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The beauty of her survival: Being Black and female in Meridian, The salt eaters, Kindred, and The bluest eye

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THE BEAUTY OF HER SURVIVAL; BEING BLACK AND
FEMALE IN MERIDIAN, THE SALT EATERS, KINDRED,
AND THE BLUEST EYE

ULLRICH-FERGUSON

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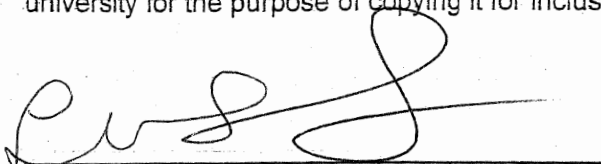
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The Beauty of Her Survival: Being Black and Female in
Meridian, The Salt Eaters, Kindred, and The Bluest Eye
(TITLE)

BY

Loretta N. Ullrich-Ferguson

THESIS

SUBMITTED IN PARTIAL FULFILLMENT OF THE REQUIREMENTS
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IN THE GRADUATE SCHOOL, EASTERN ILLINOIS UNIVERSITY
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Dedication:

To Kieran Rustin and Teagan Eleanor,
whose births and lives have been
integral to this thesis and to
my graduate experience as a whole.

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Introduction

Individuals have been responsible for advocating equality for marginalized American groups since colonial times. From the nation's second First Lady Abigail Adams through former slaves such as Fredrick Douglass and Sojourner Truth to the activists in the social movements of the 20th century, many have fought hard to try to make the wealthy white-male power structure aware of and sympathetic to the rights of all citizens. Throughout these struggles, racist and sexist ideology dictated who the public leaders of these movements would be. The abolitionist movement's prominent leaders were males, most often white. The suffragist movement was led by, and primarily composed of, white women. The major movements for racial and gender equality in the 1960s and '70s were led by, respectively, black men and white women. The central goals of these movements did not solely affect black men and white women. Women of color also stood much to gain by the realization of these goals, yet they were often relegated to supporting positions within the movements when they were not excluded entirely. An analysis of the movements for social equality over the course of U.S. history suggests reasons for black women's exclusion: underlying patriarchal sexism and racism within those very movements.

To understand the historical reasons for the racism and sexism inherent within U.S. social movements, we must examine the abolitionist and suffragist movements in the decades leading up to the Civil War. These social movements rose to prominence as the nation headed towards the bloody conflict that would abolish slavery. Abolitionists and suffragists were not exclusive, or isolated; there was a great affinity between the two groups, as many involved had a shared goal: the emancipation, empowerment, and

enfranchisement of two peoples who had long been denied basic rights in society. Both groups believed that as long as any person were in bondage, so were all people in bondage; if anyone were denied the right to vote, all were inevitably disenfranchised.

Ellen Carol DuBois explains:

Of the moral reform movements, abolitionism was the most radical and contributed the most to the emerging sensibility of the female self-assertion. The abolitionists' indictment of the absolute immorality of slaveholding established a much stronger political language [...] for describing the tyrannical abuse of power; women quickly put that language to good use in indicting men's tyranny over them. (840)

During the Civil War, those who primarily identified as suffragists aligned themselves even more closely with the abolitionist movement, banding together in support of the Union. According to DuBois, "political equality had been the first principle of the women's rights movement for almost two decades, but it was the historical consequences of the Civil War that began to make it a possibility" (844).

Advocates for women's rights saw the emancipation of slaves as a framework on which to build the movement for women's emancipation. During this time, the most striking example of the close relationship was the drive to pass the Thirteenth Amendment.

DuBois writes:

[I]n 1863 congressional radicals turned to the women's rights movement for support in passing the first of the Reconstruction amendments, the constitutional abolition of slavery. Women's rights leaders, enthusiastic advocates of "A NEW CONSTITUTION in which the guarantee of liberty and equality to every human being shall be so plainly and clearly written as never again to be called in question," were eager to help and organized a campaign of popular support, the first such effort on behalf of a proposed constitutional amendment. They collected over four hundred thousand signatures [...] and Sen. Charles Sumner gave them much of the credit for the ultimate passage of the Thirteenth Amendment. (844-845)

Woman's rights activists thought that their efforts would not be forgotten. However, most male suffragists were too engrossed in the war to remember their allegiance to the woman's rights movement. Fredrick Douglass himself gave only one speech that referred to woman's rights during the duration of the Civil War on January 25, 1865. In it he "affirmed his belief that 'women as well as men have the right to vote, and my heart and my voice go with the movement to extend suffrage to women'" (26). Anticipating that there would be a swift move to enfranchise black men, Douglass quickly added in this speech that "woman's suffrage rested upon a different basis than that of the Negro's right to the ballot" (26). With that one public statement, the strong bond between the abolitionist and suffragist movements began to crack apart.

After slavery was abolished with the end of the Civil War, "Reconstruction strengthened the belief that the right to vote was a natural right. The right to suffrage was either the supreme natural right [...] or the necessary protection of all other natural rights" (DuBois 845). At this time many former abolitionists sought suffrage for black men. Suffragists attempted to align once more with their former comrades, but they soon found themselves facing an enormous obstacle in the form of the Fourteenth Amendment. Rheta Childe Dorr explains the amendment:

[The amendment] provided, in its first article, that all persons born or naturalized in the United States, were citizens, that representatives should be apportioned among the several States according to their respective numbers, counting the whole numbers of *persons* in each State, excluding Indians not taxed. But by the second article, if the right to vote in any State were denied to any of the *male* citizens, except for participation in rebellion or other crime, the basis of representation would then be reduced in proportion which the number of such *male* citizens bore to the whole number of *male* citizens, twenty-one years of age, in the State. (178—her emphasis)

The Fourteenth Amendment caused great distress in the suffragist community, and for good reason. It represented the first time gender would be articulated specifically in the Constitution. Women, both white and black, had not only worked hard to gather support for the Thirteenth Amendment during the Civil War, but they also served in various other facets, such as working in the “military hospitals, in the first aid stations under fire, in war work of every description back of the lines ... [e]ven, in some cases, in the planning of campaigns and in the secret service women had distinguished themselves” (Dorr 179). The fact that their actions had been ignored by the men with whom they had worked so diligently was a stunning blow, and they actively fought to strike the word *male* from the language of the Fourteenth Amendment.

The Republican Party, which had the most to gain during the era of Reconstruction from the enfranchisement of the black male voter, was determined to secure the vote for the black man first. DuBois writes, “Part of the argument for black suffrage was that enfranchising the freedmen would keep the Republican Party in power, thus preserving the victories of the war and strengthening the nation” (849). Susan B. Anthony and other women’s suffrage leaders thought that the Republican leaders would see the inherent benefits of enfranchising the women of the country who had been such ardent supporters during the war. However, they failed to consider one very important factor. Dorr writes, “What the Republicans were seeking at the moment was geographical extension of their power, and this they sought in the South among Negroes and yeoman whites, who as voters would outnumber the old oligarchy. They did not particularly need the votes of Northern women, so they could be pushed aside for the present” (185). Susan B. Anthony, Elizabeth Cady Stanton, and Sojourner Truth, among

others, continued to seek the removal of gender specification in the Fourteenth Amendment. Petitions bearing thousands of signatures, of both men and women, imploring the elected officials in Washington to give women the right to vote poured into Washington. Many male abolitionists, including Frederick Douglass, "did everything they could privately to encourage Congress to ignore the women" (Dorr 186). In their quest to maintain their control of the government, the white, male, Republican legislators chose to continue the marginalization of the nation's women.

In May 1866, in an attempt to link its cause with that of the black man, the Women's Rights Convention changed its name to the American Equal Rights Association. It announced its main objective to be universal suffrage. Frederick Douglass was elected one of the organization's Vice-Presidents (Quarles 39) and Susan B. Anthony the First Secretary (Dorr 182). Shortly thereafter, however, some of the group's male members began to express doubt over the soundness of this coalition. Theodore Tilton, one of the organization's other Vice Presidents, exclaimed that it was the "Negro's hour" and called for achieving votes for black men before trying to enfranchise women (Dorr 182). Anthony said she "will cut off this right arm of mine before I will ever work for or demand the ballot for the Negro and not the woman" (qtd. in Dorr 183). Sojourner Truth, in a less vitriolic but nonetheless impassioned statement claimed that "if colored men get their rights and not colored women theirs, you see the colored men will be masters over the women, and it will be just as bad as it was before" (qtd. in hooks *Ain't I A Woman* 4). Nevertheless, the abolitionists failed to acknowledge their former female comrades, either white or black.

The ensuing passage of the Fourteenth Amendment in July of 1866 did little to ease the tensions between the two sides. Douglass' Congressional lobbying on behalf of the passage of the Fourteenth Amendment was seen as an especially horrific betrayal. Although he was not the only one to abandon the women's rights movement at this critical juncture, had he chosen to align himself with the suffragists, he would not have been alone because several other men still advocated universal suffrage. Dorr writes, "To the credit of another intellectual Negro, Robert Purvis, it should be remembered that he refused to do this, saying that he was ashamed to vote before his own wife and daughter" (187). Purvis was not the only black advocate for universal suffrage. According to DuBois, "Sojourner Truth spoke frequently from the women's rights platform in the 1860s and, despite the terrific pressure not to delay the freedman's enfranchisement, was in favor of holding out for universal suffrage" (846). However, as bell hooks writes, "Black women were placed in a double bind; to support women's suffrage would imply that they were allying themselves with white women activists who had publicly revealed their racism, but to support only black male suffrage was to endorse a patriarchal social order that would grant them no political voice" (*Ain't I A Woman* 3). This double bind in which black women found themselves was still felt a century later during the U.S. feminist and civil rights movements.

The passage of the Fifteenth Amendment served to anger woman's rights activists, and they reframed their arguments, switching at that point to one that called not for universal suffrage on the basis that all were equal but rather because they were different, and those differences required that women have protection under the law because of those differences. The white suffragists could be especially racist, partly

because they saw the enfranchisement of black men, for whom they had initially worked so hard, as an enormous insult. They disbanded the ERA and founded a new organization, the National Women's Suffrage Association, which focused solely on issues of gender and which was primarily focused on issues concerning white women¹.

The Fifteenth Amendment was passed on March 30, 1870, and many abolitionist leaders, including Frederick Douglass, immediately called for a sixteenth amendment granting women the right to vote (Douglass 37). These efforts, however, would not be realized until well after their, and female suffragists', deaths. Although many abolitionists eventually realigned themselves with the woman's suffrage movement following the enfranchisement of black men, a great wound had already been inflicted on the women's rights movement at the critical period during the discussion and ratification of these two amendments. American social movements are still feeling the ramifications of the great divide that occurred between the abolitionist and suffragist associations in the 1860s. The suffragists and second wave feminists of the 1960s and 70s, in particular, have been influenced by the tensions that erupted over the Fourteenth and Fifteenth Amendments, and the rift between the Civil Rights and Feminist movements of the 1960s-70s attests to this tension.

During the Progressive Era prior to the passage of the Nineteenth Amendment granting U. S. women the right to vote, social movements focused mainly on white and class-related concerns. This was certainly true of the ever-resilient suffragist movement, which had been waging the fight for women's voting rights since their break with the

¹ These comments are not intended to justify the white supremacy in the suffragist movement. Rather, they are included to explain *why* there are undertones of white supremacy/racism in U.S. women's rights movements.

abolitionist movement. The movement's leaders were all white women, like Carrie Chapman Catt and Alice Paul. Although several notable African American women activists, such as Ida B. Wells, were actively involved in garnering support for women's suffrage, they, like Sojourner Truth and innumerable other black women of the previous generation, were relegated to a secondary, or supporting, position within the movement itself. Judith McDonough speculates that this is due in part to the fact that "white women feared alienating the South and many shared the prejudicial attitudes of the time" (317). While this certainly played a part, the lingering racist sentiments and feelings of betrayal by men, both white and black, in the 19th century were certainly inherited by the movement's new leaders. Carrie Chapman Catt, who took over as President of the National American Women Suffrage Association when Elizabeth Cady Stanton resigned in 1900, certainly had ample opportunity to witness firsthand this racism within the movement before her ascendance to the presidency. And, although the feminist movement stagnated following the ratification of the Nineteenth Amendment, there was still a small majority of members who remained active until the emergence of the Second-Wave Feminist movement in the 1960s and 70s, at which time racism within the movement once again became apparent, as did sexism within the Civil Rights and Black Power Movements, due in no small part to the internalization of white patriarchal norms by black men and the black community. bell hooks highlights this in her book *Ain't I a Woman: black women and feminism*. She writes "As black men advanced in all spheres of American life, they encouraged black women to assume a more subservient role. Gradually the radical revolutionary spirit that characterized the intellectual and political contribution of black women in the 19th century was quelled" (4). Black men's

internalization of white patriarchy created a fertile breeding ground for sexism within the Civil Rights and Black Power Movements in the 1950s, '60s, and '70s.

The abolitionist movement's legacy of sexism and the internalization of white patriarchy by black men was readily apparent in the U.S. Civil Rights Movement in the mid-20th century. The most prominent leaders of the movement were black men, and from its infancy throughout, those men were "still parroting the master's prattle about male superiority" (Weathers 158). Certainly, some women, such as Rosa Parks or Fannie Lou Hamer for example, were public figureheads of the movement, yet they were primarily relegated to positions of secondary leadership. In an analysis of the role that gender played in leadership during the Civil Rights Movement, Belinda Robnett elucidates the fact that women were given positions of informal, rather than formal, leadership. She writes:

Within the context of the civil rights movement, African-American women operated as 'bridge leaders,' who—through frame bridging, amplification, extension, and transformation—initiated ties between the social movement and the community and between prefigurative strategies aimed at individual change, identity, and consciousness and political strategies aimed at organizational tactics designed to challenge existing relationships with the state and other societal institutions. The activities of African-American women in the civil rights movement provided the bridges necessary to cross boundaries between the personal lives of potential constituents and adherents and the political life of civil rights movement organizations. (1664)

Here Robnett highlights the gendered division of leadership, and she also acknowledges that this personal, informal leadership was invaluable to the movement. Without these "bridge leaders," the movement would not have been as successful at mobilizing the masses, but, at the same time, this hierarchy of leadership reinforced the decidedly sexist nature of the Civil Rights Movement. In her analysis, Robnett states that, "Women, because of their gender, were often channeled away from formal leadership positions and

confined to the informal level of leadership. ... Bridge leaders were by no means exclusively women. However, this area of leadership was the only one available to women. ... Within this context, the Civil Rights Movement's organization was gendered" (Robnett 1667). Women were actively routed into subservient positions, working as secretaries or helpmates within the movement's main organizations like the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC), the Southern Christian Leadership Conference (SCLC), and the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP).

