris, in his *Palace of the Peacocks*, is concerned with how narratives of history are limited; Harris senses a tension between how inherited frameworks of belief empower and how they are necessarily challenged in a postcolonial space. In George Lamming's *Natives of My Person*, it becomes clear that regardless of one's position in the postcolonial Caribbean, the ancestry of colonialism impacts, perhaps even dictates, the future. Indeed, Lamming insists that Caribbean people must recognize their relationships with the past as they encounter the spirits of those who came before. Similarly, in *Sea of Lentils*, Antonio Benítez-Rojo demonstrates that the growth of the Caribbean is structurally linked to the history of slavery there, even as he undermines the reliability of historical narratives in their ability to capture the essence of the Caribbean community.

the African diaspora: this unHINGING from the past, this unknowing which results in a ceaseless, yet futile effort to return, to seek for markers of origin, to know. (98)

D'Aguiar recognizes that written history has been traditionally used to construct hierarchical identities, even as he also claims that those marginalized by hegemonic forces must revise and reclaim their histories in ways that not only create platforms of agency for them, but also serve to challenge notions of identity fixed and justified by a Eurocentric, linear understanding of history.

In *Feeding the Ghosts*, D'Aguiar illuminates two paradigms of history: He demonstrates the productivity in resisting historical erasure through witness and the affirmation of diasporic consciousness while also exposing such efforts as ultimately futile through the character of Mintah, a captured African slave.⁹⁹ Ian Baucom, in his important work presented in my introduction, presents a full picture of the actual history of the voyage of the *Zong*, a journey that D'Aguiar imagines here in his text. Using this history of absence as a point of reference in his examination of the problem of history, Baucom reads D'Aguiar's text as "informed throughout by a deep awareness of the uncertainty of beginning, the fiction of ending, and the truth of enduring" (327). The lack of closure surrounding the history of resistance in the sea does not detract, however, from its compelling power as both a common place of beginning and a site of countless horrors and death. D'Aguiar's ambivalent use of history, therefore, is not unclear, but is rather intentionally representative of two conflicting approaches to history often utilized by Caribbean thinkers. Baucom argues that "the singular image of abandonment thereby

⁹⁹ There has been little critical work published on D'Aguiar's text, although his poetic work is better recognized. I argue that he deserves more critical attention because of the ways in which he imagines the Middle Passage, the important relationship between individual and communal acts of witness and resistance, and his deliberately ambivalent approach to historical and traumatic recovery.

becomes an image of diasporic survival, an image, as D'Aguiar has it, in which what seemed to figure the loss of home, is therefore home" (329). In this way, D'Aguiar's deliberate approach to historical trauma reveals the complexity that anyone living in diaspora must face. Writing from and about the African diaspora, he attempts to imagine and articulate a collective memory "which orients the group through time and over space by providing a narrative frame, a collective story, which locates the individual and his and her biography within it, and which, because it can be represented as narration and as text, attains mobility" (Eyerman 161). This mythologizing for those in diaspora is important, for as Achille Mbembe theorizes, "there is, strictly speaking, no African memory of slavery. Or if there is a memory of slavery, it is characterized by diffraction...At most, slavery is experienced as a wound whose meaning resides in the domain of the psychic unconscious" (25). D'Aguiar's project is thus central to this study of how history is approached and appropriated in the effort to resist erasure and to establish agency in the African diaspora because his ambivalence represents the realities of memory, resistance, trauma and autonomy in productive ways.

The representational practices of Morrison, Gaines and Marshall demonstrate the complexities of the relationships between historical erasure and diasporic consciousness, and between the disempowerment of the memory of trauma read against the healing possible for those who offer accounts of witness within a communal context. I close my dissertation with D'Aguiar, though, because his ambivalent text reads with and against the grain of trauma theory in ways that highlight the complexity inherent in projects which imagine acts of witness meant to bring closure to victims of oppression, historical erasure and abuse. D'Aguiar's heroine, like Gaines's men, is empowered to challenge

the hegemonic status quo through creating a spiritual community not unlike Marshall's portrayal of the Big Drum, and yet, D'Aguiar's text ends in the physical reliving of previous trauma. All of the texts considered here represent the difficulty of accounts of witness in relationships of unequal power, but D'Aguiar's text most fully explores the ambiguous outcomes, as his mythologizing does not ultimately resist erasure or challenge hegemony. D'Aguiar gives a voice of resistance to those marginalized by capitalism, racial hierarchy, colonial imperialism, and the institution of slavery by writing this novel; at the same time, he offers a historiographical approach which recognizes the long term effects of the Atlantic slave trade and imagines attempts at resistance through accessing a diasporic heritage which ultimately fail.

The reclamation of history imagined here is especially poignant for Caribbean writers. Seodial Frank H. Deena, in his book on Caribbean literature and postcolonial studies, asserts that the concerns of the Caribbean are "the confrontation of history, belonging to a place, identity, escape and escapism, and change" (33). He goes on to explain that "much of Caribbean literature explores the importance of belonging to a place, and when the feeling of belonging is destroyed, a person's identity crumbles" (56). D'Aguiar explores these issues of history, belonging and subject positionality in his writing a narrative of transatlantic movement, dreams of an African homeland, and terror at the displacement of the sea in ways that suggest identity is much more complicated than the sense of belonging Deena suggests. D'Aguiar engages here with a central paradox of Caribbean history: searching for an inclusive identity, Caribbean writers and critics must look to history; and yet, oftentimes the only history offered is the skewed result of colonial power and economically based hierarchies. This 'history' is all that is

left, and yet it reinforces the domination those in diaspora want desperately to escape. For Caribbean literature then, any attempt to relate history must describe oppression even as it responds with a revision of resistance.

Because the Middle Passage is figured both as a site of erasure and as a space for the productive mythologizing of diasporic history, it is approached hesitantly and portrayed ambiguously in much of Caribbean literature. The sea is thus necessarily repelling as a problematic scene of trauma and alluring as the only tangible starting point for Caribbean peoples.¹⁰⁰ The sea is a common trope for transport and cosmopolitanism, but in Caribbean literature it is also the literal site of historical erasure for many.¹⁰¹

Indeed, critic and poet Mark A. McWatt agrees that the sea

becomes an important paradigm for dealing with the collective amnesia of the black diaspora; it speaks of the necessity to enter the void of history (the depths of the sea), not with the attitude of a people already defeated...but with a kind of creative audacity that will supply the gaps with new inventions. (9)

¹⁰⁰ The sea figures predominately in much of Caribbean literature. See Derek Walcott's "The Sea Is History" in *The Star Apple Kingdom* for instances of the ocean or sea figuring as a living, keeper of history. Emily Greenwood argues that Walcott's "renunciation of historical time" and of colonialism's "insistence on linear, historical time", is "figured spatially...through the use of culturally neutral, unmarked spaces such as the sea" (132). In "The Open Boat," Wilson Harris writes of the wasted lives of those lost at sea: "The torment of those who never escaped it: straight from the belly of the slave ship into the violent belly of the ocean depths they met. But their ordeal did not die; it quickened into this continuous/discontinuous thing" (7). Similarly, Edward Brathwaite, in "Caliban," writes "eyes / shut tight / and the whip light / crawl- / ing round this ship where his free- / dom drowns / down / down / down / to the is- / land town" (192-193). David Dabydeen, in his *Turner* collection of poems, portrays death in the sea: "no noise / Comes from my mouth, no lamentation / As I fall towards the sea, my breath held / In shock until the waters quell me. / Struggle come only after death" (25). Jerome S. Wynter argues that "When one's history is nebulous and shifting, it means that there are enormous possibilities for meaning making" (6).

¹⁰¹ "According to the most recent computations based on the revised slave trade database, approximately 12.5 million captives embarked from Africa, of which 10.8 million made it alive to the Americas. The difference in figures represents deaths during the Middle Passage" (Lindsay 4). Not only this, but as Oguibe claims, "anxiety is riveted on the perpetual palpability of slavery as a lived experience, as a terror that survives and mutates and re-inveigles the present" (96). The collective (dis)memory of the Atlantic slave trade pervades the history of those in the African diaspora while it also diminishes their positions as subjects.

D'Aguiar, a Guyanese black British poet, novelist, and critic, has interests in history and identity which inevitably lead him to the sea—for as Derek Walcott has argued the “sea is history”—and specifically to the slave ship.¹⁰² D'Aguiar describes this curiosity in his own words:

I have always been interested in the in-betweenness of a slave ship in the Atlantic for the slaves who have left home and are bound for a strange place. At sea they are able to think about what they have left and where they are heading. Water becomes a library for them. They have to read the current of the sea and match it with their memory, their will to remember, their will to live, the shock of their bodies in bondage. (qtd. in Frias 422)

Recuperating history by resisting the erasure of the sea, D'Aguiar explores the process of how ship-bound Africans are dominated by slavery even as they create avenues of survival.

Feeding the Ghosts tells of the voyage of the *Zong*, a ship that actually sailed from the West Coast of Africa in “March 1783, carrying 440 slaves and fourteen crew members” and then ported in Jamaica having killed 132 slaves in route (Lindsay 90).

D'Aguiar refuses to overlook the horrors of the massacre which reportedly occurred on the historic crossing of the *Zong*.¹⁰³ On this voyage, disease threatened to decimate the stock of Africans upon whom investors' profits depended. Rather than deliver a small

¹⁰² Baucom is again helpful here, for he argues that D'Aguiar's text suggests that history is, essentially slavery, and, thus, building on Walcott's claim, Baucom asserts that, for D'Aguiar, the sea is slavery. In Baucom's reading, history “is never something that is purely past, done, finished with, distant, all worn out. And neither, D'Aguiar insists, is slavery” (331). Building on Baucom's argument, I examine the ways in which D'Aguiar figures the memory of Africa as a platform for resistance and as a space of witness.

¹⁰³ D'Aguiar is not the first to emphasize this cruelty, for J.M.W. Turner's early nineteenth-century painting was celebrated for its purity, even as the foreground of the painting featured the violence of drowning slaves. Additionally, Barry Unsworth's *Sacred Hunger* is loosely based on this voyage, while Nourbese Philip's *Zong!* is a collection of poems clearly exploring the legacy of that fateful journey. David Dabydeen published *Turner* in 2002, a collection of poems in which he recreates life and death on the ship displayed in Turner's painting. Sarah Fulford, in her “David Dabydeen and Turner's Sublime Aesthetic,” points out that Dabydeen emphasizes Turner's “morbid fascination with the power of inarticulate suffering and the infliction of pain” (20).

crop, the Captain of the *Zong* decided to exploit an insurance clause which promised compensation for any loss assumed in an attempt to preserve the cargo. To this end, he ordered 132 living slaves thrown overboard. D'Aguiar's novel is not only about remembering those who lost their lives on this passage by bearing witness to their imagined stories; it also explores conflicting power. Through speaking, dancing and writing, Mintah promotes alternative power structures based on her reclamation of history; however, D'Aguiar's ambivalence about the productivity of resisting historical erasure is clear, for Mintah is ultimately unable to issue a lasting counter narrative of empowerment.

In much of D'Aguiar's creative work, he explores themes of history and belonging in ways that problematize self-actualization for those in the African diaspora. For instance, in his short story, "A Son in the Shadow," D'Aguiar articulates the effort to reconstruct a meaningful personal history from a past full of gaps:

I am searching the only way I know how, by rumination, contemplation, conjecture, supposition. I try to fill the gaps, try to piece together the father I never knew. I imagine everything where there is little or nothing to go on. And yet, in going back, in raking up bits and pieces of a shattered and erased existence, I know that I am courting rejection from a source hitherto silent and beyond me...No to everything I ask of them, even the merest crumb of recognition. (43)

Just as a son attempts to ignore and dismiss his father's absence, so that absence comes to define the son in many ways. Similarly, the desire to insert oneself into a history of erasure in order to fill in the gaps such a master narrative creates can often result in even more limited positions of agency. Indeed, I will show that in D'Aguiar's rendering,

Mintah's counter narrative fails to change the status quo but instead further reinforces her own lack of agency as she remains a victim of the memory of trauma.

D'Aguiar pursues these twin ideas of establishing a sense of belonging and exposing oneself to risk when pursuing an unknown history in his poem "At the Grave of the Unknown African, Henbury Parish Church" (1992). Here D'Aguiar laments the historical reality for many of African descent; rather than having a heritage of empowerment, there is only a physical history: possessing a "cherub's cocoa face" "signal[s] unequivocally how you got here and where you came from" (894). He goes on to conflate the memory of countless nameless Africans who died in the Middle Passage with the "unknown soldier's tomb," clearly referencing the oft visited and celebrated American World War I monument (894). D'Aguiar's critique then is not just aimed at displaced Africans, but at the collective memory of a country that commemorates the lives of young soldiers while demanding that Africans who have no true name or legacy stop dwelling on their unknown roots and instead "call this home / by now" (894). D'Aguiar thus implies the need to be rooted to a history and a place, suggesting that those who are neither autochthonous nor named are doubly disadvantaged. Indeed, in commemorating this unknown African slave, D'Aguiar asserts, "namelessness can't be your end: / history, once your enemy, has sent me, a friend" (895). Here again D'Aguiar issues the imperative that nameless slaves with no legacy to grasp must find a friend in history.

In section two of the poem, D'Aguiar confronts his ambivalent approach toward history. A different, forceful voice, emphasized by italics—presumably the body of the

unknown African—confronts the earlier voice who articulates the difficulty in befriending history in order to counteract namelessness:

Stop right there black Englishman before you tell a bigger lie.
You mean me well by what you say but I can't stand idly by

While you do all the defending on me and my friends' behalf.
The ugly fact that I died without a proper name's no gaff

I know, but it's no funeral either; that was the slave game. (896)

D'Aguiar's ambivalence is present here as he seems to defend the need for Africans in diaspora to articulate their own histories while he also pragmatically admits that a present absence of history is simply part of the reality of slavery. In fact, later in the poem he writes of another buried man given the generic name of Scipio Africanus, saying "a teenager when he died, / a man long before that; he doesn't sleep any sounder grandly titled" (897). Such stanzas seem to confront the earlier yearning for a name by arguing that a label (and all the belonging and legacy a name implies) will not redeem the lives of those who have already died. Indeed, D'Aguiar asserts,

The dead can't write, nor can we sing (nor can most of the living).
Our ears (if you can call them ears) are no good for listening.

Say what happened to me and countless others like me, all anon.
Say it urgently. (897)

Even as he illuminates the futility of writing, singing or speaking of the past (and thus revising history), D'Aguiar urges those in the African diaspora to speak and bear witness to the past. This ambivalence is consistent through the end of the poem, for while a valid voice laments the unknown name and legacy of Africans, and another calls for the witnessing of these lives, a voice of similar weight—placed at the end of the poem for emphasis—asserts, "You think remembering me is enough. It's not" (898). Although

D'Aguiar grapples with history and at times asserts the need for reclamation and revision, he is ultimately ambivalent about the effectiveness, or even possibility, of such recuperative endeavors. Nevertheless, D'Aguiar engages in such projects in his writing, directly confronting the historical record with an imagined heroine even as he problematizes the effect of bearing witness. Positioned at the end of a project on the power of witness and diasporic consciousness in confronting trauma and historical erasure, D'Aguiar's text serves as a reminder that historical reclamation is neither fixed, nor, at times, productive.

That D'Aguiar utilizes a metacognitive approach to this fictional project is clear, for he rewrites the history of the voyage of the *Zong*. While the historical details of the slave trade can be disputed or proven true, D'Aguiar's engagement in such an imagined project suggests that he believes "the whole story [of the slave trade] is still within living memory" and that it cannot only be considered intellectually (Bailyn 249). He agrees with Bernard Bailyn, who argues that the history of the slave trade is "collective memory" and therefore "the memory of it is immediately urgent, emotional, and unconstrained by the critical apparatus of scholarship" because it is "buried in our consciousness and shapes our view of the world" (250, 251). For D'Aguiar, a historiography of the slave trade should value the exploration of empirical facts, but also "must consider the relationship of History and Memory" (Bailyn 249). Indeed, his effort is legitimized not by historical accuracy, but by the way in which his imagined account of witness initially challenges hegemony, yet ultimately fails to initiate lasting change in the abusive practices of the slave trade. The records of the voyage were kept by European men who financially backed the Atlantic slave trade and by traders in the Americas. By

inserting his imagined account, D'Aguiar suggests that the version of history sanctioned by white, European males whose worldview is dominated by economic concerns is neither fully accurate nor sufficiently representative of the lives involved in the historical narrative at stake.

Deena argues that, "Most, if not all, postcolonial writers, theorists, and critics will arrive at this theoretical juncture, and will have to decide when and how to confront the Eurocentric mythology of colonialism" (26). Deena goes on to argue that in Africa this "Eurocentric representation of their history and literature has been a gross misrepresentation of Africa as a primitive and unrecognized culture" (26). I read D'Aguiar's figuring of Mintah's past and of her father's skill in woodworking as a firm revision of the notion that Africans were unskilled and uncivilized, as well as an assertion of an Afrocentric narrative of the slave trade.¹⁰⁴ Indeed, although he is ambivalent in his figuring of the possibility of autonomy after revising history, in subtle ways throughout the novel, D'Aguiar emphasizes the need to bear witness to history and to reclaim the collective memory misrepresented by loud hegemonic voices.

In *Feeding the Ghosts*, D'Aguiar explores the devastation of and possible resistance to historical erasure in the character of Mintah. In the text, Mintah is

¹⁰⁴ Upon excavating plantations which housed slaves taken from the Gold Coast, "a rich diversity of artifacts, including locally manufactured pottery, beads, lithics, cowry shells, kaolin smoking pipes, firearms, stone and glass beads, metal and glass buttons, metal nails, door locks and hinges, and faunal remains" were found (Ogundiran and Falola 13). Wood is unlikely to last in the archeological division, but working on "figurines—effigies done on a small scale or in miniature" was not unheard of in Yoruba, Africa and represented a high degree of artistry (Krose 104). In fact, D'Aguiar places Mintah in a position of spiritual authority here, for "the divinity who, according to myth, was assigned the task by God, the supreme deity of molding humans" was to be revered (Krose 120). Christopher C. Fennell, studying Bakongo work in the Americas, refers "to the use of a core symbol to express a social group's collective identity as an 'emblematic' expression of that group" (200). D'Aguiar's choice to have Mintah carve wood figurines both elevates her to an African spiritual being and corrects notions of African civility and artistry through her nuanced artistic expression.

physically and spiritually consumed with resistance. She actively challenges the hegemonic authority of the ship's crew through her words, her movement, and her access to spirituality. Simply defying another's power is not sufficient to resist historical erasure, however, and Mintah therefore must also actively become a witness bearer of her own past. This chapter examines the ways in which she attempts to bear witness for others by speaking their names and remembering them, resisting historical erasure on their behalf. Even more fascinating to me are the ways in which D'Aguiar incorporates Mintah's past in Africa into her current understandings of herself, allowing her position in the diaspora to empower her to preserve the future histories of those on the *Zong*.

In giving a woman the will to resist and the physical means to do so through her speech and writing, D'Aguiar revises the history of the Middle Passage even as he re-tells this story. In her study on "Women and Resistance: 'Herstory' in Contemporary Caribbean History," Blanca G. Silvestrini examines not only traditional historiographies' exclusion of women, but also establishes the fact that "women's experiences were silenced from history by the very nature of the historical endeavor" (165). For D'Aguiar to envision the history of the Middle Passage in terms of resistance, specifically through a woman's struggle, is to offer a revision of Caribbean history itself. Silvestrini comments, "to tell women's story, to place them at the centre and make sense of their experiences, means that we have to reconceptualize Caribbean History" (173). Thus, D'Aguiar does not record history that portrays a woman as a victim; rather, he offers an alternative history with a new reading of gender and power relationships.

Through his characterization of Mintah, D'Aguiar explores the ways in which the African and European worlds collide in the space of a slave ship on the Atlantic. This

collision represents what anthropologist Mary Louise Pratt has called the “contact zone,” a term she uses to describe “the social spaces where disparate cultures meet, clash and grapple with each other, often in highly asymmetrical relations of domination and subordination—like colonialism, slavery, or their aftermaths” (4). In the contact zone, subordinated cultures challenge the authority of dominant cultures by manipulating the very tools used to dominate them; their resistance is performed by redefining and co-opting the manner in which they are oppressed. Rather than privileging white, hegemonic history, D’Aguiar inserts a woman’s resistance and explores the resulting clash with authority and collapse of hierarchy. Mintah’s rebellion is precisely such a re-visioning of the colonial power over memory, language, movement and even life.

Sarah Appleton Aguiar’s “bitch” discourse, in which she outlines the character traits that exemplify a woman who resists oppression, reveals the specific choices Mintah must make, “either consciously or subconsciously, to reject the traditional roles open to her and to possess power, a power that is always presupposed to have been usurped from the male sphere” (Aguiar 98). Approaching *Feeding the Ghosts* through Aguiar’s bitch theory allows us to more fully understand how Mintah’s actions affect not only her individual situation, but also the ramifications of her resistance on her community. Mintah resists the oppression of this contact zone by employing the tools used by her oppressors to dominate the slaves on the *Zong*. In describing the profound affect of the sea on one woman, D’Aguiar places his text firmly in a body of Caribbean work which struggles to revise or even bear witness to a past dominated by hegemonic forces and

dictated by an original displacement enforced by the sea.¹⁰⁵ Rejecting traditional roles for slave women, she embodies Aguiar's bitch by usurping power from the male sphere. To this end, Mintah uses the power of the spoken word to reclaim her identity and undermine her abusers. At times her resistance is less explicit, for she also rebels against her role as feminine performer and bearer of children when she dances for the Captain. While this dance has private ramifications for Mintah, her resistance also involves spiritual aspects which have communal results. Using H  l  ne Christol's foundation of the "conventional fantastic story" in African culture, I also explore Mintah as a representative African character whose effect on her community is significant to D'Aguiar's revision of history (166). A transformed Mintah thus revises her present situation of defeat by creating a spiritual realm—inaccessible to her oppressors—from which she draws hope and energy.

D'Aguiar's portrayal of Mintah's challenge to the accepted power structure is complicated by his ambiguity in the final portions of the text. Although Mintah certainly resists the traditional ways in which women are dominated and objectified, it is not clear if she has successfully dealt the traditional power hierarchy a mortal blow or if it ultimately stands. Her rebellion is just that; she lacks the agency to create a revolution. D'Aguiar not only engages in challenging hegemonic norms of history and history keeping in the writing of his imagined text, he also explores the ways in which voices of resistance are marginalized in their attempts to tell or revise sanctioned histories. For instance, in *Feeding the Ghosts*, Mintah keeps a journal detailing everything that occurred on the *Zong*. This journal, written in her own hand, in the language of the slave

¹⁰⁵ See footnote 100 for more on the trope of the sea in Caribbean Literature.

traders, challenges the accepted avenues through which colonial history is passed down both in the content she covers and in its very existence as an article of the written record. Even as he imagines ways in which memory of the homeland can transform one's position of autonomy in relationship to power, D'Aguiar acknowledges the devastating lack of recourse available to those in diaspora. This is made clear when Mintah's record of the events on the voyage is presented in court to counter the only written records which exist: the contract made between the ship's captain, financiers, and their insurance company, and the ledger of the Captain which accounts for each African body on board and thrown into the sea with a simple mark. Mintah's journal, representing those same bodies with rhetoric and compassion, is ignored simply because she, a slave woman, penned it. D'Aguiar demonstrates here that the skewed history of slavery is not simply a result of written history physically outlasting oral history, but is rather the manifestation of the intentional marginalization and denial of agency often accessed through mastery of written language.