The prominent male leaders of the movement's primary organizations publicly espoused sexist rhetoric. The most notable example of this public abuse was Stokely Carmichael of SNCC. In an interview he was asked to describe women's position in the movement, to which he replied, "prone." His defenders have since argued that he was only speaking in jest, but, regardless, his ability to joke about the fact that the only service women could be of in the movement was on their backs in sexual service to the men clearly indicates the inherent internalization of sexist ideology by men of all colors within American society, and it harkens back to the inherent sexism proffered by the movement's predecessor, the abolitionist movement. Michele Wallace, a founding member of the National Black Feminist Organization and author of *Black Macho and the Myth of the Superwoman*, discusses her personal take on this comment. She writes, "It took me three years to fully understand that Stokely was serious when he'd said my position in the movement was 'prone,' three years to understand that the countless speeches that all began 'the black man...' did not include me" (221). When abolitionists

and modern-day Civil Rights leaders spoke of the fact that all men were created equal, they truly believed that encompassed all men and did not extend that ideology to women.

Carmichael was not alone in publicly pontificating about women's proper place within black (and white) society and within the Civil Rights and Black Power movements. Even Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., perhaps the most widely known and respected movement figurehead, had internalized the sexist paradigm in American society. Robnett points out that, as evidenced in a preface he wrote for Septima Clark's autobiography *Echo in My Soul*, King "believed that women, while capable of leadership, did not and should not exercise this ability by choice. A woman's position was more naturally suited as a support to her husband and as a mother to her children" (1672). In addition to these public statements, privately, King was rumored to be a prolific womanizer, which supports the notion that those with power within the movement were complicit in objectifying women and perpetuating misogynistic ideology².

While black women were marginalized within the Civil Rights and Black Power Movements because of their gender, they were equally as marginalized due to their race in the feminist movement of the 1960s and '70s. The schism created between the (primarily white) suffragists and (primarily male) abolitionists due to the sexism invoked

² The same is true for the leaders of the Civil Rights Movement's offshoot, the Black Power Movement. Misogyny and sexism were no less prevalent in the Black Power Movement than in the Civil Rights Movement, and black women's voices were just as marginalized in the former as in the latter. Roberta M. Hendrickson writes that "By 1970, some people, who called themselves black nationalists or black militants, and whose slogan had become 'Black Power,' urged black women [...] to subordinate themselves to black men, to make themselves less, for the good of the people" (112). In her memoir, Michelle Wallace also states that the Black Power Movement "seemed even worse—the 'new blackness' was fast becoming the new slavery for sisters" (225).

by the latter during the fight for the Fifteenth Amendment was still apparent during the Second wave of feminism.

In a preface in her anthology of black feminist thought, Beverly Guy-Sheftall claims that "What is apparent from our revisiting the feminist writings of African American women during this critical juncture is that the women's movement would have seriously attracted a broader cross-section of the female population had it taken seriously the insights of women of color" (143-144). In a manifesto of sorts, the Combahee River Collective, a black feminist group from Boston, states:

As black feminists we are made constantly and painfully aware of how little effort white women have made to understand and combat their racism, which requires among other things that they have a more than superficial comprehension of race, color, and black history and culture. (239)

As evidenced by these statements, black women clearly felt their marginalization within the feminist movement, despite the fact that their subordination because of their race and gender meant that they perhaps stood the most to gain from the elimination of sexist ideology within society because of the internalization of sexist ideology by most men, both black and white.

Black women faced a double marginalization if they decided to participate in the feminist movement, due in large part to the lingering tensions from the rift between the suffragists and abolitionists. On one hand, their concerns and input was often disregarded by the movement's white leaders who were determinedly focused on issues pertaining to middle-class white women. On the other hand, they were faced with ostracism from the black community for concerning themselves with issues that addressed sexism in their society. Barbara Smith, in her article "Some Home Truths on the Contemporary Black Feminist Movement," writes "so many black people who are

threatened by feminism have argued that by being a black feminist ... you have left the race, are no longer a part of the black community, in short no longer have a home" (254).

Facing this double rejection and ostracism, black feminists sought a way to respond to the misogyny of the Civil Rights and Black Power Movements and the racism of the feminist movement. They looked to their foremothers for inspiration. The Combahee River Collective highlights the legacy of black feminist activism in its aforementioned public statement:

There have always been black women activists—some known, like Sojourner Truth, Harriet Tubman, Frances E. W. Harper, Ida B. Wells-Barnett, and Mary Church Terrell, and thousands upon thousands unknown—who had a shared awareness of how their sexual identity combined with their racial identity to make their whole life situation and the focus of their political struggles unique. Contemporary black feminism is the outgrowth of countless generations of personal sacrifice, militancy, and work by our mothers and sisters. (233)

Black feminist organizations and theorists sought to rectify the inadequacies of the twentieth-century social movements. Black feminism distinguished itself from white feminism and the Civil Rights Movement through its ideology which, in the words of theorist Barbara Smith, "has no use for ranking oppressions, but instead demonstrates the simultaneity of oppressions as they affect Third World women's lives" (256). Issues of sex and race are given equal privilege and consideration in the black feminist movement because both work equally to subordinate black women in society. One cannot be divorced from the other.

White women focus solely on issues pertaining to sexism because they are not also limited by their race. Audre Lorde writes that "By and large within the women's movement today, white women focus upon their oppression as women and ignore differences of race, sexual preference, class, and age. There is a pretense to a

homogeneity of experience covered by the word *sisterhood* that does not in fact exist” (285). Likewise, black men focus on racism because their gender affords them privilege, albeit small, in society. Frances Beale elucidates this concept when she writes that “Those who are exerting their ‘manhood’ by telling black women to step back into a domestic, submissive role are assuming a counterrevolutionary position. Black women likewise have been abused by the system, and we must begin talking about the elimination of all kinds of oppression” (148). bell hooks writes that “racism and sexism are interlocking systems of domination which uphold and sustain one another” (*Yearning* 59). By focusing on eliminating all forms of oppression rather than focusing on just one, black feminism strives to create a truly equitable and free society.

How does this historical legacy of marginalization manifest itself in literature and literary works? My social historicist perspective suggests to me any study of this literature is enriched by acknowledging the point in time in which it was written. While some may argue that an author’s gender or race does not influence the themes of her works, I will demonstrate that race and gender, together with historical context, reveal critical points of inspiration and expression in the four novels that I examine. Alice Walker’s *Meridian* (1976), Toni Cade Bambara’s *The Salt Eaters* (1980), Octavia Butler’s *Kindred* (1979), and Toni Morrison’s *The Bluest Eye* (1970) all demonstrate the proliferation of the black feminist movement in the second half of the 20th century when “black feminist cultural work flourish[ed], particularly in literature” (Smith 265). These literary masterpieces enrich the larger American canon and also provide vivid insight and strong commentary on the 20th century’s social movements. They all suggest black feminist thought and articulate black women’s feelings on a number of issues, especially

betrayal by black men and white women, sexual violence, and motherhood. This thesis looks at these three specific issues as represented in the fictionalized worlds created by Walker, Morrison, Bambara, and Butler in order to elucidate the black feminist response to the Civil Rights and white feminist movements and to the historical legacy of disenfranchisement and subordination of women of color in the United States.

Hostile Abandonment:

Society's Ultimate Betrayal of Black Women

While anyone in society can experience personal betrayal and exclusion, there are certain members who face a systematic and institutionalized exclusion because of their race, class, or gender. Oppressed members of society try to rectify inequalities and subordination, although when doing so they often end up trivializing, ignoring, or downplaying the travails of other oppressed groups, as seen in the persistent tension between groups advocating an end to racism or sexism in the United States. Black women, along with other women of color, are placed in what some black feminists refer to as a “double bind”—they are marginalized both because of their race and also because of their gender.³ This results in the most significant institutionalized betrayal of all. Black women are excluded by white men, as are black men and white women. However, they also experience betrayal at the hands of black men and white women.

The social movements of the 20th century and the position of black women within them clearly highlight the ignorance of black women's concerns. Black women were relegated to subordinate positions within both movements. The Civil Rights Movement was led by black men, and, when women voiced their concerns or gave suggestions, they were often ignored. Similarly, the feminist movement of the 1970s focused on issues pertinent to middle-class, primarily white women. During these mid-20th century movements, which claimed to be working for equality for all people of color and all

³ It is difficult to divorce race, gender, and class when referring to the subordinate status of black women. Several black feminist theorists refer to this as multiple jeopardy rather than “double jeopardy” or “double bind”. However, issues of race and gender are the only ones analyzed in this work.

women, black women undoubtedly faced even more intense feelings of betrayal and exclusion.

Often literary representations of personal betrayal and exclusion are exemplary of the more systematic betrayal and exclusion of one group by another in the larger world. Fictional characters and events in a novel are often microcosmic representations of broader issues in society. The betrayal or exclusion of one individual character by another in a literary work can often be seen as an allegory for larger societal forces at work. This capacity of fiction for symbolic representation is certainly true of the encounters and betrayals of the main characters in Alice Walker's *Meridian* and Toni Cade Bambara's *The Salt Eaters*. Meridian Hill and Velma Harris confront issues of betrayal and exclusion in their respective novels, although *Meridian*'s is the more complex and personal of the two. Beginning at a young age, Walker's title character is deeply wounded by black men, black women, and white women over the course of the novel. Her mother and college roommate, Anne-Marion, both black women like herself, provide the most personal betrayal. Anne-Marion's condemnation of Meridian continues long after they have left college, and it comes in the form of various scathing letters with which Meridian cannot part, suggesting that Meridian feels as though she is deserving of this particular betrayal. Truman Held, the man whom we're led to believe is Meridian's lover, and Lynne Rabinowitz, a white student who spends a summer helping with a voter registration drive with Meridian and Truman, perform the ultimate betrayal when they begin dating (and eventually marry).

Although this theme is less obvious in *The Salt Eaters*, it is there nonetheless. In this case, however, the betrayal comes from leaders who emerge in the aftermath of the

Civil Rights Movement itself. Velma, and the other women in the novel, begin to realize that their efforts have led to a self-centered, androcentric leadership that has no regard for women's concerns. While not personal in the same sense as Meridian's, this affront becomes personal and represents a blatant disregard for the concerns of a vital component of the movement. Velma likewise experiences personal betrayal by her husband, whose infidelity is certainly a contributing factor to her mysterious illness in the novel.

The betrayals of Meridian Hill and Velma Harris are representative of the broader betrayal of black women by all members of society, but most notably by black men and white women. In this chapter, I analyze the betrayals they both experience and show how their abandonment and exclusion by all other members of their societies—men and women, black and white—is allegorical for the exclusion and betrayal of black women by their larger American society and how the novels' endings represent the birth of a more formal black feminist movement in American history. Both women are betrayed by others with whom they should have been allied just as, historically, black women faced disillusionment and abandonment when participating in various American social movements. Yet, at the end of the novels, both women have transcended, have moved beyond these abandonments. Meridian and Velma emerge renewed and healthy, which is representative of the resiliency of black women and the emergence of a strong, vibrant black feminist movement in the aftermath of the Civil Rights and white feminist movements. Through both of these characters, their experiences, and their renewed sense of self and determination to create change, we can see Walker and Bambara commenting on and critiquing the androcentricity of the Civil Rights Movement and the racism of the

(white) Feminist movement and advocating further change within both movements to end racism and to end sexism through the inclusion of women of color and their concerns.

Meridian

Throughout Alice Walker's novel *Meridian*, the title character experiences disappointment from and abandonment by nearly everyone with whom she establishes a relationship, from her mother to her lovers to her dearest friends. Yet, once committed to the struggle to end the racist and sexist paradigm, Meridian remains steadfast despite all the heartache she experiences. This unwavering commitment to taking control of one's life is common among Walker's black female characters according to Mary Helen Washington, who writes:

What particularly distinguishes Alice Walker in her role as apologist and chronicler for black women is her evolutionary treatment of black women; that is, she sees the experiences of black women as a series of movements from women totally victimized by society and by the men in their lives to the growing developing women whose consciousness allows them to have control over their lives. (137)

As Washington points out, Meridian does experience terrible victimizations by the men in her life, all of whom are black. At the same time, she also experiences it at the hands of her white and black female friends, which can be seen as the total exploitation of black women by the entire society. While encumbered by these exclusions and betrayals, Meridian endures and learns from these encounters and emerges a stronger woman at the end of the novel. We see her character move from having her actions and life totally dictated by others before college and her involvement in the time's social movements to having complete control over her own destiny, following her involvement and growth within them. Meridian's growth, however, is due in part to the rejections and exclusions

she experiences within those movements that claim to be striving for a more equitable society. If the 20th century social movements had been more inclusive, it wouldn't have been necessary for there to be an emergence of a strong black feminist/womanist movement⁴. Likewise, if that had been the case, perhaps Meridian would have become complacent, would never have reached her full potential, and she would not have emerged a strong, grounded, self-motivated woman in control of her own destiny, continuing to work for change.

Black Men and the Internalization of White Men's Patriarchal Norms

Throughout *Meridian*, nearly all of the title character's encounters with black men exemplify the sexism inherent within the black community and Civil Rights Movement. From her first "sexual" encounter with the half-white owner of the local funeral home to her on-going on-and-off relationship with her fellow civil rights activist Truman Held, Meridian is desired solely as a sexual object. Even Truman, who claims to respect her as an activist, is primarily motivated by a desire to possess her sexually. The only male character who seems to respect Meridian, value her input, and acknowledge her concerns is her father who is a very minor character in the novel, only appearing in one vignette. Walker's commentary on the sexism inherent in the Civil Rights Movement reveals itself in each of these encounters Meridian has throughout the novel.

⁴ According to Alice Walker, the term "black feminist" is not broad enough to encompass all for which black feminism stands, nor does it recognize the experiences of other women of color. In response to this inadequacy, Walker coined the term "womanism" to describe the perspective and experiences of all women of color. Womanism implies a consideration of race, class, gender, age, and sexual orientation, among others, with no one ideology having more importance than another. Although I'll make references to womanism throughout this and subsequent chapters, this topic itself is deserving of its own study and is an area for further research.

Meridian's first introduction to the internalization of white patriarchal norms and sexism in the black society is through her experiences with George Daxter, the owner of the funeral home in her hometown, and his assistant. Though at first glance the chapter "English Walnuts," which describes Meridian's encounters with Daxter and his assistant, is a seemingly benign "coming-of-age" vignette, further exploration reveals the prevalence of sexist patriarchal ideology amongst black men. Walker writes:

Daxter had been after Meridian since she was twelve years old. She would visit the funeral home on Saturday afternoons, as everybody did to see who was new in the viewing room. Daxter would entice her into the small back office where he kept a long sofa and two soft chairs. At first she thought Daxter was generous: He gave her candy for a swift, exploratory feel. When she became older—fifteen or so—he would take out his wallet crammed with money, and leave it on the sofa between them while he felt her breasts and tried to pull her into his lap. ... The Assistant would manipulate her breasts and cram her between his legs and rub her so against him that her panties became flooded with the residue of her resistance. ... One day The Assistant ... arranged for her to watch him while he seduced another schoolgirl (the same girl, in fact, who did baby-sitting for his wife). (62-63)

In this passage we can see Daxter's and his assistant's fascination with Meridian as a sexual object. They value her because of her body parts, particularly her breasts, and not for her whole person. She is an object, bought by Daxter who pays her first in candy and later in cash. His assistant pays for her in another less obvious way in that he gives Meridian her first exposure to female orgasm when she watches him seduce his baby-sitter, a sexual encounter that could be read as empowering but rather further reinforces the objectification of women's bodies. Meridian is viewing him "fucking" another object, a tool that the assistant intends to use in his domination and conquest of Meridian.

While both Daxter and the Assistant fail in their attempts to get what they ultimately desire from Meridian, they do impart irrevocable harm on her. Walker highlights the negative impact these encounters have on Meridian, "their pawing over her

over a critically important figure of the slave community, he would also be aiming a blow against the black man" (213). In light of this, Mr. Raymond's actions could be seen as representative of black men's attempts to reclaim power. bell hooks's research shows that, "As black men advanced in all spheres of American life, they encouraged black women to assume a more subservient role" (*Ain't I a Woman* 4). In fact, after the abolition of slavery as black men sought ways to further enfranchise themselves and elevate their position in society, they adopted white men's patriarchal norms. This included both protecting and asserting their superiority over black women, the only people further below them on the social ladder—a characteristic perfectly exemplified by Mr. Raymond. He chastises Meridian for fraternizing with the white divinity student, which is at the same time asserting both a patriarchal, fatherly kind of protective attitude towards her and a possessive attitude because of the fact that he wants to possess her himself, although he is physically unable to do so. Mr. Raymond's attitudes further highlight the deeply engrained sexism in the black community, held most dearly by black men, which in turn have a detrimental impact on Meridian and other black women.

Of all the male characters with whom Meridian interacts outside of her involvement with the Civil Rights Movement, the man who eventually becomes her husband, Eddie, is the one who is able to possess her physically and who is the least misogynistic, at least when referring to his relationship with Meridian. Eddie "treated her with gentleness and respect" (Alice Walker 66) and "absorbed the belief, prevalent in all their homes, that without a high school diploma, a person would never amount to anything. He was even sorry she was expelled from school because of the pregnancy" (58). He understands that Meridian has lost something because she is pregnant. She has

lost the ability to “amount to anything” in their society. She instead is relegated to the subordinate position of “wife/mother,” which is worth less (and worthless) in their patriarchal society. She is responsible instead for doing that which the man does not wish to do, and Meridian fails miserably at doing those very jobs which are *hers*—“ the ironing of his clothes, ... the cooking, ... and sex” (60). Meridian fails at these jobs because she does not find fulfillment in them. They are as much a waste of time to her as they are to Eddie. She does not understand, for example, why “his pants and shirts have to be starched and ironed after every second wearing It did not seem a reasonable answer to her that his mother ‘had *always* done this,’ or that he was ‘*used* to clean clothes’” (67). However, despite the fact that Eddie also feels that Meridian has lost something, it does not stop him from forcing her to assume the role she then finds herself in, for he, too, has internalized white men’s sexist paradigm, a concept that Mary Ann Weathers posits in her essay arguing for black women’s liberation when she writes, “Black men are still parroting the master’s prattle about male superiority” (158). Even Eddie, the most thoughtful of Meridian’s men, ultimately embraces the benefits of patriarchy in his life.

Susan Danielson succinctly elaborates on why Meridian does not find happiness in her life with Eddie. It is because Meridian is “unable or unwilling to adjust to the roles delineated for her by her community” (319). She knows that her community has labeled her “a mindless body, a sex creature, something to hang false hair and nails on” (Alice Walker 68), and she is dissatisfied with this objectification. She knows that these roles, “drop-out from high school, a deserted wife, a mother, a daughter-in-law” (73) are

limiting the good she can do, the impact she can have on the world, and she feels trapped within them, as do most women in a patriarchal society.

From the beginning, Meridian has mixed emotions about her relationship with Eddie. On one hand, their sexual relationship is problematic for her, for “she could not understand why she was doing something with such frequency that she did not enjoy” (Alice Walker 56). But at the same time, “being with [Eddie] did a number of things for her. Mainly it saved her from the strain of responding to other boys or even noting the whole category of Men. This was worth a great deal, because she was afraid of men” (57). Based on Meridian’s previous experiences with Dexter and the Assistant, we can see why men frighten Meridian. They do not treat her as a person, but rather as something, an object, to be possessed. And, while Eddie is comforting to Meridian because of the level of protection he affords her, and also because of the fact that he seems to see her as a person rather than an object, he, too, fails her because he, and his actions, force her into a position of motherhood and wifedom with which she is uncomfortable, which does not value all she has to offer. This objectification and devaluation is precisely why Meridian is attracted to Truman Held, a man who, at least initially, seems to view Meridian as an equal, as a compatriot, a comrade in their war to end racial injustice.

An Affair in Triangulation: Meridian, Truman, and Lynne

Meridian and Truman’s relationship begins quite uneventfully when they are introduced at the movement office where Meridian goes to volunteer, and he is “the first of the Civil Rights workers ... who [begins] to mean something to her” when they are

both “arrested for demonstrating outside the local jail, and then beaten” (80). Their shared burden and experiences ignite feelings of intense camaraderie between them. Meridian herself acknowledges at the time that “it was not even that she was in love with him: What she meant by it was that they were at a time and a place in History that forced the trivial to fall away—and they were absolutely together” (81), but, over the course of two years, her feelings for him change, and she later acknowledged that “she was in love, with Truman” (98). Meridian begins to love Truman because he gives her what she has previously been unable to find in other black men whom she had met. She feels “protected when she [is] with him. To her he [is] courageous and ‘new.’ He [is], in any case, unlike any other black man she [has] known. He [is] a man who [fights] against obstacles, a man who [can] become anything, a man whose very words [are] unintelligible without considerable thought” (100). Yet, this very same man would inflict tremendous heartache on Meridian because he is a “vain, pretentious person” (99), a man who cannot see the privileges afforded him in his community because of his gender, a man who has wholeheartedly embraced the patriarchal, sexist paradigm.

Any discussion of Truman Held, the novel’s principal male character is wrought with implications of gender’s role in the movement, and even literary scholars sometimes mimic the androcentricity of the Civil Rights Movement when analyzing Truman’s importance in Walker’s work. Melissa Walker claims “in general, then, the core narrative is about a black man and the two women in his life—one black and one white—and how in the mid-1970s their lives have been transformed by their shared experiences in the civil rights movement” (174), but in fact, the narrative does much more than that. Walker uses these relationships to elucidate the tensions between the feminist and civil

rights movements during the time and to highlight the pervasive racism and sexism within each, respectively. Accordingly, Truman is the literary personification of the Civil Rights Movement's sexism in the novel and, as such, represents an integral component of the narrative, but he is still a secondary character, a foil for the main character. Meridian Hill, the primary figure in the novel, represents the matrix by which everyone and everything else is measured.

As a movement worker, Truman is strident in his quest for racial equality, but he falls far short when considering gender equality. Although he professes an interest in Meridian as a partner, in fact, he is solely interested in her sexually. While it could be argued that sex, sexuality, and sexual attraction are a natural part of life and, as such, should be distanced or divorced from a discussion of sexism, it is impossible to do so when the internalization of sexist ideology leads to the objectification of women and the valuing of women solely as sexual objects. This sexist ideology is perfectly exemplified in the character of Truman Held. He is only interested in Meridian (and Lynne, for that matter) as sexual objects. Walker writes, "But Truman, alas, did not want a general beside him. He did not want a woman who tried, however encumbered by guilt and fears and remorse, to claim her own life. [Meridian] knew Truman would have liked her better as she had been as Eddie's wife, for all that he admired the flash of her face across a picket line—an attractive woman, but asleep" (112-113).

Truman primarily values Meridian for her body, not for her contributions to the movement as we see several other times; for example, when finding out about her son, he "thought of her breasts as used jugs. They belonged to some other man" (151). He is to be the literary embodiment of the rampant sexism in the Civil Rights Movement, a sexist

paradigm that enabled Stokely Carmichael to make his famous comment on woman's position as "prone." Truman uses Meridian for his own sexual purposes, and, after getting what he ultimately wants from her, he leaves her for a white woman. He does so because, as bell hooks writes, "in a white supremacist sexist society all women's bodies are devalued, but white women's bodies are more valued than those of women of color" (*Yearning* 62). Skin color represents one variable by which men measure the worth of each woman—or each conquest. As such, Truman readily abandons Meridian for Lynne, who he values more because of her white skin. When Lynne returns to the North at the end of the summer, Truman returns to Meridian, an act which in itself indicates Truman's objectification of her. "Have my beautiful black babies" (Alice Walker 120) he tells her, and we understand that Meridian is only valuable to Truman as a vessel.

In Frances Beale's essay, "Double Jeopardy: To be Black and Female," she writes that those "who are exerting their 'manhood' by telling black women to step back into a domestic, submissive role are assuming a counterrevolutionary position" (148). Beale's critique can be applied to Truman, who embraces patriarchy and sexist ideology, and, in fact, does more to alienate and to diminish black women from the movement than he does to acknowledge their potential for contribution. After Truman leaves her for Lynne and Meridian finds herself dealing with an unwanted pregnancy and has an abortion—of which Truman knows nothing—she starts to lose control both emotionally and physically. She begins to "take chances with her life...[and] forget to eat" (Alice Walker 121-22). She begins to see things as though they are "bathed in a bluish light" (122) and eventually loses her sight for two days. She ceases to feel—she is "not hungry, not cold, not worried ...[and] seems to be slipping away" (124). Truman's actions have caused

Meridian to start to disassociate within herself and, consequently, from the movement precisely because she understands the paradoxical sexist paradigm of which she has been a part.

At this point in the novel, Meridian begins to slip away from her grounding in the Civil Rights Movement and toward a more independent, solitary activism. It is why Meridian cannot vow to "kill for the Revolution" (14) when asked to do so by her dear friend, Anne-Marion. She knows that inherently the movement is flawed and will be ineffective because it, too, is undermined by inequality. Meridian sees the pervasive sexism in the Civil Rights Movement, and its limits. In order for her to become an effective agent for change, for *true* equality for all, she realizes that she must break from the movement to embark on her own journey for change. This realization ends Meridian's burgeoning self-alienation, and she begins to embrace and to find self-sufficiency in her identification as a black feminist.

Truman and Lynne's relationship itself is allegorical of the tension between both the Civil Rights and second-wave Feminist movements, and the betrayal of black women by both movements. Ironically, although they desert her, Truman and Lynne help define Meridian for us and for her. When Truman and Lynne begin their relationship, they both betray the trust Meridian has invested in them. Lynne had been a friend to Meridian, Truman a lover, yet, they both willingly give that up in order to be with one another. However, they continue to call on her when *they* need her. Meridian becomes the bridge that ultimately connects them to one another. Meridian, the black woman, the literary representation of the least enfranchised person in the society, is the glue that secures black to white, and man to woman. She is the one whom they both visit individually for

help and comfort and to whom they both reach out when their daughter is killed.

Meridian becomes, therefore, the most important character in the novel, the most central person in the society. Both the most disregarded and the most necessary component for efficacy in Truman and Lynne's lives, Meridian suggests the position of black women in the 20th century social movements.

When necessary and/or convenient, the Civil Rights Movement called on black women to try to reach its goals, but the primary players in the movement were black men. Similarly, the second-wave feminist movement was focused primarily on the concerns of white women, only advancing the causes of black women when convenient to the dominant group. As such, black women, the common link between the two movements, were both important to those social causes and, at the same time, invisible and silenced. Black women were given marginal positions within both movements, but, without their involvement and support, neither movement would have gained more than a limited measure of success in the larger American society.

However, black women paid a high price to be included, because they were expected to privilege racial concerns for ones of gender, or vice versa. Neither group attempted to examine the interlocking roles of sexism and racism, so black women had to forsake someone—themselves—when they had to choose sides. Meridian's involvement with both Truman and Lynne allows us to understand this dual role and painful split: she must suppress parts of herself as she attempts to help them through their struggles, which ultimately "drain[s] her dry" (188).

Black Women

This competition of “isms” informs Meridian’s relationships with other black women, chiefly her mother and her college roommate Anne-Marion and suggests the way that women of color themselves internalized the paradigm of gender inequality and perpetuated that inequality on others. Often, as in the case of Anne-Marion, women aligned themselves with one of their social identities while minimizing or subordinating another. In both Anne-Marion and Mrs. Hill’s characters, we can see the internalization of patriarchal norms and an unwillingness to acknowledge how the inequalities perpetuated by sexism within the black community are limiting its women, specifically Meridian.