In *Feeding the Ghosts*, D'Aguiar achieves his fraught balance of past and future memory preservation primarily through the metaphor of wood. Wood and wood grains are central images not only in the text, but also in Mintah's memory of Africa, her voyage on the *Zong*, and her survival in the future. D'Aguiar figures wood as memory through dreams, wood as land through synecdoche, wood as Mintah's own body through metaphor, and wood as resistance through personification. D'Aguiar thus conflates wood with Mintah's resistance of historical erasure in the text, and while this attachment to wood initially empowers her, D'Aguiar soon proves that Mintah's agency, like the wood which witnesses her history of erasure, eventually decays.

Moreover, Mintah's images of Africa highlight her hatred of water and her desire for land; D'Aguiar contrasts the comfort she finds in her familiarity with wood with the insecurity the sea produces in her. In her limited situation, wood comes to represent land, and thus offers her a bit of stability, a foundation from which she can resist erasure. On studying the wood, she thinks,

Land. If only she was on land. She could run in one direction away from these people and hide. There would be no limit to the number of hiding places. The ship was nowhere. The grain in its wood offered small comforts. She was tired of the threat of the sea. It appalled her that she could be in the middle of nowhere for weeks at a time, surrounded by sea and a distant horizon promising more sea. (61)

Indeed, Mintah sings a song explaining the power the sea has to disorient her: "We are on water far from home / We have been on water forever / It seems we are all alone, / We are not and water isn't home, / Can never be home; not now or ever" (114). The sea forces Mintah to experience temporal, spatial and relational disorientation. His narration reads, "Mintah believed they were adrift on it rather than heading towards land. The rest of her days would be passed here. She would never be still again. Those who died must have perished with the belief that the land was the future" (112). D'Aguiar thus dramatizes that just as the sea is deeply disorienting to Mintah's sense of time—her understanding of her past and her hope for agency in the future—so has the Middle Passage deeply troubled any attempt to develop a congruent sense of time, identity or historical access for those in the African diaspora.

Because she is so uncomfortable at sea, Mintah uses the wood which surrounds her to escape into visions of Africa; D'Aguiar thus suggests that memories of the past—or, for the purposes of this project, diasporic consciousness—can effectively help restore

one to a position of self-actualization. For Mintah, such memories of wood are rooted in the land of her past: “Everything she dreamed, all the shapes without a basis in the waking world that surrounded her, belonged deep in the soil. Wood worked by her hands had tried to find these shapes. Sleep was a descent into the ground” (116). D’Aguiar’s use here of synecdoche emphasizes the ways in which even wood on the *Zong* represents both a part of her entire past and a piece of the soil that is Africa. Mintah thus clings to wood, for it represents a time when she possessed an empowered sense of self which enabled her to create art through woodworking with her father. Because D’Aguiar uses synecdoche to link wood with the land of Africa, it soon acts as a trigger for Mintah’s memories of her home and her father. Indeed, in her powerless position onboard, sleep is the only time when she can immerse herself in the land she so desperately misses, and she often dreams of her father and the woodworking he shared with her.

It is through this figuring of wood that D’Aguiar makes his statement about the need to remember and bear witness to the past in order to resist the historical erasure of the future of diaspora. When Mintah awakens from unconsciousness, she focuses on the wood and then immediately has a vision of her father: “Her father loomed up from the grain, melted into her forehead and stood regarding her with his arms folded. She saw herself seated on the ground on a mud floor with a block of soft birch gripped between her feet” (41-42). This sight of wood effectively transports Mintah back to Africa where she is empowered by her father and her connection with the land. While Mintah is trapped on the *Zong*, D’Aguiar uses the image of wood both to remind her of her father and African soil, providing her with the agency she needs to resist erasure.

Thus, D'Aguiar appears to conflate memory of land with empowered belonging, while he figures the sea as an agent of historical erasure. This desire to be grounded, to connect with the land, is not new to D'Aguiar. In fact, Peter Geschiere argues that autochthony “seems to represent the most authentic form of belonging: ‘born from the earth itself’—how could one belong more?” (2). Deena would agree that when Mintah is stolen away from her African homeland—her place of belonging—she begins to lose her sense of self-actualization. In order to revisit historical erasure and oppression, then, Mintah must find a physical connection to Africa and her memories there. In his poem, “A Bill of Rights: An Excerpt”, D'Aguiar actually references this identity with wood and home directly, saying,

Autochthonous wood. / Purpleheart and greenheart / Blunted or
broke electric / Saw after electric saw / In half. Wood this tough /
Cannot have known much love / And must have hardened itself /
Against further loss of face. (229)

Here, D'Aguiar's theme of attachment to the land through wood which strengthens and hardens one against despair is present. He again conflates wood with humanity and marvels at the ability of those autochthonous few who are rooted, like trees in the land, to resist the historical erasure inherent in forced migration through the development of diasporic consciousness.

Soon Mintah and the text are consumed with the feel and sight of wood.

D'Aguiar first explores wood as a physical item which both metaphorically becomes a part of Mintah's body and comes to represent the hard indifference of spirit to which Mintah aspires. Early in the text, after Mintah first utilizes the power of the spoken word

to undermine Kelsal,¹⁰⁶ the white first mate, he “methodically beat his way up her body” on the deck of the *Zong* in front of the crew (33). As Mintah helplessly receives his blows, the narration reads, “she saw water spinning on the deck, with the grain in the wood rearranged from straight lines into a vortex with circles until it grew into the entire deck, filling her head with soundlessness and blackness” (33). When Mintah focuses on the grain in the wood, the vision transforms her into unconsciousness, saving her from more pain.

D’Aguiar goes on to demonstrate the ways in which wood becomes a part of and a metaphor for Mintah’s body in her attempt at resistance. After that first beating, Mintah retreats into the wood grain:

The wood was hard, wet and warm. She had warmed it. Wet it also...The wood felt a part of her. To be truly like wood, indifferent to everything, grain fixed for all time, unchanging, she would have to be still, reduce her heavings in this stale, airless grave to nothing, be as still as wood, collect warmth, wet and shed skin, grow indifferent. She felt a knot in the wood right where her forehead lay...A knot in the wood meant grain had to swirl around it just as a boulder in a stream divided a current. Grain flowed around that knot. Was divided by it, but flowed around it nonetheless. (41)

Such a lengthy quote is necessary to track the many ways in which D’Aguiar figures wood here. Mintah’s admiration of the wood illuminates an option for her as she tries to survive: she can become still, requiring nothing, indifferent to such an extent that she might protect herself from loss or pain. Furthermore, Mintah observes that even “unchanging” wood has a knot that the wood grain has to move around in order to remain

¹⁰⁶ Although *Feeding the Ghosts* exists as D’Aguiar’s attempt to imagine this haunting history, it is very much rooted in actual history. As Baucom points out, in the documented record of the trial, this man is not purely imagined: “James Kelsal, chief mate and later chief witness in the trials that were to follow” (10).

strong. As Mintah considers the possibility of remaining still and indifferent, she learns from this wood—which is becoming a part of her—that she will have to be flexible and even divide herself if she wishes to survive this traumatic experience. In this way, such personification allows D’Aguiar to explore one of the avenues of resistance to historical erasure.

This ability to garner strength from flexibility is further seen in the fact that Mintah is imprinted with wood grain because of the horribly tight quarters in which slaves were kept as they were bound hand and foot, pressed into the wood of the holds on their sides.¹⁰⁷ Rather than allowing the wood to be a mark of abuse only, D’Aguiar transforms Mintah’s ability to resist through her acceptance of the wood grain as an empowering force. This flexibility she learned from the grain is again seen as she later imagines herself rising up from her chained position on her side. The narration reads, “She was wood but she was not a part of the deck. She was a loose plank. And she could bend. Halfway down, three-quarters of the way down, this way and that. Bendable wood” (134). Her embodiment of the wood thus allows her to cope with her situation and actively resist erasure.

D’Aguiar continues to imprint Mintah literally as her physical body is marked by the wood grain to which she clings. When she hears children screaming as they are carried on deck to be thrown overboard, the text reads, “Mintah’s forehead was printed with fine wavery lines” (47). Later in the text, after she has embraced woodworking for a

¹⁰⁷ Lisa A. Lindsay explains that, “drawings for slave ships show that each captive was allocated five to seven square feet below decks, with less than two feet of headroom. The only position possible for prisoners in the holds was to lie on their sides, fit against each other like spoons in a drawer” (90). In these holds they are forced to lay in the squalor of their own urine and excrement, unable to lift their heads for a simple breath of fresh air.

living, Mintah's body continues to merge with the wood, and "some splinters had been buried so deep in her hand, the skin had hardened over them and now they were forgotten" (222). Similarly, when she is chained with the men after their failed physical resistance, Mintah, "was still throughout. Her flesh had become wood...She felt nothing, not even numb. Where she ended and the deck began was something her open eyes could not judge" (132). Here D'Aguiar imprints Mintah's body with the wood which represents her attempts to resist historical erasure.

Indeed, her attachment to and embodiment of the wood brings her back to herself so that she bears witness to her very personhood:

She wondered what her grain looked like. She was lines. The lines wavered and the next moment seemed to run like liquid and flow along the plank of who she was to herself. A thump in her chest floated into her attention and instead of disappearing again its nose stayed. Her chest moved out and in. That too stayed. This was living wood. Wood breathing. Her lips touched and parted. 'Mintah,' she said. 'I am Mintah.' (134)

D'Aguiar's conflation of Mintah's body and the wood grain which represents her diasporic consciousness ultimately empowers her to an assertion of her agency. Soon this wood gives her hope and life as she clings to it and supernaturally climbs the side of the ship literally to resist erasure through drowning: "She could feel the wood she cherished against her body, drawing her upwards and promising safety at any moment, an end to the blistering and scorching soon" (54). The wood, which has become a part of her body, now serves as a physical avenue toward resistance.

D'Aguiar consistently uses the trope of wood and woodworking throughout *Feeding the Ghosts* first to empower Mintah to remember the land of her past and then to garner the self-actualization needed to resist the historical erasure of abusive power and

the sea.¹⁰⁸ D'Aguiar maintains the image of wood through the ambivalent end of the novel where it serves as both a means of bearing witness to those lost on the *Zong*'s voyage and as a constant reminder of Mintah's inability to escape the abuse she suffered onboard. D'Aguiar foreshadows this cycle of oppression when Mintah is thrown overboard and uses the wood of the ship to climb back onboard. Even though she finds comfort in the wood of the ship as a trigger for memories of Africa and as a means of resistance as it imprints her body, in the water she realizes that,

I have yet to find the true grain of wood anywhere on this ship.
That I am back where I left before with nothing in my hands. And
nothing to look forward to in these hands. With a past in my head
where my hands are full. With a present that keeps them empty.
Hands with no future. (189)

Even as she scales the wood to climb back onboard, saving her life, she recognizes the ultimate futility of her efforts to reclaim her history and establish herself as a subject.