Meridian’s college roommate, Anne-Marion, is the clearest representation of the internalization of sexism and the complacency of gendered subordination by some black women in the Civil Rights Movement and in the broader black community. When Anne-Marion marches with Meridian and asks Meridian to promise to “kill for the Revolution” (Alice Walker 14) and Meridian declines, Anne-Marion mocks her, begins to ostracize her, shows contempt for her, breaks away from her. Meridian cannot kill for the revolution because “though her mind was running a small voice that screamed: ‘Something’s missing in me. Something’s *missing!*’... [She] alone was holding onto something they had let go” (14—her emphasis). What Meridian is still holding onto is her belief in the necessity for not only racial equality, but also for gender equality as well. Anne-Marion and the other women demanding that Meridian vow fidelity to the Revolution, the Movement, have given up that part of themselves. That Meridian cannot

subvert herself brands her as a traitor in their minds. In her essay "Some Home Truths on the Contemporary Black Feminist Movement," Barbara Smith expounds on this concept, stating "so many black people who are threatened by feminism have argued that by being a black feminist ... you have left the race, are no longer a part of the black community" (254). Meridian's alienation from Anne-Marion is directly related to her embrace of a black feminist ideology. Anne-Marion tells her that she is "obsolete" (Alice Walker 131), and she berates Meridian for her feminist awareness, mailing letters to her that claim she is "misguided ... [has] never, being weak and insensitive to History, had any sense of priorities" (9). These denouncements highlight Anne-Marion's own internalization of the patriarchal paradigm in which the Civil Rights Movement was firmly entrenched. In her quest for racial equality, Anne-Marion loses sight of the necessity for gender equality and cannot forgive Meridian for not doing the same.

Unlike Anne-Marion, who is striving to rectify at least one type of injustice, Meridian's mother Mrs. Hill is a complicated character in the novel who represents a generation of black women who are complicit in perpetuating both racial and gender inequality. The sexual inequality that she witnesses and is a victim of, perpetuated by black men in the black community, causes her to internalize *all* injustice and to see it as "normal." She both feels betrayed and is a betrayer, at the same time feels trapped and is a perpetuator of that same entrapment of the younger generation, because "it never bothered [her] That's what [they] did when [she] was coming up" (83). She is not sympathetic to the Civil Rights Movement for this very reason. She tells Meridian, "you've wasted a year of your life, fooling around with these people. The papers say they're crazy. God separated the sheeps from the goats and the black folks from the

white. And me from anybody that acts as foolish as they do" (83). Here we see Mrs. Hill's complete internalization of the white patriarchal paradigm, to the point that she believes it to be divinely ordained, a concept that harkens back to slave owners' religious rhetoric before the abolition of slavery.

Mrs. Hill is both a betrayer and is betrayed, just as many black women were during the twentieth century's social movements. The vignette "Have You Stolen Anything?" highlights Meridian's mother's feelings of betrayal, which are caused by the sexual inequality that she finds herself facing as a woman, as a wife, as a mother in her society. In the novel, Alice Walker shows the effect that this sexual inequality has on black women through the character of Mrs. Hill. She writes that Mrs. Hill "was capable of thought and growth and action only if unfettered by the needs of dependents, or the demands, and requirements, of a husband" (40). Here we see that she is only able to access her full potential when she is unencumbered by the burdens associated with being a woman, being a wife, being a mother⁵. She feels betrayed by the fact that no one ever warned her of the loss of self-determination, indeed even the loss of her sense of self, that is a crucial component of patriarchy's conceptualization of womanhood. She "could never forgive her community, her family, ... the whole world, for not warning her" (41). She feels such intense feelings of betrayal that she is unable to recover. She becomes numb, her life "a blind, enduring, stumbling" during which she "[does] not take extreme positions on anything, unless unreasonably provoked over a long period" (74). In the end, because of this feeling of powerlessness over even her own self, Mrs. Hill attempts to assert the only form of power she has—the power of being a mother, an elder,

⁵ These feelings are inextricably tied to Mrs. Hill's feelings on motherhood, which are discussed at length in Chapter Three of this thesis.

someone from whom the younger generation learns. Rather than using her experience to advocate change, however, Mrs. Hill guards this information, wields it as a form of power, and uses it to try to maintain the status quo in every respect⁶.

The greatest victim of Mrs. Hill's betrayal is her daughter, Meridian, and that betrayal causes Meridian to find herself in the same exact position as her mother—entrapped, mother to a child she does not want—all because of Mrs. Hill's attempt to empower herself. When she is older, Meridian realizes “that her mother ... had told her nothing about what to expect from men, from sex. Her mother never even used the word.... When Meridian left the house in the evenings with her ‘boyfriend’ ... her mother only cautioned her to ‘be sweet.’ She did not realize that this was a euphemism for ‘Keep your panties up and your dress down’” (55). Mrs. Hill's failure to educate Meridian is due in great part to her use of silence as a form of power over her daughter. Mrs. Hill knows exactly how sex and motherhood can ruin one's life, but she *chooses* (perhaps unconsciously) not to share that information with her daughter in order to claim the only access to power she has—power over those black women and girls younger than herself. Mrs. Hill's betrayal is recognized by Meridian's childhood friend Nelda, who feels “hatred and comprehension of betrayal” towards her because Nelda knows “that the information she had needed to get her through her adolescence was information Mrs. Hill could have given her” (86). Nelda knows, as does Meridian, that Mrs. Hill has betrayed the younger generation of black women through her deliberate silence, a silence that stems from her complicity with and acquiescence to the dominant paradigm. This betrayal mimics the betrayal of black women by the empowered but dominant black men

⁶ Ageism plays a role in all of these novels as well. However, it is not a component of this analysis and is a subject for further study.

of the Civil Rights Movement and by white women of the second-wave Feminist movement.

We see Mrs. Hill's desperate attempt to access power at the expense of other women in the exchange between her and her daughter when Meridian comes to tell her that she is going to Saxon College. Mrs. Hill responds with incredulity that Meridian would abandon her son: "It can't be right to give away your own child You should have thought about [your only chance] before" (85). Meridian tells her mother that she "always talked in riddles ... [and] never made a bit of sense," to which her mother replies "[e]veryone else that slips up like you did *bears* it" (86). Mrs. Hill has internalized the dominant paradigm's definitions of appropriate behavior and punishment. She attempts to empower herself by emulating the dominant culture, by enforcing strict definitions and punishments. Meridian is attempting to break free from those restraints. She "thinks [she] can just outright refuse" to conform, which quashes her mother's power and, in turn, starts Meridian on her own journey toward self-empowerment. Unlike her mother's albeit unconscious assent to patriarchy in her pursuit of power, Meridian's journey results in an awakening, not a numbing, to the idea of social equality, rather than a perpetuation of injustice.

Meridian's journey on her path towards true empowerment is not without hardship. Truman and Lynne's betrayal of Meridian is one such hardship that she must endure in her journey to self-awareness. However, theirs is not the most significant betrayal that Meridian suffers. Her abandonments by Anne-Marion and her mother are the most devastating losses that Walker's title character endures. Meridian's ostracism by these two women is most painful precisely because they are the characters with whom

she should have found herself aligned. Meridian cannot completely sever her ties with either of them—she keeps Anne-Marion's searingly vicious letters with her as she travels on her quest of self-realization, and her thoughts turn "with regularity and intensity to her mother, on whose account she endured wave after wave of an almost primeval guilt ... [and she] felt as if her body ... stood in the way of a reconciliation between her mother and that part of her own soul that her mother could, perhaps, love" (96-97). Meridian's recognition of the inequalities she faces because of her gender and her desire to fight against multiple injustices rather than simply accepting or trivializing some of them costs her her relationships with the women who should have been her allies. These abandonments by Anne-Marion and Mrs. Hill represent the prodigious gender and racial inequalities in the Civil Rights Movement and the second-wave feminist movement. Just as Meridian is reborn and renewed, at the end of her journey at the culmination of the novel, so, too, did the marginalization of black women in the Civil Rights and feminist movements spur the naissence of a black womanist movement that takes into account all forms of subordination without ranking those oppressions.

The end of the novel finds Meridian renewed and preparing to embark on a new journey, separate and distinct from the journey to self-realization that she undertook earlier in the novel. In the book's final vignette, Truman recognizes that "he would never see 'his' Meridian again. The new part had grown out of the old, though, and that was reassuring. This part of her, new, sure and ready, even eager, for the world, he knew he must meet again and recognize for its true value at some future time" (241). This new part of Meridian, grown out of the old, is her fully developed black feminist consciousness. Truman is not yet prepared, as many black male civil rights activists were

not prepared, to embrace black feminist discourse or declarations for truly equitable change. However, he does recognize that feminist issues will be important in the future. He worries that Meridian's new journey, like the one preceding it, will be a solitary one. Meridian assays his fears, however: "Besides, all the people who are as alone as I am will one day gather at the river. We will watch the sun go down. And in the darkness we will know the truth" (242). Here Meridian foresees the convergence of black feminist thinking in the waning days of the Civil Rights and second-wave feminist movements and predicts the birth of a black feminist movement, one that works for a truly equitable society.

The Salt Eaters

Like Meridian Hill, Velma Harris, the main character in Toni Cade Bambara's novel *The Salt Eaters*, is also on a journey of self-discovery, one that, like Meridian's, ends in the birth of a black feminist consciousness. Velma's journey is wrought with betrayals and abandonments by others in her life. However, unlike Meridian, Velma experiences her betrayal entirely at the hands of the black male Civil Rights activists in *The Salt Eaters*. The deeply rooted sexism that Velma experiences both in her political organizing and in her personal relationship with her husband, who also happens to be a movement leader, leads to her physical and psychological deterioration, and, ultimately, a suicide attempt, as she tries to reconcile the Civil Rights Movement's quest for racial equality and justice with the tenacious sexism that continues to be prevalent even in the decades following the movement's heyday. Not until Velma's black feminist

consciousness is born is she “healed,” does she break free from what plagues her, and, ultimately, embark on a new journey, a new life, a new self.

Toni Cade Bambara levels a scathing critique on the patriarchal culture of the Civil Rights Movement in *The Salt Eaters*. In the first chapter of the novel, which is narrated by Velma, Bambara shows us the sexist attitudes of the movement’s male leaders, attitudes they don’t even attempt to hide but, rather, display publicly in movement meetings and refuse to acknowledge as unjust, even when confronted with that knowledge. These men—Jay Patterson, Lonnie Hill, Obie, and others—expect the movement’s women to do the grunt work and to ignore the male leaders’ overt sexism. In response, the women begin meeting in their own separate (and subordinate) group, the Ida B. Wells Club (later Women for Action), where they can pretend to ignore their objectification and subordination in the larger movement. They agree that “the main thing was the work. But like sorority sisters, they preferred to splinter. They were not at their best, they said, ‘in mixed company’” (Bambara 27). They still frequently meet with the men, however.

It is during one such meeting that we are first introduced to the overt objectification and subordination that the women experience in the larger group:

Lonnie’s [head] was buried in Daisy Moultrie’s blouse. Just a half a half-hour ago when Jay had made his pitch again, maintaining that somebody—looking straight at Jan and Ruby—ought to get cracking on a rough draft of bylaws, Lonnie had leaned up in his chair and swung his gaze away from Daisy’s breasts long enough to agree that yes that was certainly a first step. (28)

Daisy, one of Velma’s compatriots, one of the movement’s revolutionaries, is not valued as such by the movement’s male leaders. Rather, she is reduced to an object, one who is there strictly for men’s viewing pleasures. The men, who have internalized the

patriarchal paradigm because of the advantages and power that it affords them, have limited their efficacy because of these attitudes.

At the time in which *The Salt Eaters* takes place, the movement was in its waning years and was struggling for momentum, due in no small part to the fact that the movement's women had "laid back when told to get back and had watched another organization sacrificed on the alter of male ego," and "had been brought up on charges by the Black Student Union, charged with insensitivity, insubordination, uncooperativeness and a poor analysis of 'liberation,' meaning she needed to change her aggressive ways and give Black manhood a chance to assert itself" (26-27). In these passages, Bambara, like Alice Walker in *Meridian*, gives clear and shining examples of the sexist attitudes of the male leaders and revolutionaries of the Civil Rights Movement and their blatant dismissal of women. That Velma would feel so ineffectual and unappreciated is not difficult to ascertain based on the accounts of her fellow female activists, both real and fictional, especially when coupled with her own experiences.

Velma, too, recognizes the misogyny in the movement and experiences victimization at the hands of its leaders, and, like Meridian Hill, she recognizes the limitations that misogyny places on the movement's ability to affect change. In the introductory chapter, when we first meet Velma, her mind wanders, bouncing from encounter to patriarchal encounter. At one point she tells the male activists "we need to be clear, all of us, about the nature of the work. About how things have gotten done in the past and why that pattern has to change" to which her friend, Ruby, adds, "you jokers...never want to take any responsibility for getting down. ... Now, what that has meant in the past is that we women have been expected to carry the load" (30-31).

Velma expounds on the necessity for changing the patriarchal structure, the “egocentric way decisions are made in [the] group” (32), but to no avail. The men, those in power, are unwilling to relinquish their control of when and how things are done because they have internalized the advantages that patriarchy affords them.

In this same introductory chapter, Velma recalls a situation that clearly juxtaposes the power and glamour of the androcentric male leaders of the Civil Rights Movement with the people for whom the movement was portending to work. This time, Velma remembers a rally that:

they'd marched all morning, all afternoon and most of the early evening to get [to]. Shot at, spit on, nearly run down by a cement mixer, murder mouthed, lobbed with everything from stones to eggs, they'd kept the group intact and suffered no casualties or arrests. But when they got to the park, renamed People's Park for the occasion, the host group hadn't set up yet. The banners were still drooping, missing a string in one corner, the PA system only just arriving and two cables split Exhausted, she was squinting through the dust and grit of her lashes when the limousines pulled up, eye-stinging shiny, black, sleek. And the door opened and the cool blue of the air-conditioned interior billowed out into the yellow and rust-red of the evening. Her throat was splintered wood. Then the shiny black boots stepping onto the parched grass, the knife-creased pants straightening taut, the jacket hanging straight, the blinding white shirt, the sky-blue tie. ... Flanked by the coal-black men in shiny sunglasses and silk-and-steel suits, he made toward the platform. [Velma] carried herself out of the park in search of a toilet, some water to wash up, a place to dump her bag before her arm broke or her shoulder was permanently pulled from its socket. ... Some leader. He looked a bit like King, had a delivery similar to Malcolm's, dressed like Stokely, had glasses like Ra, but she'd never heard him say anything useful or offensive. But what a voice. And what a good press agent. And the people had bought him. What a disaster. (35)

This contrast of the suave, impeccably dressed, nonchalant speaker and splintered, parched, bleeding, suffering Velma is astounding. The privilege of black men and the subordination of black women couldn't be clearer. Velma's mobilization of the masses, preparatory work, and marching is ignored by the host group and the speaker. The people arrive, and there is no food, no bathroom, and, most importantly, no leader. This

insensitivity, this feeling of self-importance in the speaker's manner, is a direct result of his privilege and of his power, both of which are born of patriarchy. The male speaker can afford to arrive late, can afford to be aloof, because he has power. Velma and the nameless masses who join her are of no importance to the speaker or the other male leaders of the movement, precisely because of the subordinate position they occupy within the patriarchal organization of the Civil Rights Movement.

In her study on gender and leadership in the Civil Rights Movement, Belinda Robnett highlights the movement's very gendered division of labor, a division that led to the subordinate position of bridge leader, or grassroots mobilizer, which Velma Henry clearly occupies in *The Salt Eaters*. She writes:

the development and sustenance of a collective identity within the civil rights movement was anything but nonproblematic. ... The gendered organization of the civil rights movement defined the social location of African-American women in the movement context and created a particular substructure of leadership, which became a critical recruitment and mobilizing force for the movement. (1663)

These bridge leaders, like Velma and the other women in *The Salt Eaters*, were the main force behind any measure of success the movement achieved. While bridge leadership was not comprised solely of women, "this area of leadership was the only one available to women" (1667). Women were relegated to the subordinate positions men permitted them to occupy, just as in Bambara's novel the female characters are subordinate to the men, although they are the ones who do most of the grassroots organizing and daily work. In fact, Velma had "run the office, done the books, handled payroll, supervised the office staff ... wrote the major proposals and did most of the fundraising. It took [Obie], Jan, Marcus (when he was in town), Daisy Moultrie and her mother, ... the treasurer of

the board, and two student interns to replace [her] at the Academy [of the 7 Arts]" (Bambara 93).

Despite the incredible work Velma and the other women do, whenever the women bring up concerns about sexism or questions about broadening the scope of the movement, those concerns are relegated to the "women's caucus" and are deemed unimportant to the broader group's interests. In her essay comparing Bambara's women in *The Salt Eaters* to those in Ralph Ellison's *The Invisible Man*, Ann Folwell Stanford claims that "Velma's attempts to provide bridges and to work for social change in her community are consistently undercut by a social system that upholds male superiority" (27).

The female activists in *The Salt Eaters* recognize the paradox created by this double standard in a movement that strives for equality for one group while still subordinating another. They are constantly questioning this double standard and the "double burden" it creates for women, particularly Ruby, the character who seems to be most attuned to her black feminist consciousness. At one point, Ruby states, "Women for Action is taking on entirely too much: drugs, prisons, alcohol, the schools, rape, battered women, abused children. ... And the Brotherhood ain't doing shit about organizing. ... They've gotten so insulated and inbred up there ... having their id ego illogical debates, no one even sees them anymore. ... So quit the understanding, standing-by-the-men, good-supportive-sister crap" (Bambara 198-99). Ruby acknowledges that the women's group is taking on all the causes that have been abandoned by the men, fighting against inequalities ignored by the "Brotherhood," inequalities like child and sexual abuse and battery in the black family that were immeasurably important to black women and that

were ignored or overlooked by the broader Civil Rights Movement. Ruby later states that she has designed a questionnaire to “get ideas for workshops, panels, speakers, films and stuff like that” (199) intended to “provoke some thought about paternity and rape and misogyny and what have you” (200), all of which are issues previously ignored by the movement. Ruby—and the other women in the novel to a lesser extent—recognize that by doing the men’s work, they have advanced a social cause that ignores issues specific to black women. In these waning days of the Civil Rights Movement, the women recognize that the men have become complacent with the success that the movement had achieved thus far and have no interest in standing by the women.

At another point in the novel, Velma herself questions the men’s intentions.

When asked to help coordinate Jay Patterson’s election campaign, Velma asks:

Who’s called in every time there’s work to be done, coffee made, a program sold? Every time some miscellaneous nobody with a five-minute commitment and an opportunist’s nose for a self-promoting break gets an idea, here we go. And we have yet to see any of you so much as roll up your sleeves to empty an ashtray. Everybody gets paid off but us. Do any of you have a grant for us? Any government contracts? Any no-work-all-pay posts at a college, those of you on boards? Is there ever anything you all do on your own other than rent out the Italian restaurant on the Heights to discuss the Humphrey-Hawkins bill over wine? ... Drinking at the bar is all we’ve witnessed yet. You all say we need a conference, we book the hotel and set it all up and yawl drink at the bar. We shuttle back and forth to the airport, yawl drink at the bar. We caucus, vote, lay out the resolutions, yawl drink at the bar. We’re trying to build a union, a guild, an organization. You are all welcome to continue operating a social club, but not on our time[.] (37)

Velma directly addresses the fraternal and patriarchal nature of the organization itself and of the broader group of black men. She alludes to the work, the organizing, and the sweat that the group’s women have poured into trying to make the movement for racial equality a success. However, she recognizes that it is the men who have reaped, and continue to reap, the benefits of the women’s hard work with little or no input of their own. In her

aforementioned memoir, Michele Wallace claims that “the new ‘blackness’ was fast becoming the new slavery for sisters” (223), and Velma’s indictment implies that she recognizes the same to be true. The men appear to be unconcerned with any further measure of success in organizing unless it continues directly to benefit them. Unlike in *Meridian*, whose title character never actually directly confronts Truman or the Civil Rights Movement’s other male activists about their sexism, Velma and other black women activists directly address the insidious sexism in the movement and confront their male counterparts about it. Yet, they accomplish as much change in the system over the course of the novel as *Meridian* does—very little. This knowledge, coupled with the personal betrayal Velma experiences when her husband Obie cheats on her, leads her to attempt suicide.

Velma is so deeply affected by the inequality that she witnesses within a movement portending to advocate equality and change and by the personal betrayal by her husband, who has also internalized the patriarchal paradigm espoused by other movement leaders, that she tries to kill herself. In the Combahee River Collective’s “A Black Feminist Statement,” the authors state that “the psychological toll of being a black woman and the difficulties this presents in reaching political consciousness and doing political work can never be underestimated” (236). Velma’s illness and struggle with her feminist consciousness suggests this psychological toll. However, as she is being healed by Minnie Ransom, a faith-healer, Velma undergoes a profound change. Minnie asks her repeatedly if she is “sure ... that [she] want[s] to be well” (Bambara 3) or if she can “afford to be whole” (106). She tells Velma “wholeness is no trifling matter. A lot of weight when you’re well” (10). Minnie is asking Velma if she is ready to embark on a

new journey working for true equality following her “healing,” which symbolizes the birth of her black feminist consciousness. Like Meridian, who also experiences an ambiguous illness over the course of the novel, Velma is healed, becomes whole, becomes well after she undergoes her black feminist awakening⁷.

Velma’s healing occurs simultaneously with a cataclysmic storm that jars the entire town. There is “a sudden downpour with no warning, the light only now shifting from metallic lemon to purple-gray. ... [L]ightening ... flash[es] lighting up a purple, smeared sky A grumbling, growling boiling up as if from the core of the earthworks ... it couldn’t be simply a storm with such frightening thunder as was cracking the air as if the very world [is] splitting apart” (244-245). This storm, “as if the very world [is] splitting apart” is allegorical, paralleling the changes that will come with the advent of the nascent black feminist movement, which Velma’s healing and emerging consciousness allows her to join. The concept of a movement that is truly egalitarian will only come about with the complete disruption and destruction of the current paradigm, indeed of the entire world, which is embedded with much more than just one type of

⁷ Ann Folwell Stanford claims that Velma’s illness is a response to the “gender erasure exemplified in *Invisible Man*” (24). She writes “‘Written prior to the civil rights movement and the second wave of the women’s movement, Ellison’s novel predictably foregrounds race—‘the blackness of blackness’—in his character’s search for identity, meaning, and place in American history. The novel insists, however, that this problem of origins and identity is not, of course, limited to blacks, but permeates the fabric of American society, and is shared by all Americans. ... While the impulse to come to terms with one’s personal history ... and to claim a national identity is no doubt shared by many, the very notion of ‘universal humanity,’ erases or at least blurs more political considerations about how a text is produced as well as about how it is received. J. Lee Greene notes that critics often had ‘strained to make the definition of ‘universality’ in *Invisible Man* synonymous with ‘white’” (154). I would add that ‘universal’ is not only synonymous with ‘white,’ but with ‘male’ also. The very premise of the novel’s universality ignores the problematic of gender, and thus perpetuates the invisibility it seeks to undo” (20).

discrimination. Velma's new journey will depart from previous movements for social change which had only focused on eliminating one type of inequality. The black womanist movement is fighting against all forms of intolerance and subordination without privileging one over another.

Bambara's novel is less critical of the feminist movement than it is of the movement to end racial inequality, probably because the "black feminist presence ... evolved most obviously in connection with the second wave of the American women's movement beginning in the late 1960s" (Combahee 233). Bambara's characters are mostly silent regarding the feminist movement, with one notable exception when Bambara levels a critique on the second-wave Feminist movement, particularly the concept of losing one's personal space and one's personal identity because of the concept that the personal is political. During a conversation about Velma, Jan tells Ruby:

Velma's never been the center of her own life before Velma [never] set things up so [she] could opt for a purely personal solution. ... Velma has worked hard not to hollow out a safe corner—yeh, quotes around the safe—of home, family, marriage and then be less responsive, less engaged. Dodgy business trying to maintain the right balance there, the personal and the public But it's good she has put herself at center at last. (240-241)

Jan suggests here that making everything political can take the focus away from that which is truly important—acknowledging the necessity for self-identity and self-centeredness which can in turn lead to a renewed recognition of all forms of privilege and subordination. Velma's identity crisis is due in part because she has not allowed herself personal space for self-reflection and self-centering, which would have allowed her black feminist consciousness to emerge.

In contrast, however, *The Salt Eaters's* portrayal of the Seven Sisters performance group, which includes women of differing races and backgrounds, suggests a truly

inclusive feminist movement. In her essay on power and postmodern politics in *The Salt Eaters*, Janelle Collins writes, "the Seven Sisters are identified individually by Bambara, yet for the most part they function as a unity. Without sacrificing the distinctiveness of their own ethnic identities, the women are fused in their political concerns and activism" (38). The Seven Sisters are representative of the emerging black feminist movement, a movement Velma joins after she is healed. Velma joins a newly reborn black feminist movement: Although an offshoot of the second-wave white feminist movement, the Seven Sisters represent this move towards a truly inclusive feminist movement, a *womanist* movement.

Conclusion

Both *Meridian* and *The Salt Eaters* level valid critiques at the Civil Rights and second-wave Feminist movements of the mid-twentieth century, and the characters of Meridian Hill and Velma Harris both experience the limitations black women faced in either social campaign. Although Walker and Bambara both explore how black men and white women excluded black women, one group that is noticeably absent from the two novels is white men. This absence reflects the powerful invisibility of whiteness and maleness in society. White men do not need to be present in either novel because they have others who have internalized their white patriarchal paradigms and who uphold their (white male) supremacy. Both *Meridian* and *The Salt Eaters* reveal how the internalization of patriarchy by black men and the internalization of white men's racist norms by white women continues to enable white men to control society and to influence situations by proxy.

While white men are invisible and have the greatest amount of power in Walker's and Bambara's novels, black women, their antithesis, are the most visible. They are, therefore, also the most vulnerable because they are in the most powerless and subordinate position in society. As long as white men are invisibly powerful, Meridian and Velma won't be healed because their illnesses lie in their own internalizing of some manifestation of the white patriarchal social norms. Once they break free of that dominant paradigm and their womanist consciousnesses are born, the tables begin to turn. The novels end, but we can only project that, if these stories were continued, those who were invisible would become increasingly apparent.

Sexual Violence: The Great Uniter and Divider

One of the main campaigns of the late-twentieth century Feminist movement was waged against violence against women, with a particular focus on sexual violence. Sexual violence represents a more intimate kind of betrayal than the broader betrayals discussed in the previous chapter, as it is most often perpetrated by someone the survivor knows, in some cases by someone the survivor trusts.⁸ The lengthy history of legally sanctioned sexual violence against women in the United States, especially against women of color, and the role race plays when discussing both perpetrators and survivors makes this particular subject both racially and sexually charged. Sexual violence in *Meridian* and in Octavia Butler's science fiction novel *Kindred* further highlights the tension black women faced when trying to negotiate between their racial and gendered affiliations, a tension exacerbated by the discriminatory ideologies of the Civil Rights and Feminist movements.

Although *Meridian* is violated by a campus doctor, the character whose rape is most overtly described and focused on in Walker's novel is not *Meridian's*, but *Lynne's*. *Lynne's* rape suggests miscegenation, racism, and sexism because of Tommy Odds, a black Civil Rights Movement worker. However, Walker seems to be describing sexual violence as one area in which both black and white women suffer, and she suggests that there is room for inclusion in the movement for both black and white voices in this ongoing dialogue. In *Kindred*, *Dana*, too, negotiates between her racial and gendered affiliation, much like both *Meridian* and *Lynne*; however, *Dana's* gender identity takes a

⁸ There is great debate as to whether or not to call women who have experienced sexual assault 'victims' or 'survivors.' In light of the notion that language, and individual words themselves, are also empowering, I will use the word 'survivor' because of the reclamation of power that lies within the word itself.

primary role in her understanding of self, unlike Meridian and Lynne for whom issues of race and gender are of equal importance. Throughout Butler's novel, Dana undergoes a slight reawakening of her racial identity, and she does make some personal sacrifices in an attempt to save the other black people on the plantation to which she is inexplicably and repeatedly summoned. However, the issue of rape complicates this racial reawakening. On one hand, when Dana is faced with the prospect of being raped, she chooses to spare only herself, but, when presented with the opportunity to save another black woman, her great-great-grandmother Alice, from the same fate, she instead becomes an accomplice in Alice's rape. These acts sharpen the tension between race and gender, a tension with which many of the characters in these novels find themselves struggling. Walker's and Butler's different depictions of rape and sexual violence portray the ongoing struggle among black women as they try to negotiate between their racial and gendered identities during the time of the emerging black feminist movement.