D'Aguiar's ambivalent approach toward history keeping and diasporic consciousness are apparent as he both suggests the productivity in using history to resist erasure and acknowledges that for those who pass through the Door of No Return,¹⁰⁹ some level of historical erasure is inevitable. For instance, as Mintah works with wood, the sea "rise[s] again in [the] wood" and she feels that the "grain [is] heading somewhere. To Africa?...But the sea between me and Africa would always seem too wide to cross" (208). Indeed, later in the text D'Aguiar again emphasizes the sea's destruction and erasure of her: "She was no longer the Mintah who had left that land, those two people. The *Zong* saw to that. The sea erased whole tracts of the land and the people she had

¹⁰⁸ Indeed, as Deena claims, in Caribbean literature there is a strong "relationship between the woman and the landscape...And from this relationship they draw strength, healing, and inspiration" (67).

¹⁰⁹ See Dionne Brand's *A Map to the Door of No Return: Notes to Belonging*, introduced in Chapter One.

held inside. Wood and her dreams had recovered much to her but not enough to feed her desire to return. Salt had helped with the obliteration of the past” (224). Despite a life of resistance, Mintah’s memory of Africa and her access to history are eventually destroyed by the sea.

This ambivalence is made evident as D’Aguiar continues to place wood as Mintah’s primary means of self-actualization. The trope of wood and woodworking culminates as Mintah “made shapes with wood. Filled my hands with it. Woke and gave shape to whatever I dreamed. Saw my father instructing me in my dreams. Woke and followed his instructions” (206). Wood serves to connect Mintah with Africa and her father, even as it allows her to give form to the memory of those who died, practically enabling her to resist the erasure of slavery by earning money with which she buys her freedom. However, D’Aguiar again problematizes the success of Mintah’s resistance. While a slave in Maryland, she,

made the shapes I’d always dreamed of making and some that did not figure in my dreams. People paid me for them. They said the wood I worked resembled water in its curves and twists. The very element I sought to escape rose out of wood shaped by me. Trees became waves. Waves sprouted roots, braches and leaves. My carvings exchanged the two and made the sea home, at least in my head. (207)

Mintah works with wood both to escape the memory of the sea and to bear witness to the lives of those 132 people thrown into the sea from the *Zong*, and yet the wood she carves comes to represent water most of all. She carves as if wood, “is a treasure, that it harbours the past, that it houses the souls of the dead” (208). Thus, D’Aguiar problematizes any simplistic notion that remembering the past will redeem the present and preserve an empowered self-actualization. She carves the men and women who

drowned in order to prevent their historical erasure, and yet the narration explains that when she is old, “no one knew her story because she had not bothered to tell it. All her notes were for herself, her failing memory, her recurrent dreams. These used to hurt her once, like a new splinter, but now she did not know they were there. Time had hardened over them” (222). In his ambiguous representational practices, D’Aguiar reflects the importance of resistance and memory even as he also acknowledges that, ultimately, Mintah cannot change her situation.

In spite of the silent powerlessness Mintah experiences at the end of her life, D’Aguiar explores productive aspects of her resistance of oppression on board through her speech, movement and spirituality. Mintah’s physical efforts to resist oppression are difficult because of the nature of slavery on the *Zong*, which removes all agency from the Africans bound by hands and feet in the dim interiors of the ship’s holds. Historical accounts reveal little of the experience from the perspective of the enslaved, and yet certain attempts at resistance were common in similar passages. In her article, “The Slave Ship Dance” Geneviève Fabre asserts that “codes of silence” were adopted among Africans as an “answer to the humiliations suffered, alternating with moments of extreme vocal expression and shrieks of grief” (39). Indeed, the women onboard the *Zong* adopted this code by crying “silently,” helping one another “silence those tears” (Fabre 76). In contrast to this silence is the verbal authority established among the crew. True to the power structure on board any ship, the words of the Captain and Kelsal translate into immediate action. Captain Cunningham wields an unthreatened authority, and yet this power disintegrates as he chooses to assume control over life and death based on an

economic strategy. Slaves below deck, on the other hand, gain a form of power by refusing such speech.

In contrast to this strategy of silence, Mintah undermines the traditional power structure and establishes her own agency through the sound of her voice. From her first word, Mintah asserts her ability to disrupt. Accustomed to ignoring the “howls, moans, cries, calls and implorings in indecipherable tongues [which] assailed [his] ears” in the slave holds, Kelsal is insensitive to the needs of those enslaved (19). Mintah thrusts a new reality into the consciousness of the first mate by screaming his name in his own tongue, a language she learned in the past in Africa. Indeed, her interpellation, garnered from her claim on history, strips Kelsal of power completely: “Only what he heard next could have kept him below decks a moment longer. He froze. ‘Kelsal!’” (20-21). Rather than believe that such assertiveness could come from a source outside of himself, Kelsal thinks he must be “hearing things” (21). Nevertheless, Mintah possesses the power to arrest his actions by uttering one word. Despite his disbelief, he wonders if a competing source of authority now exists.

Kelsal spends the rest of the voyage resisting Mintah’s verbal authority, and this alternative source of power undermines the existing structure in which he functions. As Mintah’s power persists and takes on different forms, the ship’s hierarchy is severely threatened. When Kelsal beats her for her interpellation, it is clear that from now on, the men will question all authority: “But the faces of the men around him, including the trustworthy second mate’s, appeared to take little or no pleasure in the exercise” (33). This independence is soon asserted on every level, for Kelsal becomes the spokesperson for the crew in telling the Captain that, “all of us...will have nothing further to do with

this treatment of the sick” (101). This claim directly rejects the Captain’s previous orders. The hierarchy is further destroyed when the boatswain refuses to fall in line with his first mate and instead remains loyal to the Captain. Dissension on every level is felt by the Captain, as he observes that “every order issued by him in the last day or so seemed to necessitate lengthy debate” (98). The crew of the *Zong* experience the consequences of an undermined power structure because Mintah, having been empowered through her memory of Africa, speaks up. Mintah’s resistance is most effective because she utilizes her voice to challenge the crew, who has used the power of the spoken word to enslave her. She manipulates the system they put in place, attempting to equalize the forces of this contact zone by undermining their spoken power with the memory of a language from her past. Her verbal assertiveness is significant because she is beating them at their own game.

Mintah’s challenge not only pervades the authority of the Captain and first mate, she threatens the very basis of Kelsal’s identity. Having gained the position of first mate, Kelsal is someone to whom the crew “deferred,” for he “represented the thoughts and feelings of the rest of the crew” (D’Aguiar 12). Mintah’s voice, however, has the power to destroy his self-possession. After she speaks his name with the moral authority of entitlement, Kelsal loses all personal agency:

He simply mimicked the antics and sounds of everyone around him as they responded to the Captain while he stared at Mintah, putting all of his energy into ransacking his past to see if he could produce an image from it that approximated to the young woman facing him. (30)

Kelsal cannot articulate his identity in the face of this powerful African woman; indeed, for a brief moment, he faces the historical erasure he normally inflicts on others. Mintah

calls his name because she has known him as a human in need when he was wounded in the Christian settlement in which she once lived. This shared past leads her to expect him to respond to the mass murder on the ship by recognizing the humanity of those enslaved. Kelsal's cruel response to her claim on his compassion effectually removes all that distinguishes him from the rest of the crew. After beating her, he is no longer distinct, but a mirror of the mass.

Kelsal's only thoughts now originate in reaction to Mintah's being. Indeed, she soon dominates his mind as he is consumed with thoughts of her: "He thought of Mintah's foul mouth. Spit from it in his face like the sea. Her words running around in his head, a perpetual sea-sound. His name on her lips, Kelsal, another word for sea, for spit. What he was doing had to stop" (127). Her domination of his mind becomes indistinguishable from the sea and from her spit; just as the sea confused Mintah, she now forces Kelsal to encounter the same disorientation.

When Mintah later begs him to end her life, she disrupts the structure of things even more. She orders Kelsal to throw her overboard, transforming his former exhibition of cruelty into an act of mercy. In this instance, she attempts to disrupt and change the power structure of this contact zone by asserting her reclaimed position as a subject through speaking, using Kelsal's own cruel action to challenge his sense of himself. Mintah's claim on his humanity controls him, forcing Kelsal to justify his former behavior. His thoughts are narrated, "He had done what he had done to her because he wanted to be Kelsal again, not the Kelsal she had summoned when she called his name, but the first mate of the *Zong*" (131). Mintah effectively subverts Kelsal's self possession; although he knows who he wants to be, he cannot affirm which "Kelsal" he

is. His psyche is so disturbed that he cannot even articulate “what he had done to her.” As Mintah continues to speak, she strengthens her grip on Kelsal; he becomes inarticulate as she affirms her own self-actualization.

Even when her rebellion is later thwarted, Mintah continues to establish an alternate power system by asserting her humanity in a language Kelsal and the crew understand. She also gives other victims agency by redefining the consequences of their death and providing them a way to speak resistance:

“Your name! What is your name?” Mintah shouted in the three languages she knew and raised herself up to her knees.
 “Why? How will it save me?” The woman’s grip was loosened by the struggle and by another man beating her arms with his club.
 “I will remember you! Others will remember you!”
 ... “I am Ama!” (126)

Mintah’s mastery of many languages raises her to her knees as she speaks hope into Ama’s moment of death. Mintah no longer claims the desire to change the physical circumstances of their shared trial; rather, she demonstrates her ability to infuse death with life—a forgotten burial with shared remembrance. There is an agency of self-possession in Ama’s victorious assertion: “I am Ama!” In this way, Mintah uses language to prevent the historical erasure of others, undermining those speaking in authority over her.

Mintah does not simply exhibit verbal agency, she also creates power through physical movement in her sacred dance of dominion. Having been stolen from their homes, families and communities, Africans on slave ships were dominated in every possible manner. Although all were subject to horrid conditions, women were violated in irreversible ways. Crews of men, relationally and physically starved, did not hesitate to

slake their lust on African women who had no tools of resistance at their disposal.

Despite this reality, D'Aguiar implies rather than describes rape, perhaps because he is not primarily interested in that spectacle of abuse but rather in the ways in which the Africans resist and, at times, recover from such abuse.

To this end, D'Aguiar explores the situation common to ships of the Middle Passage in which men force enslaved women to dance.¹¹⁰ This form of abuse is particularly cruel for African women who use dance as a supplication to their gods.

Fabre offers a brief history of this type of worship:

In the cults honoring the gods or the ancestors, dance was a way of mediating between the godly and the human, the living and the dead. Deities were praised, called upon through a dance designed to invoke special features, properties, or abilities. Dance was thus used to solicit intercession, to thwart wrath or punishment that human action might have incurred, to flatter, or to appease. (33)

Dance is therefore a sacred ritual that evokes an ancient and shared past by providing a place of communion and intimacy with gods. Due to the spiritual roots of dance for African women, compulsory dance commanded by slavers is a psychologically devastating form of subjection. Forcing a woman to dance makes it clear that she belongs to another, physically and even spiritually; such a command typically removes from an African woman what is perhaps her last form of privacy or self-ownership.¹¹¹ She now understands that she exists to offer her entire being to the orders and even whims of white

¹¹⁰ In "The Slave Ship Dance," Fabre writes that slavers often used the dance to manipulate, control and subdue newly acquired slaves.

¹¹¹ Lindsay explains the typical scenario for such compelled dancing: "With the prodding of a whip and occasionally a drum, accordion, or fiddle for accompaniment, they forced slaves to 'dance' on deck... Sometimes ships' crews took sadistic delight in such spectacles" (92). Although the notion of dancing has frivolous connotations, there are instances in which refusal to dance is the impetus for beatings, rape, or even murder. In fact, in 1792, British Captain John Kimber was tried and acquitted for the murder of a teen-aged female slave. He had allegedly "tortured the young woman to death because she had refused to dance naked on the deck of his ship" (Lindsay 92).

men. Because of this unspoken understanding, the men use compulsory dance strategically to clarify the structure of power in which their new property now functions.