***Meridian's* Interracial Rape and Elements of Black Feminist Discourse**

Sexual assault and sexual violence are major elements in many of Alice Walker's novels, and *Meridian* is no exception. The novel's title character is a survivor of numerous sexual assaults: by Dexter, the biracial mortician, and his assistant, and by her employer, Mr. Raymond, and Meridian also survives a more brutal violation by the nameless campus doctor who performs her abortion and sterilization. He offers to sterilize her if she'll "let [him] in on some of all this extracurricular activity" (Alice Walker 119), and when Meridian becomes ill again a short time later, she is reluctant to

visit him for help because “he would want payment” (123). When she awakes from a fainting spell, she finds herself in his campus office, where she is:

lifted up on the examination table ... and she was given a thorough and painful pelvic examination. Her breasts were routinely and exhaustively felt. ... She was asked why she slept with boys. ... [The doctor] thought she'd better come to his off-campus office for further consultation; there, he said, he had more elaborate equipment with which to test her. ... She returned to the apartment sicker than when she left. (123)

The sacrifices Meridian makes and the costs that she incurs in order to gain some element of autonomy over her reproductive functions are clearly delineated in this depiction. The fact that Meridian has to relinquish control over her own body, her own sexuality, in order to gain control over her own reproduction is indicative of the misogynistic, racist society in which she lives. Patricia Hill Collins writes, “Rape and other acts of overt violence that Black women have experienced, such as physical assault during slavery, domestic abuse, incest, and sexual extortion accompany Black women’s subordination in intersecting oppressions. These violent acts are the visible dimensions of a more generalized, routinized system of oppression” (146). The campus doctor’s assault of Meridian depicts his internalization of white men’s patriarchal paradigm and the “controlling images [it] applie[s] to Black women” (Collins 148). This situation, as well as the circumstances surrounding the purported rape of Wild Child, whom Meridian befriends while at Saxon College, represents once again the betrayal Meridian and other black women experienced at the hands of black men, but Walker’s novel has a broader scope and focus with regards to sexual violence. We can see the novel’s most powerful commentary on sexual violence through an analysis of the rape of Lynne by Tommy Odds.

Lynne's rape by Tommy Odds delineates the complicated role that race plays in the issue of sexual violence. This rape of a white woman by a black man evokes and reifies what Angela Davis refers to as the myth of the black male rapist. This stereotype, perpetuated by the dominant figures in society, white men, is precisely the reason why Lynne, a civil rights activist, feels she cannot acknowledge what has happened. Walker writes: "of course it was Tommy Odds who raped her. As he said, it wasn't really rape. She had not screamed once, or even struggled very much. To her, it was worse than rape because she felt circumstances had not permitted her to scream" (171). Lynne feels trapped because she knows what the consequences will be for speaking out. She "wished she could go to the police, but she was more afraid of them than she was of Tommy Odds, because they would attack young black men in the community indiscriminately, and the people she wanted most to see protected would suffer" (176). As Roberta Hendrickson writes in her piece "Remembering the Dream: Alice Walker and the Civil Rights Movement," Lynne "fails to act, to scream or to go to the police, because of her political understanding: she knows that they would use her cry of 'rape' to terrorize or kill innocent black men" (124). This paradox is precisely to what bell hooks refers when she asserts that "racism and sexism are interlocking systems of domination which uphold and sustain one another" (*Yearning* 59). Issues pertaining to race and gender are at the forefront of Tommy's rape of Lynne, and the paradigm created by these interlocking oppressions is what stops Lynne from seeking retribution or justice.

Tommy Odds understands that this dominant paradigm will enable him to escape any repercussions for his actions. According to Pamela Barnett, he "knows that Lynne's guilty knowledge of the dominant rape myth and its consequences will keep her from

making an allegation” (72). In this situation we can see how issues of race and gender influence Lynne’s silence. However, white men still have the ultimate control. hooks states that:

As far back as slavery, white people established a social hierarchy based on race and sex that ranked white men first, white women second, though sometimes equal to black men, who are ranked third, and black women last. What this means in terms of the sexual politics of rape is that if one white woman is raped by a black man, it is seen as more important, more significant than if thousands of black women are raped by one white man. Most Americans, and that includes black people, acknowledge and accept this hierarchy; they have internalized it either consciously or unconsciously. (*Ain’t I* 52-53)

Because of society’s internalization of white men’s hierarchy, when Lynne tries to tell Meridian about what has happened, Meridian refuses to listen. Meridian also refuses to listen in part because of the fact that “black women in the movement carried a special burden, observing a code of silence and racial solidarity to protect black men from a hostile white public” (Turque 36) in order to try to overcome the severe limitations of the white male hierarchy. Lynne responds by acknowledging Meridian’s concerns about the validity of her claims: “Wait a minute. ... I know you’re thinking about lynchings and the way white women have always lied about black men raping them. Maybe this wasn’t rape. I don’t know. I think it was. It *felt* like it was” (Alice Walker 164). If Lynne were to report the rape, she knows that the most empowered members of society, white men, would assert their authority and try to further reinforce their social norms. Meridian’s silence is required, as well, in order to save innocent black men. On the other hand, Tommy Odds, who has internalized the patriarchal paradigm, empowers himself both by acting as a dominant member of the society and by anticipating how white men’s reactions will affect Lynne.

In this situation, Lynne's whiteness is not an asset but rather a liability. It is because of her whiteness that Tommy Odds, her friend, begins to vilify her. When Truman, then Lynne's husband, goes to visit Tommy in the hospital after Tommy has lost his arm, Truman mentions how Lynne is hoping for a quick recovery, to which Tommy replies, "Don't mention that bitch to me, man. ... Don't mention that white bitch" (139). He goes on to say that "All white people are motherfuckers. ... I want to see them destroyed" (140). Lynne is "guilty of whiteness" (140), and this condemns her in the eyes of Tommy Odds, and also in the eyes of her husband. It is this whiteness that enables Tommy to vilify her, to hate her, but it is also for this reason that he attempts to empower himself by raping her. Rape in and of itself is inherently about power, not about love, desire, or even lust, and, as such, Tommy asserts his (male) authority over Lynne. He humiliates and uses Lynne to try to "destroy" white privilege. As Pamela Barnett states, "Tommy repeatedly asserts that Lynne was not raped at all because she was just atoning for the sins of her 'whiteness'" (75).

Lynne herself becomes confused about whether or not she was raped. Literary scholars, however, find that Alice Walker sees the matter with less ambiguity. Pamela Barnett claims "Unlike Lynne, Walker does hold Tommy responsible. He is not a child; she has not represented him as insane or otherwise mentally handicapped" (Barnett 75). Using Walker's own black womanist theory, which does not give preference to one particular ideology over another, we can see how the author condemns Tommy's actions and is sympathetic towards Lynne's plight. The non-preferential treatment of race over sex or vice versa inherent in black feminist discourse therefore values *all* women's experiences of being raped and sexually assaulted equally. Using this framework we can

see that for Walker, the second wave feminist movement had the potential to be a source of unification for all women, yet the movement's inherent racism limited its efficacy. However, because black feminism's ideology privileges no one identity over another, Walker suggests that issues of sexual violence should have a seminal position within that movement as well. The fact that Lynne is white does not give her more or less legitimacy as a survivor of rape. Likewise, a woman's skin color should not be a variable in how we evaluate issues of sexual violence. Walker reminds us that this issue is the great "colorblind" equalizer, that all women should have the right to speak out and to be safe.

The Tension Between Race and Gender in *Kindred*

The tension between race and gender is at the forefront of the rape narrative in *Kindred*. Unlike Walker, however, Octavia Butler depicts sexual violence, and all issues pertaining to gender inequalities for that matter, as a great divider, as an issue that threatens the black community and black solidarity, rather than viewing it as a great equalizer for women of all colors. The climactic moment in Octavia Butler's novel is quite perplexing, for, in that moment, the main character Dana, a black woman, must make the difficult decision either to save herself from being raped or to save those with whom she is racially aligned from a disastrous end. Dana chooses to save herself, thereby dooming all of the slaves on the Weylin plantation to the end of their communal existence. Her decision is not made without an intense struggle, nor does it lack historical basis. Dana's struggle between her gendered and racial identity in the novel, a struggle that culminates with the need to choose the slaves on the plantation (the people who share her race) by submitting to the rape, or to save herself, reflects the longstanding

tension black women faced in having to choose between the Women's Rights and Civil Rights Movements in the United States.

Kindred was published in 1979, at the end of the two major social movements of the latter 20th century, and represents the intense internal struggle of black women in the wake of these necessary social upheavals. Because Dana privileges her gender identification over her racial identification in the novel, she represents the intense dichotomy black women faced when acknowledging issues pertaining to gender in the black community—that is, they either acquiesce to the sexism in the black community or they are viewed by the community as a traitor to the race, as a pseudo-“whitey” (Wallace 225). Barbara Smith claims that “so many black people who are threatened by feminism have argued that by being a black feminist ... you have left the race, are no longer a part of the black community, in short no longer have a home” (254).

Dana's actions throughout the novel reflect this abandonment, and the primacy of her gender identification indicates she has both been abandoned by, and chosen to abandon, her racial affiliation. Therefore, Dana defines the “self-absorbed” Feminist movement—a movement unconcerned with the intersections of race and gender because traditional American society silently acknowledges white as the “norm” in racial identification. bell hooks writes that:

American women have been socialized, even brainwashed, to uphold and maintain racial imperialism in the form of white supremacy and sexual imperialism in the form of patriarchy. One measure of success of such indoctrination is that we perpetuate both consciously and unconsciously the very evils that oppress us. ... That American women, irrespective of their education, economic status, or racial identification, have undergone years of sexist and racist socialization that has taught us to blindly trust our knowledge of history and its effects on present reality, even though that knowledge has been formed and shaped by an oppressive system, is nowhere more evident than in the recent feminist movement. ... They [feminists] revealed that they had not changed, had

not undone the sexist and racist brainwashing that had taught them to regard women unlike themselves as Others.” (*Ain't I* 120-121)

Dana's selfish actions throughout the novel, particularly her decision to abandon the other black people on the plantation in order to save herself, suggest that she has not “undone the ... brainwashing,” and these actions suggest the dilemma of gender and racial identity many, particularly women, continue to face in contemporary America.

Despite the unifying struggle to call attention to the issues of sexual violence and reproductive rights, issues to which black women had an equal, if not greater, claim than white women, black women continued to be ignored by the mainstream feminist movement in the late 20th century. In their “Black Feminist Statement” the Combahee River Collective states, “As black feminists we are made constantly and painfully aware of how little effort white women have made to understand and combat their racism” (239). In the broader American society, black women continued to be marginalized, and their process of identity negotiation as both black and women continued to be very complex.

Dana suggests this complexity. Throughout the novel, she is trying to come to grips with her identity as a black woman. Prior to being transported back to the 19th century world of Rufus Weylin, issues of race seem to be on the periphery in Dana's life. She embodies the “racist brainwashing” hooks delineates, is portrayed as struggling much more with marginalization because of her gender than because of her race in her contemporary society. We don't even hear much about issues that arise due to Dana's race in the 20th century, the exception being when her white partner, Kevin, tells his family that he is going to marry her. Only at this point does Dana recognize her racial limitations as imposed on her and the ostracism that accompanies them. Otherwise, her

race seems to have less relevance in her daily life than her gender. Dana's elusive racial heritage in the contemporary portion of the text indicates her assimilation into the contemporary white culture, and her primary identification with her gender indicates Butler's representation of a black woman caught in the broader racist but narrower white women's feminist movement.

The issue of sexual harassment, one brought to the forefront of American consciousness during the late-20th century feminist movement, highlights Dana's gendered, rather than her racial, identity in the beginning of the novel. When Dana and Kevin begin dating, their co-worker Buz begins making inappropriate and suggestive comments to Dana. He continually refers to pornography in a lecherous manner, making Dana uncomfortable and defensive. Although at one point Buz exclaims "chocolate and vanilla porn!" (Butler 57), his comments generally do not refer to Dana's race, nor does he try to embarrass and to intimidate her because of it. Rather, he comments about her because he can assert his power as a man over her. Buz does not make the same comments to Kevin, who is his equal (or even his superior when considering their social classes). Instead, he mutters the obscenities to Dana who has no way to stop him and who is in a subordinate position to his dominant one. Dana does not take offense to Buz's comments as a racial affront but instead reacts to the gendered subordination, positioning Dana's identity first and foremost as a woman.

Another example of Dana's struggle with her gendered marginalization happens when her partner Kevin insists that she do his typing for him, and she refuses. In contemporary society, secretarial work has been ascribed the label "women's work," for it is viewed as less important than the "real" work that men do. Kevin's insistence that

Dana type his manuscripts for him indicates that he views typing as work beneath him because he is a man, while it is appropriate work for Dana to do because she is a woman. Thus, although Kevin's request of Dana may seem innocent enough, it reveals the problematic androcentric society in which they live, a society that devalues Dana's contributions in this instance because of her gender, not her race.

In contrast, when Dana finds herself in a similar situation when she is once again on the Weylin plantation in the latter part of the novel, she prepares all of the correspondence for the plantation owner (who also happens to be her great-great-grandfather), Rufus Weylin. In this instance, Dana does not refuse to write Rufus' letters; rather, she gladly engages in this activity. At this point in time, we recognize the full shift in Dana's identity consciousness. Rather than identifying her gender as the sole cause of her marginalization, she is now faced with the limitations defined by her race, a concept with which she seemingly had had little experience in the 20th century. As a black person without any free papers in a slave state prior to the Civil War, she is in no position to say "no" to Rufus, a white man. She has already faced brutality from him and his father, and she risks doing so again by refusing him; her very existence depends on him.