D'Aguiar explores this display of power on the *Zong*. Rather than simply relate Mintah's compliance with Captain Cunningham's order to dance, the narrator provides insight into her thoughts for the first time in the novel. Having learned that she had lived in the Danish mission, the crew is "preoccupied with what she had said" (D'Aguiar 31). Due to her contact with European missionaries in the past, Mintah's claims on morality have the same basis as "civilized" moral codes, and thus her moral challenge to these murders finds reluctantly receptive hearers. Mintah's history amounts to a threat to the authority structure of the ship. The crew think of the stolen Africans as little better than animals, but they now know that,

[Mintah] was not like the other slaves. Her prolonged contact with missionaries amounted to a familiarity with whites...She would have gained an education, would be able to read and write, when most of them could barely sign their names. She would have learned about the kind of world they came from. All of which took the place of the usual fear of whites and resulted in a slave who was difficult to subjugate. (D'Aguiar 31)

Aware of his crew's insecurity, the Captain issues a uniquely crushing order: "Dance for us, Mintah. Dance" (30). Phrased as an invitation, the Captain's order is clearly an imperative, for he "produced a whip and lashed at Mintah's feet" (30). As the crew joins in with clapping, it appears that she is entertaining them; for many African women this dance serves as an initiation into their new lives in which they must perpetually "perform" their blackness. Again, I borrow here from Judith Butler's notion of the performative nature of gender and identity, for these slavers want their slaves to perform

the expectations of blackness that they have developed in their limited interaction.¹¹² The crew wants to be instantly gratified, and they expect Mintah to embody their notions of African femininity in her performance.

Initially, Mintah's dancing is simply an instinctive result of the combination of the Captain's command and his whip. However, she infuses her objectification with empowered agency garnered through her diasporic consciousness, again finding a way to resist the domination of the crew. Fabre helps us anticipate such a move on Mintah's part, arguing that,

If the dancing of the slave involved many strategies and much scheming on the part of the slavers, one may surmise that the captives responded with equally elaborate devices to develop—secretly but purposefully—a form of dancing that could escape control and manipulation. (37)

D'Aguiar suggests that Mintah embodies this resistance when she “decided to dance the death of fertility dance” (31). The narration becomes heavy handed here: “No doubt they would see it as her willingness to obey their every whim, but she *needed* to dance this particular dance,” a dance which allows her to revisit her own historical roots in her African homeland (31). Knowing that any explicit challenge to authority is immediately thwarted and punished, Mintah obeys the Captain and entertains the crew, while accomplishing her own goals, as well. She is now able, “to transfer the pain of the whip around her legs to that of her womb. To placate the fertility god. To touch imaginary soil with the balls of her foot,” and to “be cleansed by the rain, by water in its purest form” (31-32). Pratt's notion of the contact zone is helpful here because it emphasizes

¹¹² See Butler's *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity*. Butler's notion of performativity is introduced in Chapter Two.

Mintah's choice to resist not by refusing to obey, but by taking the orders of the captain and using them to undermine him, improving her own position of subordination. Mintah thus turns her point of complete subjection into a moment of utter freedom by infusing her present reality with her past empowerment. By privileging her own thoughts, the narrator reveals that rather than performing for them, they now perform for her; "Mintah replaced the crew's clapping with drums" (32). In this way D'Aguiar imagines the ways in which Mintah can successfully resist her place at the bottom of this hierarchy of power through her claim on history.

Her dance is significant not only in the immediate release it offers her, but even more in the result of her performance. Mintah chooses the "death of fertility" dance, and with the cessation of her movement she not only stops the show, but also ends the procreative function of her womb (D'Aguiar 31). By seeming to comply with Captain Cunningham, Mintah successfully costs her future owner thousands of dollars. For every thousand Africans who started the Middle Passage, only hundreds made it to the Americas alive (R. Wright 14). Because of the uncertainty of availability for new slaves to work on plantations, many American owners depended on their female slaves to bear new slaves mechanically. Mintah's greater act of rebellion, then, is her determination to subvert the compliant role of female slaves even as she appears to comply with the Captain's orders; she effectively ensures the erasure of her family line on her own terms. The result of her fertility dance is that she will never be an unwilling promoter of the system of slavery.

While her dance is a public display of private resistance, Mintah soon represents hope for her community of slaves when she creates an avenue for spiritual resistance

through her resurrection from the sea. Having been determined an instigator of trouble and an unredeemable rebel, Mintah causes chaos as the crew attempts to throw her into the sea. Here, D'Aguiar slows down the pulse of his text, listing each quadrant of her body that disappears, even down to "the hand still gripping a clump of Kelsal's long auburn hair, and then Mintah was gone" (49). And yet Mintah's resistance does not end with her disappearance; instead, by climbing back on the ship using the wood of her African past, she continues to challenge the existing power structures even in spiritual and psychic realms.

Defying the physical reality witnessed by others, she gains a new form of power; Mintah becomes a being with authority over death. Having overcome her physical boundaries in climbing back on board, Mintah now re-establishes them on her own terms. It is at this point that her rebellion outgrows her personal endeavor, gaining significance for her fellow Africans as she comes to represent a historically poignant spiritual force. Her survival embodies the collective dream of the African women: "They shared a recurring dream in which dignity and pride were resurrected from those depths, salvaged and restored" (D'Aguiar 76). Despite the reality that hundreds of slaves were abused and killed on the *Zong*, D'Aguiar provides this imagined counter narrative in which spiritual and physical realms combine in order to provide a form of resistance to this all encompassing authority.

In creating a spiritual element in Mintah that is immediately recognized by her fellow slaves, D'Aguiar introduces aspects of African spirituality. Establishing the "presence of a hysterical girl who can conjure up the spirits," in her article, "The African American Concept of the Fantastic as Middle Passage," Christol comments that, "the

fantastic is thus a crucial element in challenging existing notions of reality, subverting the visions channeled by dominant cultures and provoking action to change both that vision and reality” (166, 172). In recognizing Mintah as evocative of an ancient presence, the enslaved find and claim hope that the contact zone in which they find themselves is not limited to the parameters set by their oppressors. Mintah thus establishes another form of resistance by escaping the death meant for her and literally overcoming the physical oppression placed upon her. With Mintah’s reemergence, it becomes clear that although they have been dominated physically, the slaves can access alternative elements which enable them to challenge the power structure of which they are a part. D’Aguiar models Christol’s claim that “the intervention of the fantastic thus frees the community and the characters...and becomes a necessary instrument in the healing of personal and collective wounds” (170). Mintah thus introduces this element of ancient spirituality, essentially defining for herself the grounds upon which she can resist the power oppressing her. Part of the inferior culture, Mintah redraws the lines within which this contact zone occurs.

Mintah’s reception among the Africans in the hold makes it clear that she is now a spiritual being sent to give them hope on several levels. In fact, the scene of her resurrection is infused with otherworldly elements. As she climbs the rope the text reads, “‘Let go, Mintah!’ She heard the voice above the wind and the rain and the sea, above all the flames, inside her body and out” (54). It is clear here that when she comes out of the water, beating death by holding onto the wood of her past, her spiritual reality is now more important than her physical surroundings. Having established her spiritual significance, D’Aguiar demonstrates Mintah’s ability to elicit an immediate spiritual response among her fellow slaves. Mintah “crept into the men’s section of the slave hold

with the index finger of her right hand over her lips. There were shrieks and open mouths and sudden intakes of breath” (87). The instinctive nature of their response demonstrates their recognition of Mintah as an African spiritual being. Indeed, the men act on this belief as they, “touched her for some of her magic to rub off on them and to check that she wasn’t an apparition” (88). As other slaves accept Mintah as their spiritual inspiration—an ancient African force able to overcome their present oppression—it is important to note that Mintah is simultaneously recreating herself. While D’Aguiar revises this history of the *Zong*, Mintah redefines her role as a woman in a patriarchal system.

In fact, D’Aguiar not only presents Mintah as a ghost, of sorts, she also comes to represent what Aguiar calls, “a Bitch.” Aguiar traces the way in which the bitch resists traditional feminine roles:

Because of her repudiation of the traditional, patriarchally defined feminine role, because she won’t play ‘nice’ with the boys, the bitch is exiled from the patriarchal playground. Yet, in that denouncement, the bitch has found a space of her own. (32)

Since speaking Kelsal’s name, Mintah has refused to play by the white, European man’s rules. Mintah creates a space in which she has the agency to choose what roles she will assume or ignore. She does not remain the inferior element of this contact zone, but challenges this unequal relationship of power by creating her own space outside the parameters set for her. Aguiar’s conception is further useful in that the “bitch” most often resurrects herself, after which she “accepts responsibility for the whole self, [and] is rewarded with knowledge and power” (135). Her authority primarily comes from her refusal to reside in a position of inferiority and helplessness in relation to the colonial

patriarchy; her knowledge of her past position as a subject emerges as she “widens the parameters of self, redefining who she is” (Aguiar 135). Mintah’s reclaimed self possession and power are seen following her resurrection from the sea, when she feels her body again after being numb. Her rebirth is clear: she is consumed with laughter, begins to eat and write, and engages in a relationship with Simon. Mintah thus becomes an integrated woman who finds the agency to challenge the system in which she is trapped through her access to wood, and, therefore, to her autonomous African past.

Aguiar’s “bitch” is not just liberated in herself; she often has positive affects on the community of which she is a member. Although the text confesses that some women are afraid of Mintah’s rebellion and have learned “what *not* to do” by watching her, most of her community is encouraged when she re-emerges as spirit, goddess and matriarch (76). The women strive to feel “her head, her face [and] her body,” as they listen to her (89). It is as if they will be healed by her words and touch; indeed, Mintah’s presence infuses the hold with hope and the promise of redemption. When the boy who witnesses her being thrown overboard sees her again, his reaction reflects a salvation experience: He “told the other children that they would be saved by her”...and he “patted other children on the back who were older than himself. His face shown with conviction” (105). Spending time in her presence has a tangible effect on the boy. His face bears the mark of Mintah’s afterglow just as Moses’ face shown after having been in the presence of God.¹¹³ Mintah empowers the boy to become a leader to the other children as he confidently encourages them, offering them a counter narrative of resistance founded on their African roots, and thus their new diasporic consciousness.

¹¹³ See Exodus 34:29-30, “[Moses’] face was radiant because he had spoken with the Lord.”

Other African slaves previously without hope are similarly transformed by her resurrection. D'Aguiar reveals the spiritual element in their reaction: "To the women, talking among themselves, Mintah's reappearance was nothing short of a miracle. The gods were present in her to watch over them" (93). Not only does her presence lead them to spiritual experiences, but they begin to worship her, clapping and singing praises to her name (93). Her return reminds them that they are bound physically but free to hope and worship on a spiritual level as they had done in their pasts. For instance, slaves are still thrown overboard, but they go to their deaths screaming, "Mintah!", as if confident that the power of her name can save them (99). Mintah's return not only elicits a positive response, but she is now regarded as a goddess/savior.

Although they take hope in this new path to freedom, their circumstances do not actually change. D'Aguiar subtly reminds us that even though these women scream her name, they still "vanish over the side" of the ship (93). It is important to note, however, that although the attempted rebellion led by the resurrected Mintah is thwarted, such attempts had a remarkably powerful impact on the efficiency of the Atlantic slave trade overall. Using the Dubois institute slave trade data set, Bailyn argues that "slave rebellion occurred on approximately ten percent of all slave ships" (246). While many of the slaves involved in specific rebellions were killed, "the fear of insurrection increased shipboard staffing and other expenses on the Middle Passage by eighteen percent, costs that if invested in enlarged shipments would have led to the enslavement of one million more Africans than were actually forced into the system" (Bailyn 246). Such numbers suggest that failed attempts at resistance were, in fact, successful in lowering the number of slaves crews thought they could safely deliver to the Americas. Not only this, but here

D'Aguiar offers a strategy for strength and maintained agency within the African diaspora. If one remains displaced within the physical diaspora, D'Aguiar illustrates the possibility of creating a space of belonging through the reclamation of ancient African spirituality.