It is at this time that Dana fully understands that she is marginalized not only because of her gender, but also because of her race. Even if Dana were a white woman, she would still be in a subordinate position to Rufus. However, the fact that she is black means that she has even less autonomy and privilege. In fact, she has none. As black and as a woman, she is the most vulnerable and subordinate person in society. Dana recognizes the dually marginalizing effects of her race and gender in this particular

situation, and, because of her reconnection with her racial heritage, she agrees to write Rufus's letters in order to try to save the other black slaves on the Weylin plantation. Dana tells Rufus that he'll "never know how hard I worked in my own time to avoid doing jobs like this" (226) but that she'll do it if he won't "sell anyone else" (227).

Dana's racial recognizance and subordination fully come into play during her later transportations back to the Weylin plantation, such as when she begins to write Rufus's letters. In these latter parts of the novel, Dana most fully realizes the limitations placed on her because of her race through the real possibility of her enslavement. In her contemporary society, her racial subjectivity is less apparent. Dana readily admits that she does not know much about black history upon her second return from the 19th century and acknowledges that this is problematic, as does Kevin. When they gather all of the books they have on black history, the texts only number ten (48). Of those ten, Dana even admits to only having read a few, while merely browsing through the remainder. This neglect is another indication of Dana's abandonment of the black community and her assimilation into white society and white culture. Even her own history has been subsumed by the dominant paradigm. Butler suggests the problematic aspects of the (white) feminist movement through Dana, who embodies feminism in the novel. So concerned with her gender identity that she has all but ignored her racial identity and heritage, she must learn how to face a situation where she is brutally confronted with racial injustice. Similarly, since many of the proponents of the feminist movement were white, were racially "invisible," they, too, ignored issues pertaining to race. However, unlike Dana, most white feminists never had to confront their racial identities and never experienced racial awakenings.

Dana herself acknowledges that her primary identification is as a woman as she begins to recognize the constraints of her racial identity, and she understands this primacy is problematic, for the two are inextricably intertwined. In her first encounter with white patrollers, she understands that “they might take [her] along as a prisoner. Blacks here were assumed to be slaves unless they could prove they were free—unless they had their free papers. Paperless blacks were game for any white” (34). She fights back as a woman when faced with her first potential rape by a white patroller early in the novel but recognizes the role that her race played in the encounter. In her initial retort to the patroller, she thought “he’d be more likely to believe [her] if [she] sounded indignant” (41), which clearly shows her limited understanding of how truly pertinent her racial identification is to her assailant. Moments later, she thinks not only that “there was a more immediate threat,” but also comes to the realization that she will be “sold into slavery ... Slavery!” (42). Upon her return to the twentieth century, she proclaims her inadequacy when faced with the possibility of having to survive in a society that places such an emphasis on her race. She claims that she lacks, “Strength. Endurance. To survive, my ancestors had to put up with much more than I ever could. Much more. You know what I mean” (51). She goes on to say:

I would have used [the] knife against that patroller last night if I’d had it. I would have killed him. That would have ended the immediate danger to me [...] But, if the patroller’s friends had caught me, they would have killed me. And if they hadn’t caught me, they would probably have gone after Alice’s mother. They ... they may have anyway. So either I would have died, or I would have caused another innocent person to die. (51)

Dana recognizes that her instinct to protect herself as a woman, an idea born of her assimilated identity in her contemporary society, has resounding consequences. In the 19th century, her racial identity is thoroughly implicated in her actions as well, and she

recognizes that not only do these actions affect her personally but in addition, they also affect the entire black community.

Despite this recognition, however, when faced with the same decision at the culmination of the novel, at a point in time where she even more fully recognizes the personal ramifications of her decision, her primary identity as an assimilated 20th century *woman* informs her decision, and, in this instance, she actually does kill the white man, her ancestor Rufus. Angelyn Mitchell writes:

Rufus's ... attempt to rape her forces Dana to kill him in self-defense... Dana cannot tolerate being violated by Rufus. Killing Rufus, instead of submitting to him ... is Dana's way of maintaining her self-esteem and psychic wholeness. For Dana, to submit to Rufus would be the same as accepting his definition of her as chattel, and this she cannot do. In other words, Dana refuses to relinquish her right to self-definition. (59)

Dana's concern with her "personal," with *herself*, becomes allegorical for the women's liberation movement, which focused on the personal. Dana's murder of Rufus, however, also represents the ultimate racial betrayal of the black community, for this action brings about the dissolution of the plantation and the separation of black families, which Dana fully understands. Before she murders Rufus, Dana expresses guilt over the fact that she has saved his life so many times, but a mute house slave, Carrie, corrects her guilt and informs her that her actions have had a positive effect:

"I wish I had left Rufus lying in the mud. ... He's no good. He's all grown up now and part of the system." ...

Carrie, clasped her hands around her neck again. Then she drew closer to me and clasped them around my neck. Finally she went over to the crib that her youngest child had recently outgrown and there, symbolically, clasped her hands again, leaving enough of an open circle for a small neck.

She straightened and looked at me.

"Everybody?" I asked.

She nodded, gestured widely with her arms as though gathering a group around her. Then, once again, her hands around her neck.

I nodded. She was almost surely right. Margaret Weylin could not run the plantation. Both the land and the people would be sold. And if Tom Weylin was any example, the people would be sold without regard for family ties. (223-24)

Dana's actions prior to Rufus's murder also imply that she still struggles with her racial fidelity. Specifically, Dana's actions profoundly affect her foremother, Alice, and furthermore, Dana is implicated in Alice's rape by Rufus. This is paradoxical because, when subjected to impending sexual violence herself, Dana fights against it, but, when presented with the opportunity to save another woman, specifically another black woman, from that same violence, Dana instead chooses to enable the rapist, Rufus, to perpetuate that violence repeatedly. Although this action is necessary for Dana's self-preservation (because Alice must give birth to a daughter who will become Dana's great-grandmother), Dana's dilemma here most clearly represents a critique leveled at the inherent selfishness of the white feminist movement, which, through their self-absorption with issues that they claimed were "universal," and their subsequent ignorance of the concerns of women of color, perpetuated inequality towards black women and other women of color. Deborah King suggests that:

The assertion of commonality, indeed of the universality and primacy of female oppression, denies the other structured inequalities of race, class, religion, and nationality While contending that feminist consciousness and theory emerged from the personal, everyday reality of being female, the reality of millions of women was ignored. The phrase 'the personal is political' not only reflects a phenomenological approach to women's liberation—that is, of women defining and constructing their own reality—but it has also come to describe the politics of imposing and privileging a few women's personal lives over all women's lives by assuming that these few could be prototypical. For black women, the personal is bound in the problems peculiar to multiple jeopardies of race and class, not the singular one of sexual inequality. (303-304)

Dana privileges her own life over all of those around her, including all other women, particularly Alice. Dana will do anything to save herself from sexual violence, even to the extent of killing Rufus, but she ignores Alice's desire to do the same, and, instead, Dana actively encourages her to be complacent with her situation, with being repeatedly violated, abused, and raped. Dana, here, does not embody the black woman's "personal" experience that King describes—rather, she represents white feminism.

Butler challenges the white feminist movement's focus on the "personal" concerns of white women through Dana, whose assimilation into white culture enables her to participate in the rape of Alice. Without the primacy of her gender identity, an offshoot of her assimilation into white society which in turn marginalizes her racial identity, Dana would not have consented to Rufus' demands. If she had been more cognizant of her race and racial inequality, she would instead have felt a stronger affinity to other black women. However, through Dana's self-absorbed concern with her own personal interests, Butler suggests that Dana participates silently in Alice's rape, just as white women have violated black women and themselves through deliberate silence, ignorance, and indifference.

Dana's selfish gender identification mimics the betrayal felt by the suffragist movement towards the abolitionists in the 19th century, feelings that also festered within the social movements of the twentieth century, which in turn continued to exclude and to betray black women. Dana's actions, however, indicate that white women's sense of betrayal is misplaced and should be viewed as the opposite. Butler suggests that the true betrayal came in the failure to recognize the issues of the black community by (primarily

white) women rather than a betrayal of those women by men. Dana's dilemma and actions reveal the subordination of all black people by whites of either gender.

American history supports this claim. Even after black men's enfranchisement, white women's words meant more than theirs (particularly in the South), and black women were silent, invisible, and subordinate to white women. Dana's betrayal of the other black people on the plantation supports this commentary. Dana clearly knew her actions were a betrayal of the slaves, specifically of Alice, yet her refusal to act upon this knowledge represents white women's refusal to acknowledge the high cost of their white privilege.

Octavia Butler, through her character Dana in *Kindred*, offers a profound critique of the women's rights movement, characterizing it as selfish and self-absorbed. Although feminism might have introduced the mantra "the personal is political," Butler suggests, through Dana, that this presumed ideal is a white mantra that might empower white women, but it sounds like nonsense to black women like Dana, and Dana's identification with this mantra ultimately compromised her in tragic ways. Her concern with her own personal protection rather than with the protection of the broader group of people who share her race reveals the tension between issues of race and sex with which other writers have also grappled. Because Butler seems to have internalized some form of the white male hierarchy by privileging issues of race over issues of gender, her novel *cannot* be read as a black feminist or womanist novel. The issue of sexual violence in *Kindred* becomes the great divider rather than the great equalizer it is in Walker's *Meridian*. In *Kindred*, however, this great divider can also be read in a brighter light. Dana's actions, keeping Rufus alive and encouraging Alice to be complacent with Rufus's rape of her,

allow for the continuance of Dana's matrilineal ancestry, which in itself turns the patriarchal system on its head. It doesn't matter how or by what actions Dana does this, what is important is that, by ensuring her own survival in her complicity, she enables her matriarchal line to continue, which implies that power comes through *mothers*, and that power is transferred from mother to daughter. Inherently, therefore, *Kindred* is a novel about mothers and daughters, and matrilineal relationships and are themes that are consistently present in black feminist literature.

Mothers and Motherhood

Motherhood permeates the literature produced by black women writers, signaling its centrality to black women's experience, indeed to all women's experience. Barbara Christian writes, "the role of mother, with all that it implies, is universally imposed upon women as their sole identity, their proper identity, above all others. The primacy of motherhood for women is the one value that societies, whatever their differences, share" (212). While this concept of "motherhood" is problematic because it is defined by the dominant white male paradigm, the issues of motherhood unite black and white women. In her book *Of Woman Born*, Adrienne Rich addresses this concept of male-defined motherhood. She writes that there are "two meanings of motherhood, one superimposed on another: the *potential relationship* of any woman to her powers of reproduction and to children; and the *institution*, which aims at ensuring that that potential—and all women—shall remain under male control" (13—her emphasis). It is the male-defined *institution* of motherhood that feminist scholars, both black and white, strive to redefine, while the *relationship* of motherhood is viewed as a source of potential empowerment.

White feminists, subsumed in white men's definition of white womanhood, have to deal with a remarkably different set of social expectations than black women. Patricia Hill Collins describes this difference, writing that "according to the cult of true womanhood that accompanied the traditional [white] family ideal, 'true' women possessed four cardinal virtues: piety, purity, submissiveness, and domesticity. ... African-American women encountered a different set of controlling images" (72): the mammy, the matriarch, the welfare mother, and the jezebel. These differing images, developed because of racial differences as defined by white supremacy, created a schism

between black and white women's experiences as mothers. This schism was ultimately manifested in the dialogue on motherhood in the 20th century Feminist movement. In her article on black matrilineage in the works of Alice Walker and Zora Neale Hurston, Dianne F. Sadoff writes "White feminism obscures black women's sexuality and consequent motherhood. White women feel guilty and resentful about their relationship with black women ... because they know their children get more from a racist society than do black mothers' children—yet all mothers want the best for their children. Despite shared motherhood, race separates women" (12). White feminism, focused on the those issues and concerns of more privileged white mothers, disregarded the concerns and challenges faced by black women, women who were more oppressed members of society.

The cultural legacy of slavery prohibited black women from participating in the "cult" of (white) womanhood. In her analysis of black women's roles as slaves, Angela Davis writes, "In order to function as slave, the black woman had to be annulled as woman, that is, as woman in the historical stance of wardship under the entire male hierarchy. The sheer force of things rendered her equal to her man" (205). According to Patricia Hill Collins, this historical equalizer eliminated the option of passive domesticity and motherhood for black women:

Perceptions of motherhood as an unpaid occupation in the home comparable to paid male occupations in the public sector advanced by the traditional family ideal never became widespread among the majority of African-American women. ... [S]lavery provided no social context for issues of privatized motherhood as a stay-at-home occupation. Instead, communal child-care arrangements substituted for individual maternal care—a few women were responsible for caring for all children too young to work, and women as a group felt accountable for one another's children. (50)

Motherhood, therefore, was a *job* (albeit unpaid and unrecognized as such during the period of enslavement) for black women, while it was a *calling* for white women.

These differing perceptions of black and white women's motherhoods became startlingly clear when the (white) women's liberation movement of the late-twentieth century confronted these issues in an attempt to create a society free from patriarchal oppression. White women's confinement to the domestic sphere simply was not mirrored in black women's lives: "In contrast to the cult of true womanhood associated with the traditional family ideal, in which paid work is defined as being in opposition to and incompatible with motherhood, work for Black women has been an important and valued dimension of motherhood" (Collins 184). Black women's ability—and necessity—to work afforded them some form of economic self-reliance (albeit extremely small), which enabled them to support their children and ensure the family's survival (Collins 184). Dianne F. Sadoff states that although "Black and white women suffer similar oppression as women, ... the black woman's double oppression intensifies her suffering and the beauty of her survival" (11). Not only is this survival beautiful, but so is the fact that, through this survival, through this perpetuation of a matrilineal ancestry, black women and their children are actively subverting the dominant paradigm. Because this survival is viewed as subversive, however, black women who choose not to become mothers are seen as betrayers of the race or as complicit with white men's dominant paradigm. Black mothers' oppression and suffering, as well as the feelings of guilt and betrayal for women who opt not to be mothers, are themes that run through most fictional accounts of black motherhood. The characters in Walker's *Meridian* and Toni Morrison's *The Bluest Eye* are no exception.