Despite the significant ways in which Mintah challenges the power structures on the *Zong*, her subsequent life on land undermines the lasting effects of her resistance. Following her resurrection, Mintah finds peace in her decision to record her story: "I go to sleep knowing I have to write everything that happens to me and to everyone around me. Is that why I sleep so deep? Knowing I've found a way to get what I see on this ship out of me?" (191). She lays claim to the ritual of purging her past when she decides to bear written witness to her experiences. D'Aguiar explicitly recognizes the importance of Mintah using the language of the slavers—English—to overthrow their hegemony. Despite her subversive behavior in this contact zone, however, her words have little impact. As previously mentioned, the submission of her journal into court only confirms her status as insignificant property; she—represented by her words—is without consequence. Thus, in D'Aguiar's imagined writing of history, her resistance only further illuminates the depth of her objectivity.

After serving as a slave in Maryland, Mintah purchases her own freedom and moves south to Jamaica. She throws off the mantle of slavery under which she struggled, and yet she is still dominated by the reality of her life on the *Zong*. Her former existence pervades her present reality:

I call my house my hold. It is crowded with pieces of wood. The shape of each piece is pulled from the sea of my mind and has been shaped by water, with water's contours. People say they see a

figure of some kind, man, woman, or child reaching up out of the depths. (208)

D'Aguiar's text is purposefully ambivalent—as is Mintah's own perception of herself. Although she has escaped the hegemonic power on the surface, the present is dominated by her history in the sea. He acknowledges here that while asserting diasporic consciousness can resist historical erasure and empower one's position as a subject, memory of a traumatic past can also limit agency and ensure erasure. D'Aguiar thus complicates any simple reading of history which asserts healing and self-actualization result from any effort of witness and reclamation.

D'Aguiar ends *Feeding the Ghosts* with similar complexity. Mintah claims the “sea no longer haunted her” (224) and confesses that the *Zong* “was in that sea and we were in it and that would be for an eternity without beginning or end” (229). She recognizes that her “detailed knowledge” of names and of “who did what to whom,”...“has not made an iota of difference to history or to the sea” (229), while also claiming “the past is laid to rest when it is told” (230). Rather than ending her life with memories of survival that offer her contentment, Mintah is haunted by delusional visions of her significance; she has not made a difference. Although he appears to be ambivalent in Mintah's sense of freedom and closure, D'Aguiar is painfully clear that no amount of resistance can end oppression, just as his imagined narrative cannot overturn history. For instance, although Jamaica celebrates its independence at the end of the text, D'Aguiar gives credit for this to the traditional possessors of power: “The slave owners had to grow tired of the responsibility of plantations” (205). The slavers chose to give up on Jamaica. Jamaica took nothing from these owners.

Despite her great effort to overcome the hierarchy which dominated her, D'Aguiar's portrayal of Mintah's death is clearly reminiscent of her abuse onboard the *Zong*. As part of her punishment for leading and instigating the short-lived rebellion on the ship, the officers ordered "pepper to be daubed on [her] eyes" and "more pepper between [her] legs and pushed up into [her body]" (D'Aguiar 215). When remembering this, Mintah says, "Fire was thrown into me. Tears scalded my face. The flames crawled behind my eyes and into my skull. Fire entered my body" (D'Aguiar 215). It is no mistake that when Mintah dies at the end of the text, D'Aguiar uses the same language: "Heat filled her hands. Heat undressed her. Fire pushed her to her knees. She opened her mouth for air and ate fire. It stung like the time she had drunk the sea. The flames toppled her, laid her flat and covered her" (226). This highly sexualized language reveals the final subjection Mintah suffers. She does not overturn the power structure she spends her adult life resisting; indeed, she does not even survive it. She ends her life as a free woman, yet raped and killed by the same force slavers used to subdue her a lifetime ago.

It is here that D'Aguiar finally reveals his comment on the history of the Middle Passage: no amount of self-actualization can resist its grasp. In fact, Mintah's attempts at resistance which arise from her assertion of diasporic consciousness ultimately work to reinforce the depth of her oppression. Although Mintah's revision of history might be ignored or read as ultimately ineffective in establishing her position as an autonomous, self-actualized subject, D'Aguiar clearly promotes the value of retelling, or even imagining a narrative in order to find release from a destructive past. The history of the Middle Passage only destroys, and yet it must be remembered and retold in order to be

released. Moments of hope pervade this text and must therefore be recognized as D'Aguiar's own attempt to revise a history of destruction.

I end this dissertation with D'Aguiar because by imagining a historical event of the trauma that occurred in the creating of the African diaspora, he expands figurings of history, diapora and trauma in complicated ways. Baucom's study reminds us that D'Aguiar is forced to imagine this history precisely because there are no conclusive documents recording the particulars of what happened on the voyage of the *Zong*. In fact, Baucom asserts that "much of the [slave] trade, particularly the financial life of the trade and the theory of value that made it possible, depended if not precisely on the absence of evidence, then on its belatedness" (17). Here he gets at the complexity of imagining history that new scholarship must explore in transnational settings, and yet underlying these questions is the assertion that imagined narratives are necessary if this history is to be accessed at all. What do these imagined narratives bear witness to? Baucom would answer, "this practice. This melancholy refusal of empire from within" (300). The writers examined here, to varying degrees, are imagining, or narrating, the stories of how the traumatic histories of domination and loss are confronted and resisted. Baucom articulates well the task for us who wish to engage this absence:

It is by bearing witness to this that witness simultaneously offers its testamentary opposition to the coming of the disinterested, liberal, imperial, universal, and homogenous state as such. And among the most crucial things that such an act of witness testifies against are not only the manifold and singular injustices of imperial history but the very concept of historical time. (305)

This dissertation has examined Caribbean and African American approaches to historical erasure through master narratives, patriarchy and inflicted trauma. I have found that

often accounts of witness are imagined or voiced when a consciousness of one's place in the community of the African diaspora is affirmed. This consciousness allows victims of trauma to place themselves within an existing counter narrative of accessed history and culture; such a context often creates a space for positioning oneself as an empowered subject capable of acting with agency. And yet there is no formula for the reclamation of history or for the integration of identity after abuse. New paradigms must be offered for witnessing counter narratives and approaching the African diaspora. These visions empower us to see the gaps in history not as erasures of identity, but as spaces for the insertion of effective resistance and self-actualization which can foster new realities not just for individuals, but also across diverse diasporic communities.

Bibliography

- Adeleke, Tunde. "Africa in the Black Diaspora Struggle: Paradigms and Perspectives" in *The African Presence in Black America*. Jacob U. Gordon, ed. Trenton, NJ: Africa World Press, Inc., 2004. 289-312.
- Aguiar, Sarah Appleton. *The Bitch is Back: Wicked Women in Literature*. Carbondale and Edwardsville, Ill: Southern Illinois University Press, 2001.
- Alexander, Simone A. James. *Mother Imagery in the Novels of Afro-Caribbean Women*. Columbia: University of Missouri Press, 2001.
- Alleyne, Mervyn C. *The Construction of Representation of Race and Ethnicity in the Caribbean and the World*. Kingston, Jamaica: University of West Indies Press, 2002.
- Auger, Philip. *Native Sons in No Man's Land: Rewriting Afro-American Manhood in the Novels of Baldwin, Walker, Wideman, and Gaines*. New York: Garland Publishing, Inc., 2000.
- Austin, J.L. *How To Do Things With Words*. Cambridge, Harvard UP, 1975.
- Baer, Sylvia and Paule Marshall. "Holding onto the Vision: Sylvia Baer Interviews Paule Marshall." *The Women's Review of Books*. 8.10-11 (July 1991), 24-25.
- Bailyn, Bernard. "Considering the Slave Trade: History and Memory." *The William and Mary Quarterly*. 58.1 (Jan 2001) 245-252.
- Baker, Houston A., Jr. "On the Criticism of Black American Literature: One View of the Black Aesthetic" (1976) in *African American Literary Theory: A Reader*. Winston Napier, ed. New York: New York University Press, 2000. 113-131.
- Bakerman, Jane. "The Seam Can't Show: An Interview with Toni Morrison" (1977) in *Conversations with Toni Morrison*. Danielle Taylor-Guthrie, ed. Jackson: University of Mississippi Press, 1994. 30-42.
- Baraka, Amiri. "Black Literature and the African-American Nation: The Urban Voice" in *Literature and the Urban Experience: Essays on the City and Literature*. Michael C. Jaye and Ann Chalmers Watts, eds. New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 1981. 139-159.
- Baucom, Ian. *Spectres of the Atlantic: Finance Capital, Slavery, and the Philosophy of History*. Durham: Duke University Press, 2005.

- Beavers, Herman. "Prodigal Agency: Allegory and Voice in Ernest J. Gaines's *A Lesson Before Dying*" in *Contemporary Black Men's Fiction and Drama*. Keith Clark, ed. Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2001. 135-154.
- . *Wrestling Angels into Song: The Fictions of Ernest J. Gaines and James Alan McPherson*. Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1995.
- Benítez-Rojo, Antonio. *Sea of Lentils*. James Maraniss, trans. Amherst: The University of Massachusetts Press, 1985
- Benjamin, Shanna Greene. "Weaving the Web of Reintegration: Locating Aunt Nancy in *Praisesong for the Widow*" *Melus* 30.1 (Spring 2005), 49-67.
- Bernard-Donals, Michael. "Beyond the Question of Authenticity: Witness and Testimony in the Fragments Controversy" in *Witnessing the Disaster: Essays on Representation and the Holocaust*. Michael Bernard-Donals and Richard Glejzer, eds. Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 2003. 196-212.
- Bhabha, Homi K. *The Location of Culture*. London: Routledge, 1994.
- Blustein, Jeffrey. *The Moral Demands of Memory*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008.
- Bracks, Lean'tin L. *Writings on Black Women of the Diaspora: History, Language, and Identity*. New York: Garland Publishing, Inc., 1998.
- Brand, Dionne. *At the Full and Change of the Moon: A Novel*. New York: Grove Press, 1999.
- . *A Map to the Door of No Return: Notes to Belonging*. Canada, Doubleday Canada, 2001.
- Brathwaite, Edward. *The Arrivants: A New World Trilogy*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1973.
- Brown, Lloyd W. "The Rhythms of Power in Paule Marshall's Fiction." *NOVEL: A Forum on Fiction* 7.2 (Winter 1974), 159-167.
- Butler, Judith. *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subjectivity of Identity*. New York: Routledge, 1990.
- . "Giving an Account of Oneself." *Diacritics*. 31.4 (2001): 22-40.
- Byerman, Keith. *Remembering the Past in Contemporary African American Fiction*. Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2005.

- Carmean, Karen. *Ernest J. Gaines: A Critical Companion*. Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 1998.
- Carnegie, Charles V. *Postnationalism Prefigured: Caribbean Borderlands*. New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 2002.
- Christian, Barbara T. *New Black Feminist Criticism, 1985-2000*. Gloria Bowles, M. Giulia Fabia, and Arlene R. Keizer, eds. Urbana, University of Illinois Press, 2007.
- . "Ritualistic Process and the Structure of Paule Marshall's *Praisesong for the Widow*." *Callaloo* 18 (Spring-Summer 1983), 74-84.
- Christol, H el ene. "The African American Concept of the Fantastic as Middle Passage" in *Black Imagination and the Middle Passage*. Maria Diedrich, Henry Louis Gates, Jr, and Carl Pederson, Eds. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999. 164-173.
- Clark, Keith. *Black Manhood in James Baldwin, Ernest J. Gaines, and August Wilson*. Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2002.
- . "Re-(W)righting Black Male Subjectivity: The Communal Poetics of Ernest Gaines's *A Gathering of Old Men*." *Callaloo* 22.1 (1999): 195-207.
- Clifford, James. *Routes: Travel and Translation in the Late Twentieth Century*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1997.
- Collins, Patricia Hill. *Black Feminist Thought: Knowledge, Consciousness, and the Politics of Empowerment*. Perspectives on Gender, Vol. 2. Cambridge: Unwin Hyman, Inc., 1990.
- Conner, Marc C., ed. "Introduction: Aesthetics and the African American Novel" in *The Aesthetics of Toni Morrison: Speaking the Unspeakable*. Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 2000. vii-xxviii.
- Coser, Stelamaris. *Bridging the Americas: The Literature of Paule Marshall, Toni Morrison, and Gayl Jones*. Philadelphia: Temple University, 1994.
- Dabydeen, David. *Turner: New and Selected Poems*. Leeds: Peepal Tree Press Ltd., 2002.
- Daemmrich, Ingrid G. "Paradise and Storytelling: Interconnecting Gender, Motif, and Narrative Structure." *Narrative* 11.2 (May 2003): 213-233.

- D'Aguiar, Fred. "At the Grave of the Unknown African, Henbury Parish Church." *Callaloo* 15.4 (1992) 894-898.
- . "Bill of Rights: An Excerpt." *Callaloo* 21.1 (1998) 227-235.
- . *Feeding the Ghosts*. Hopewell, New Jersey: The Ecco Press, 1997.
- . "A Son in the Shadow" in *These Hands I know: African-American Writers on Family*. Ed., Afaa Michael Weaver. Louisville, KY: Sarabande Books, Inc., 2002. 29-50.
- Dalsgand, Katrine. "The One All-Black Town Worth the Pain: (African) American Exceptionalism, Historical Narration, and the Critique of Nationhood in Toni Morrison's *Paradise*." *African American Review*. 35.2 (Summer 2001): 233-248.
- Davidson, Rob. "Racial Stock and 8-Rocks: Communal Historiography in Toni Morrison's *Paradise*." *Twentieth-Century Literature*. 47.3 (Fall 2001): 355-373.
- Davis, Christina. "An Interview with Toni Morrison" (1986) in *Conversations with Toni Morrison*. Danielle Taylor-Guthrie, ed. Jackson: University of Mississippi Press, 1994. 223-233.
- Deena, Seodial Frank H. *Situating Caribbean Literature and Criticism in Multicultural and Postcolonial Studies*. New York: Peter Lang Publishing, Inc., 2009.
- DeLamotte, Eugenia L. *Places of Silence, Journeys of Freedom: The Fiction of Paule Marshall*. Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1998.
- Denniston, Dorothy Hamer. *The Fiction of Paule Marshall: Reconstructions of History, Culture, and Gender*. Knoxville: University of Tennessee Press, 1995.
- Douglass, Ana and Thomas A. Vogler. "Introduction" in *Witness and Memory: The Discourse of Trauma*. Ana Douglass and Thomas A. Vogler, eds. New York: Routledge, 2003. 1-53.
- Doyle, Mary Ellen. *Voices from the Quarters: The Fiction of Ernest J. Gaines*. Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 2002.
- DuBois, W.E.B. *The Souls of Black Folk: Essays and Sketches*. Chicago: A.C. McClurg and Co., 1903.
- Edwards, Brent Hayes. *The Practice of Diaspora: Literature, Translation, and the Rise of Black Internationalism*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2003.

- Eyerman, Ron. "The Past in the Present: Culture and the Transmission of Memory." *Acta Sociologica*. 47.2 (June 2004): 159-169.
- Fabre Geneviève. "The Slave Ship Dance" in *Black Imagination and the Middle Passage*. Maria Diedrich, Henry Louis Gates, Jr, and Carl Pederson, Eds. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999. 33-46.
- Falola, Toyin. *The Power of African Cultures*. Rochester, New York, University of Rochester Press, 2003.
- Fanon, Frantz. *Black Skin, White Masks*. 1952. Charles Ian Markham, trans. New York: Grove Press, 1967.
- Fennell, Christopher C. "Bakongo identity and Symbolic Expression in the Americas" in *Archaeology of Atlantic Africa and the African Diaspora*. Ogundiran Akinwumi and Toyin Falola, eds. Bloomington, Indiana: Indiana University Press, 2007.
- Folks, Jeffrey J. "Ernest Gaines and the New South." *The Southern Literary Journal* 24.1 (Fall 1991): 32-47.
- Frailé-Marcos, Ana María. "Hybridizing the 'City upon a Hill' in Toni Morrison's *Paradise*." *MELUS*. 28.4 (Winter 2003): 3-31.
- Freud, Sigmund. "The Uncanny" in *Collected Papers: Volume IV*. 1919. Joan Riviere, trans. London: The Hogarth Press, Ltd. 1950. 368-407.
- Frías, María. "Building Bridges Back to the Past: An Interview with Fred D'Aguiar." *Callaloo* 25.2 (2002) 418-425.
- Friedman, Ellen G. "Postpatriarchal Endings in Recent U.S. Fiction." *Modern Fiction Studies*. 48.3 (Fall 2002): 693-712.
- Fulford, Sarah. "David Dabydeen and Turner's Sublime Aesthetic." *Anthurium: A Caribbean Studies Journal*. 3.1 (Spring 2005).
- Fulmer, Jacqueline. *Folk Women and Indirection in Morrison, Ni Dhuibhne, Hurston, and Lavin*. Burlington, VT: Ashgate Publishing Company, 2007.
- Gaines, Ernest J. *A Gathering of Old Men*. 1983. New York: Vintage Books, 1984.
- . *In My Father's House*. New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1978.
- . *A Lesson Before Dying*. New York: Vintage Books, 1993.

- . *Of Love and Dust*. New York: WWNorton and Company, 1967.
- . "Three Men" in *Bloodline*. 1963. New York: WWNorton and Company, 1976.
- Gaudet, Marcia and Carl Wooten. *Porch Talk with Ernest Gaines: Conversations on the Writer's Craft*. Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1990.
- Geschiere, Peter. *The Perils of Belonging: Autochthony, Citizenship, and Exclusion in African and Europe*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2009.
- Gilroy, Paul. *The Black Atlantic: Modernity and Double Consciousness*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1993.
- Glejzer, Richard. "Maus and the Epistemology of Witness" in *Witnessing the Disaster: Essays on Representation and the Holocaust*. Glejzer and Michael Bernard-Donals, eds. Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 2003. 125-137.
- Glissant, Edouard. *Caribbean Discourse: Selected Essays*. J. Michael Dash, trans. Charlottesville: University Press of Virginia, 1989.
- Greenwood, Emily. "Still Going On": Temporal Adverbs and the View of the Past in Walcott's Poetry." *Callaloo* 28.1 (2005) 132-145.
- Griffiths, Jennifer L. *Traumatic Possessions: The Body and Memory in African American Women's Writing and Performance*. Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, 2009.
- Habermas, Jürgen. *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere: An Inquiry into a Category of Bourgeois Society*. Thomas Burger, trans. Boston: Beacon Press, 1979.
- Harris, Wilson. "The Open Boat" in *The Womb of Space*. Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 1983.
- . *The Palace of the Peacock*. London: Faber and Faber, 1960
- Hartman, Saidiya V. *Scenes of Subjection: Terror, Slavery, and Self-Making in Nineteenth-Century America*. New York: Oxford University Press, 1997.
- Hathaway, Heather. *Caribbean Waves: Relocating Claude McKay and Paule Marshall*. Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 1999.
- Hebert-Leiter, Maria. "A Breed Between: Racial Mediation in the Fiction of Ernest Gaines." *Melus*. 31.2 (Summer 2006): 95-119.

- Henderson, Gwendolyn. "Speaking in Tongues: Dialogics, Dialectics, and the Black Women's Literary Tradition" (1989) in *African American Literary Theory: A Reader*. Winston Napier, ed. New York: New York University Press, 2000. 348-368.
- Hicks, Jack. "To Make These Bones Live: History and Community in Ernest Gaines's Fiction." *Black American Literature Forum*. 11.1 (Spring 1977): 9-19.
- Higgins, Therese E. *Religiosity, Cosmology, and Folklore: The African Influence in the Novels of Toni Morrison*. New York: Routledge Press, 2001.
- The Holy Bible* (New International Version). London: Zondervan, Inc.
- hooks, bell. *Ain't I A Woman: Black Women and Feminism*. Boston: South End Press, 1981.
- . *Feminist Theory: From Margin to Center*. Boston: South End Press, 1984.
- . *Talking Back: Thinking Feminist, Thinking Black*. Boston: South End Press, 1989.
- . *Yearning: Race, Gender, and Cultural Politics*. Boston: South End Press, 1990.
- Hurston, Zora Neale. *Every Tongue Got to Confess: Negro Tales from the Gulf States*. New York: Harper Collins Publishers Inc., 2002
- . *Their Eyes Were Watching God*. 1937. New York: Harper Collins Publishers., Inc., \ 1991.
- Jenkins, Candace M. "Pure Black: Class, Color, and Intra-racial Politics in Toni Morrison's *Paradise*." *Modern Fiction Studies*. 52.2 (Summer 2006): 270-296.
- Johnson, James Weldon. *The Autobiography of an Ex-Colored Man*. 1912. Middlesex: The Echo Library, 2009.
- Johnson, Paul Christopher. *Diaspora Conversions: Black Caribbean Religion and the Recovery of Africa*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 2007.
- Joyce, Joyce A. "The Black Canon: Reconstructing Black American Literary Criticism" (1987) in *African American Literary Theory: A Reader*. Winston Napier, ed. New York: New York University Press, 2000. 290-297.
- Keizs, Marcia. "Themes and Style in the Works of Paule Marshall." *Negro American Literary Forum*. 9.3 (Autumn 1975), 67, 71-76.

- Kemayo, Kamau. "Ancestral Communion in Contemporary African American Literature" in *The African Presence in Black America*. Jacob U. Gordon, ed. Trenton, NJ: Africa World Press, Inc., 2004. 217-270.
- Kincaid, Jamaica. *The Autobiography of My Mother*. New York: Plume, 1996.
- Krose, Sarah. "Principles of Tradition African Art in Yoruba Thorn Wood Carvings: Conversations with Titi Adepitan." *Research in African Literature*. 34.1 (Spring 2004) 96-125.
- Kubitschek, Missy Dehn. "Paule Marshall's Women on Quest." *Black American Literary Forum*. 21.1 and 2 (Spring-Summer 1987), 43-60.
- LaCapra, Dominick. *Writing History, Writing Trauma*. Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 2001.
- Lamming, George. *Natives of My Person*. Ann Arbor: The University of Michigan Press, 1972
- Larsen, Nella. *Passing*. 1929. Mineola, NY: Dover Publications, Inc., 2004.
- Laub, Dori. "Bearing Witness or the Vicissitudes of Listening" in *Testimony: Crises of Witnessing in Literature, Psychoanalysis, and History*. Shoshana Felman and Dori Laub, eds. New York: Routledge, 1992. 57-74.
- . "An Event Without a Witness: Truth, Testimony and Survival" in *Testimony: Crises of Witnessing in Literature, Psychoanalysis, and History*. Shoshana Felman and Dori Laub, eds. New York: Routledge, 1992. 75-92.
- Lindsay, Lisa A. *Captives as Commodities: The Transatlantic Slave Trade*. Upper Saddle River, New Jersey: Pearson Education Inc., 2008
- Lubin, Orly. "Holocaust Testimony, National Memory" in *Trauma, Testimony, and Community*. Nancy K. Miller and Jason Tougaw, eds. Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2002. 131-142.
- MacCurdy, Marian M. *The Mind's Eye: Image and Memory in Writing About Trauma*. Amherst, MA: University of Massachusetts, 2007.
- Macpherson, Heide. "Perceptions of Place: Geopolitical and Cultural Positioning in Paule Marshall's Novels" in *Caribbean Women Writers: Fiction in English*. Maryse Condé and Thrunn Lonsdale, eds. New York: St. Martin's Press, 1999.
- Manning, Patrick. *The African Diaspora: A History through Culture*. New York: Columbia University Press, 2009.

- Marshall, Paule. *Brown Girl, Brownstones*. 1959. New York: The Feminist Press, 1981
- . *The Chosen Place, The Timeless People*. London: Longman Group Limited, 1969.
- . *The Fisher King: A Novel*. New York: Scribner, 2000.
- . *Praisesong for the Widow*. New York: Plume, 1983.
- . *Reena and Other Stories*. New York: The Feminist Press, 1983.
- Mayberry, Susan Neal. *Can't I Love What I Criticize? The Masculine and Morrison*. Athens: University of Georgia Press, 2007.
- Mbembe, Achille. "The Subject of the World" in *Facing Up to the Past: Perspectives on the Commemoration of Slavery from Africa, the Americas and Europe*. Gert Oostindie, ed. Kingston, Jamaica: Ian Randle Publishers, 2001. 21-28.
- McGill, Lisa D. *Constructing Black Selves: Caribbean American Narratives and the Second Generation*. New York: New York University Press, 2005.
- McKay Nellie. "An Interview with Toni Morrison" (1983) in *Conversations with Toni Morrison*. Danielle Taylor-Guthrie, ed. Jackson: University of Mississippi Press, 1994. 138-155.
- McKoy, Sheila Smith. "The Limbo Contest: Diaspora Temporality and Its Reflection in 'Praisesong for the Widow' and 'Daughters of the Dust.'" *Callaloo*. 22.1 (Winter 1999), 208-222.
- McNeil, Elizabeth. "The Gullah Seeker's Journey in Paule Marshall's *Praisesong for the Widow*." *Melus* 34.1 (Spring 2009), 185-209.
- McWatt, Mark A. "Migrating From the Void: A Voice Beneath the Metonymic Sea: David Dabydeen's *Turner*." 14th Annual Conference on West Indian Literature Held at Antigua State College (March 1995).
- Michal, Magali Corneir. "Re-Imagined Agency: Toni Morrison's 'Paradise.'" *African American Revision*. 36.4 (Winter 2002): 643-661.
- Morrison, Toni. *Beloved*. New York: Penguin Putnam Inc., 1987.
- . *The Bluest Eye*. 1970. New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1993.
- . Nobel Lecture. *1993 Nobel Foundation*. Swedish Academy: Stockholm, 1993.

- . *Paradise*. New York: Penguin Books USA, Inc., 1997.
- . *Playing in the Dark: Witness and the Literary Imagination*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1992.
- . "Rootedness: The Ancestor as Foundation: Black Women Writers, 1950-1980" in *What Moves at the Margin: Selected Nonfiction*. Carolyn C. Denard, ed. Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 2008.
- . *Sula*. 1973. New York: Penguin Books USA, Inc., 1982.
- . *Tar Baby*. New York: Penguin Books USA, Inc., 1981.
- Naipaul, V.S. *The Middle Passage: Impression of Five Societies—British, French and Dutch—in the West Indies and South America*. London: Andre Deutsch Limited, 1962.
- Nursey-Bray, Paul and Pal Ahluwalia, eds. "Frantz Fanon and Edward Said: Decolonisation and the Search for Identity" in *Post-Colonialism: Culture and Identity in Africa*. Commack, NY: Nova Science Publishers, Inc., 1997. 27-47.
- Nwankwo, Ifeoma C. K., "Insider and Outsider, Black and American: Rethinking Zora Neale Hurston's Caribbean Ethnography." *Radical History Review*. 87 (Fall 2003), 49-77.
- Oguibe, Olu. "Slavery and the Diaspora Imagination" in *Facing Up to the Past: Perspectives on the Commemoration of Slavery from Africa, the Americas and Europe*. Gert Oostindie, ed. Kingston, Jamaica: Ian Randle Publishers, 2001. 95-101.
- Ogundiran, Akinwumi and Toyin Falola. "Pathways in the Archaeology of Transatlantic Africa" in *Archaeology of Atlantic Africa and the African Diaspora*. Eds., same. Bloomington, Indiana: Indiana University Press, 2007. 3-45.
- O'Reilly, Andrea. *Toni Morrison and Motherhood: A Politics of the Heart*. Albany: State University of New York, 2004.
- Page, Philip "Furrowing All the Brows: Interpretation and the Transcendent in Toni Morrison's *Paradise*." *African American Review*. 35.4 (2001): 637-649.
- Papa, Lee. "'His Feet on Your Neck': The New Religion in the Works of Ernest J. Gaines." *African American Review* 27.2 (Summer 1993): 187-193.

- Paquet, Sandra Pouchet. "The Ancestor as Foundation in *Their Eyes Were Watching God* and *Tar Baby*." *Callaloo* 13.3 (Summer 1990): 499-515.
- Pettis, Joyce. *Toward Wholeness in Paule Marshall's Fiction*. Charlottesville: University of Virginia, 1995.
- and Paule Marshall. "A Melus Interview: Paule Marshall" *Melus* 17.4 (Winter 1991-Winter 1992), 117-129.
- Philip, M. Nourbese, as told to the author by Setaey Adamu Boateng. *Zong!* Middletown, CT: Wesleyan University Press, 2008.
- Pratt, Mary Louise. *Imperial Eyes: Travel Writing and Transculturation*. London: Routledge, 1992.
- Rogers, Susan. "Embodying Cultural Memory in Paule Marshall's *Praisesong for the Widow*." *African American Review*. 34.1 (Spring 2000), 77-94.
- Ruas, Charles. "Toni Morrison" (1981) in *Conversations with Toni Morrison*. Danielle Taylor-Guthrie, ed. Jackson: University of Mississippi Press, 1994. 93-118.
- Rushdy, Ashraf H. A. "The Neo-Slave Narrative" in *The Cambridge Companion to the African-American Novel*. Ed., Maryemma Graham. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004. 87-105.
- . *Remembering Generations: Race and Family in Contemporary African American Fiction*. Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2001.
- Ryan, Judylyn S. "Contested Visions/Double-Vision in *Tar Baby*" in *Toni Morrison: Critical and Theoretical Approaches*. Nancy J. Peterson, ed. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1997. 63-87.
- Said, Edward W. *Culture and Imperialism*. New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1993.
- and David Barsamian. *Culture and Resistance: Conversations with Edward W. Said*. Cambridge, MA: South End Press, 2003.
- Sandiford, Keith A. "Paule Marshall's *Praisesong for the Widow*: The Reluctant Heiress, or Whose Life is it Anyway?" *Black American Literary Forum*. 20.4 (Winter 1986), 371-392.
- Scarboro, Ann Armstrong. "The Healing Process: A Paradigm for Self-Renewal in Paule Marshall's '*Praisesong for the Widow*' and Camara Laye's '*Le Regard du roi*'" *Modern Language Studies*. 19.1 (Winter 1989), 28-36.

- Schramm, Katharina. "Slave Route Projects: Tracing the Heritage of Slavery in Ghana" in *Reclaiming Heritage: Alternative Imaginaries of Memory in West Africa*. Michael Rowlands and Ferdinand de Jong, eds. Walnut Creek, CA: Left Coast Press, Inc., 2007. 71-98.
- Scott, Joyce Hope. "Song of Solomon and Tar Baby: The Subversive Role of Language and the Carnavalesque" in *The Cambridge Companion to Toni Morrison*. Justine Tally, ed. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007. 26-42.
- Shannon, Sandra G. "Strong Men Getting Stronger: Gaines's Defense of the Elderly Black Male in *A Gathering of Old Men*" in *Critical Reflection on the Fiction of Ernest J. Gaines*. David C. Estes, ed. Athens, University of Georgia Press, 1994. 195-214.
- Sicher, Efraim, ed. "Introduction" in *Breaking Crystal: Writing and Memory After Auschwitz*. Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1998. 1-6.
- Silvestrini, Blanca G. "Women and Resistance: 'Herstory' in Contemporary Caribbean Writing" in *Slavery, Freedom and Gender: The Dynamics of Caribbean Society*. Brian L. Moore, B.W. Higman, Carl Campbell and Patrick Bryan, Eds. Kingston, Jamaica: University of The West Indies Press, 2001. 161-182.
- Smith, Barbara. "Toward a Black Feminist Criticism" (1977) in *African American Literary Theory: A Reader*. Winston Napier, ed. New York: New York University Press, 2000. 132-146.
- Spiegelman, Art. *Maus: A Survivor's Tale*. New York: Pantheon Books. 1973.
- Stave, Shirley Ann. "Jazz and Paradise: Pivotal Moments in Black History" in *The Cambridge Companion to Toni Morrison*. Justine Tally, ed. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007. 59-74.
- Sundquist, Eric J. *To Wake the Nations: Race in the Making of American Literature*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1993.
- Sweeney, Megan. "Racial House, Big House, Home: Contemporary Abolitionism in Toni Morrison's *Paradise*." *Meridians: Feminism, Race, Transnationalism*. 4.2 (2004): 40-67.
- Tally, Justine. "The Morrison Trilogy" in *The Cambridge Companion to Toni Morrison*. Justine Tally, ed. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007. 95-91.
- . *Paradise Reconsidered: Toni Morrison's (Hi)stories and Truths*. Piscataway, NJ: Transaction Publishers, 1999.

- Tate, Claudia. "Toni Morrison" (1983) in *Conversations with Toni Morrison*. Danielle Taylor-Guthrie, ed. Jackson: University of Mississippi Press, 1994. 156-170.
- Thorsson, Courtney. "Dancing Up a Nation: Paule Marshall's *Praisesong for the Widow*." *Callaloo* 30.2 (2007), 644-652.
- Toomer, Jean. *Cane*. 1923. New York: W.W.Norton and Company, Inc. 1975.
- Turner, J.M.W. *The Slave Ship*. 1840.
- Unsworth, Barry. *Sacred Hunger*. New York: Doubleday, 1992.
- Walcott, Derek. "The Muse of History" in *What the Twilight Says: Essays*. New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1998. 36-64.
- . "The Sea is History" in *The Star Apple Kingdom*. New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1977.
- Walters, Wendy W. *At Home in Diaspora: Black International Writing*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2005.
- Wardi, Anissa J. "Inscriptions in the Dust: *A Gathering of Old Men* and *Beloved* as Ancestral Requiems." *African American Review* 36.1 (Spring 2002): 35-53.
- Waxman, Barbara Frey. "Dancing out of the Form: Dancing into Self: Genre and Metaphor in Marshall, Shange, and Walker." *Melus* 19.3 (Autumn 1994), 91-106.
- . "The Widow's Journey to Self and Roots: Aging and Society in Paule Marshall's '*Praisesong for the Widow*'" *Frontiers: A Journal of Women Studies*. 9.3 (1987), 94-99.
- Willis, Susan. *Specifying: Black Women Writing the American Experience*. Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1987.
- Wright, Michelle M. *Becoming Black: Creating Identity in the African Diaspora*. Durham: Duke University Press, 2004.
- Wright, Richard. *12 Million Black Voices*. New York: Thunder's Mouth Press, 1941.
- Wynter, Jerome S. Transculturation and the Cross-Cultural Imagination: A Reading of David Dabydeen's 'Turner.' 20th Anniversary Conference on West Indian Literature. St Augustine: University of West Indies (March 2001).