In Walker's novel, the complexities and sufferings of motherhood are depicted abundantly by many characters, including Lynne, who is mother to a biracial child, Meridian's childhood friend, Nelda, and the Wild Child, but they are exemplified most overtly in both Meridian and her mother, Mrs. Hill. Mrs. Hill never wanted children and resents them; however, she also sees them as part of her Christian duty. Meridian, too, experiences suffering because of her role as mother, but, unlike her mother, she actively denies any feelings of maternal obligation. She feels an intense hatred towards her young son and even imagines killing him before she gives him up. When she finds herself pregnant again by Truman, she has an abortion and then is voluntarily sterilized, thus eliminating the possibility of ever being faced with the prospect of motherhood again. This decision, however, does not come without an accompanying feeling of overwhelming guilt, which is undoubtedly "exacerbated by her knowledge of her maternal ancestors—mothers who were slaves and who were often denied their children; mothers who did anything and everything to keep their children" (Christian 231). For this decision, Meridian feels that *she* is a betrayer of black womanhood and motherhood because of her lack of maternal desire. At the same time, she cannot bring herself to be a part of the *institution* of black motherhood.

Images of maternal burdens and the concept of maternal love and devotion to one's own children are also suggested and questioned in *The Bluest Eye*, specifically through the relationship of Pecola and Pauline Breedlove. The Breedloves' relationship is juxtaposed with the relationship of the novel's narrator, Claudia MacTeer, and her mother, Mrs. MacTeer. Morrison examines and questions many facets of black motherhood, both institutionally and individually, through these intertwining

relationships. Through their female characters both Walker and Morrison critique the way sexist and racist attitudes in their respective movements enforced rigid social categories, which, in turn, reproduced further inequalities.

As black feminism sought to articulate its own ideology and identity, the issues of motherhood were fundamental of that self-definition, and, through the characters in their novels, Walker and Morrison both depict the stark realities of the *institution* of black motherhood and highlight the complexities of the *personal relationships* of black mothers in their novels. Patricia Hill Collins writes, "Black motherhood is a fundamentally contradictory institution. African-American communities value motherhood, but Black mothers' ability to cope with intersecting oppressions of race, class, gender, sexuality, and nation should not be confused with transcending injustices characterizing these oppressions" (195). The mothers and mother-child relationships in *Meridian* and *The Bluest Eye* represent the complications of the institution of black motherhood. Through their characters and relationships, Walker and Morrison deliver a clear black feminist critique of the dominant paradigm, and both offer revisions to a definition of both black and white motherhood.

Meridian's Maternal Suffering

Motherhood is everywhere in Alice Walker's *Meridian*. Nearly all the female characters, both minor and major, are mothers, and, through them, Walker realistically portrays the institution of motherhood and critiques the stifling effects of that (white patriarchal) institution on the mothers who participate in it. From the Wild Child to Meridian's childhood friend Nelda through Mrs. Hill to Meridian herself, issues of

motherhood, and, specifically, the burden and suffering of motherhood, are realistically depicted.

Integrally important in these depictions is the notion that motherhood is a cause for great suffering. Motherhood is so all consuming that the mothers in *Meridian* are almost solely described and defined by their identity as mothers, save the title character. All of the mothers in the novel seem to view the institution of motherhood as a great burden, one over which they have no control, just as they have no control over their own lives separate from their identity as mothers. Barbara Christian points out that “because of the history of slave mothers, such sanctification surrounds Afro-American motherhood that the idea that mothers should live lives of sacrifice has come to be seen as the norm. ... [W]omen ... are valued ... because of the children they bear and ... this value demands a giving up of their independence, of their personal life” (Christian 231-32). This loss of independent autonomy profoundly affects each of the mothers. Meridian laments that life with her son “is what slavery is like” (Alice Walker 65). Mrs. Hill is an “already overburdened woman” (130) whose existence is a “blind, enduring, stumbling ... through life” (74). Nelda has a “meek acceptance of her family’s burdens” (86) but desperately wishes her life had turned out differently and is envious of Meridian’s opportunity to go to college, to escape. All three of these women recognize, albeit unconsciously, that they have lost something because of their participation in the institution of motherhood.

Walker depicts the impact that this loss of autonomy and maternal suffering most dramatically through Meridian’s mother, Mrs. Hill. Mrs. Hill was “not a woman who should have had children. She was capable of thought and growth and action only if

unfettered by the needs of dependents, or the demands, requirements, of a husband" (40). When she became pregnant for the first time "she became distracted from who she was. As divided in her mind as her body was divided, between what part was herself what part was not" (42). Consequently, Mrs. Hill becomes incredibly bitter towards her family, particularly towards her children. Because of the controlling forces of white patriarchy's institution of motherhood and that institution's double standard for black and white mothers, Mrs. Hill is caught in limbo. She has internalized the dominant paradigm's characterization of white motherhood and does not work outside the home, which, according to Patricia Hill Collins, has always been an integral part of black motherhood, yet Mrs. Hill's former work as a teacher had brought her "both money and respect. This mattered to her" (Alice Walker 41). Having children, being a mother, caused her to lose this source of respect and, consequently, empowerment, and, for this loss, Meridian's mother is incredibly resentful.

As Mrs. Hill loses her autonomy, she begins to recognize that she, like all other mothers, is trapped in a reality that is defined and enforced by the dominant members of society—men, both black and white—and:

she was not even allowed to be resentful that she was 'caught.' That her personal life was over. There was no one she could cry out to and say "It's not fair!" And in understanding this, she understood a look she saw in other women's eyes. The mysterious inner life that she had imagined gave them a secret joy was simply a full knowledge of the fact that they were dead, living just enough for their children. They, too, had found no one to whom to shout "It's not fair!" The women who now had eight, twelve, fifteen children: People made jokes about them, but she could feel now that such jokes were obscene; it was like laughing at a person who is being buried alive, walled away from her own life, brick by brick. (42)

Because of the pervasiveness of patriarchy's control over women's lives, Mrs. Hill does not have access to the information that might have saved her from being "caught" in a life

she did not desire. She is enraged that no one has shared this essential information with her, and she “would never forgive her community, her family, his family, the whole world, for not warning her against children” (41). However, when faced with the same opportunity to inform, to educate, to prepare her own daughter, Mrs. Hill refuses.

Meridian’s foray into motherhood comes about precisely because her mother does not give her the information for which she herself had so desperately wished before she became pregnant the first time. Meridian:

realized that her mother, father, aunts, friends, passers-by—not to mention her laughing sister—had told her nothing about what to expect from men, from sex. Her mother never even used the word, and her lack of information on the subject of sex was accompanied by a seeming lack of concern about her daughter’s morals. Having told her absolutely nothing, she expected her to *do* nothing. (55)

Because Mrs. Hill has internalized the dominant ideology, she becomes complicit in its perpetuation through her silence, which is “deliberate. A war against those to whom she could not express her anger or shout, ‘It’s not fair!’” (42). If she has to live by the dominant social norms, those “unfair” norms, then so, too, does everyone else. When Meridian tells her mother that she is going to give up her son in order to go to college, Mrs. Hill replies that “Everyone else that slips up like you did *bears* it. You’re the only one that thinks you can just outright refuse” (86). Rather than choosing to fight against the patriarchal dictation of the institution of motherhood and attempting to redefine it, Mrs. Hill becomes that institution’s most effective enforcer.

In Patricia Hill Collins’ analysis of black women’s motherhood, she states:

In the context of a sexual politics that aims to control Black women’s sexuality and fertility, African-American women struggle to be good mothers. In contrast, motherhood can serve as a site where Black women express and learn the power of self-definition, the importance of valuing and respecting ourselves, the necessity of self-reliance and independence, and a belief in Black women’s empowerment. These tensions foster a continuum of responses. Some women

view motherhood as a truly burdensome condition that stifles their creativity, exploits their labor, and makes them partners in their own oppression. Others see motherhood as providing a base for self-actualization, status in the Black community, and a catalyst for social activism. These alleged contradictions can exist side by side in African-American communities and families and even within individual women. (176-77)

Mrs. Hill and Meridian both represent this intense conflict inherent in black mothers' quests for self-definition. For Mrs. Hill, her children have been "burdens to her always" (Alice Walker 42), and these burdens are the cause of her "abstraction" (42). Mrs. Hill's creativity is stifled because of these burdens. Walker writes "creativity was in her, but it was refused expression" (42). Mrs. Hill's self, her whole identity within the *institution* of motherhood, is subsumed by her *role* identity as "mother."

Meridian, too, finds her son burdensome. He does "not feel like anything to her but a ball and chain" (65). She willingly and gladly gives him away to another family, to "people who wanted him" (89). For Meridian, motherhood is not compatible with her journey to self-actualization. In fact, this separation from her child is necessary for her to embark on her journey of self-actualization. Because Eddie Jr./Rundi is born to Meridian during a time in her life in which she is so fully absorbed in an oppressive—both racially and sexually—society, Meridian must excise him from her life in order to begin her quest for true social—and *personal*—change.

Meridian's abandonment of her child, however, is a source of great guilt. Despite the fact that she "might have murdered him instead [and] then killed herself" (89) and despite the fact that "she felt deeply that what she'd done was the only thing, and was right" (90), Meridian begins to question her decision to give up her child. She has "nightmares that began to trouble her sleep. Nightmares of the child, Rundi, calling to her, crying, suffering unbearable deprivations because she was not there" (89-90).

Meridian feels such guilt over forsaking her son because of the historical legacy of black mothers being denied their own children. Walker writes:

Meridian knew that enslaved women had been made miserable by the sale of their children, that they had laid down their lives, gladly, for their children, that the daughters of these enslaved women had thought their greatest blessing from "Freedom" was that it meant they could keep their own children. And what had Meridian Hill done with *her* precious child? She had given him away. (90)

Meridian feels this overwhelming guilt and inadequacy because of the constraints of motherhood as an *institution*. The rigidly defined social mores for black mothers reinforced this concept of black maternal sacrifice and suffering—in the passage above Walker suggests that slave mothers "laid down their lives, gladly" for their children—and any woman who chooses not to live by these norms, who chooses not to be self-sacrificing, is viewed as a traitor. By abandoning her role as mother, however, Meridian begins to define her personal relationship to motherhood by making a decision based on what is best for her and her child. Meridian knows that because of her actions, her son "needn't worry, ever, about being deprived. Of his life, for instance" (90). In this situation, Meridian is being the best mother that she can be. She is relinquishing her position as mother in order to afford her child a better life rather than rear him in the conditions that she knew all too well: resentment. At the same time, the most self-less and self-interested thing she can do, Meridian privileges her child's life over her own. In doing so, she is also freeing herself and asserting her own sense of independence and agency.

The concept of the inevitability of maternal suffering is not limited solely to black women in Walker's novel—Lynne, too, endures suffering as a mother. As the white mother of a biracial child, Lynne is shunned in both societies. Her parents

disown her after finding out about her relationship with Truman. When Lynne called to tell them that Camara was dead, "her mother wouldn't speak to [her] and ... [her] father ... said, 'So's our daughter'" (164). Lynne's suffering is not imparted solely through the burden of motherhood, a burden which causes her to become a welfare mother, but, like Meridian, Lynne's suffering is also precipitated through the loss of motherhood. When Camara dies, Lynne is distraught, and it appears as though she may never recover. She tells Meridian "I don't have anything" (161), for she does not know how to define herself without her daughter, the one person who had ultimately connected her to the black community. Without Camara, Lynne, like Mrs. Hill, is caught in limbo. She no longer belongs to the black community because her biracial daughter is dead, nor is she married to Truman. Yet, at the same time, she is no longer a part of the white community, both because her choices have ostracized her from it and because she does not wish to be a part of it. Lynne is the character who experiences the most fundamental suffering of motherhood, a suffering that, historically, many black women also experienced. Unlike Mrs. Hill who suffers because she never wanted children and unlike Meridian who suffers because she feels guilty for not wanting to raise her child, Lynne suffers because she lost her child, a child she loved, just as black mothers in slavery lost children they had loved immeasurably. By viewing Lynne through this lens, we can understand Walker's suggestion that motherhood, free from the constraining historical definitions imposed by white patriarchal society, can be a source of unity for all women of all colors.

Motherhood, Matriliny, and Resistance

Of equal importance to the theme of maternal suffering in *Meridian* is the concept of matriliny, the perpetuation of the maternal line. Many of the female characters are described not only as mothers, but also in relation to their own mothers and daughters. Specifically, Meridian's female ancestral line is described in detail. From her father's grandmother, Feather Mae, who fought her husband to save an ancient Indian burial site and who was a "strong silent woman who seemed always to be washing or ironing or cooking or rousing her family from naps to go back to work in the fields" (51) to her mother's great-great-grandmother who fought to keep her children from being sold to her own maternal grandmother who literally worked herself to death to send Meridian's mother to teacher's college, the women from whence Meridian came and the sacrifices that they made are described in detail. Angela Davis asserts that it is important not to describe maternal ancestry as matriarchy because "inherent in the very concept of the matriarchy is 'power'" (201), and all of these women appear on the surface to be powerless. By stressing this concept of maternal ancestry in her novel, however, Walker resists Davis's definition. The perpetuation of the maternal line, particularly for black women, can be read as a form of empowerment. By continuing to have children (particularly after the abolition of slavery), black women resisted the white patriarchal paradigm, and, through this action, black women accessed the only power that they had: the power of resistance. Meridian's foremothers were all active participants in resistance. Her father's great-grandmother resisted her husband's attempts to level the ancient Indian burial site on their property. Her mother's great-great-grandmother resisted her master's selling of her children: "she had followed the man who bought them until she was able to

steal them back. The third time ... she was allowed to keep them on the condition that they would eat no food she did not provide herself" (Alice Walker 128). Meridian's own grandmother resisted when her husband said that her daughter, Meridian's mother, could not go to school to become a teacher: "It was her [Mrs. Hill's] mother who made the bargain with her father that allowed her to go to school. ... School would cost twelve dollars a year, and her mother would have to earn every cent of it" (129). Through these resistances, these mothers enriched their children's lives. Meridian, too, is an active participant in resistance, but, unlike her foremothers, she resists not just for the benefit of her children, but rather for the benefit of all society, especially for all black women and their children.

Despite her participation in this matrilineal legacy of resistance—seen through her involvement in the Civil Rights Movement—Meridian still experiences deep feelings of guilt over her unwillingness to participate in the literal perpetuation of her matriline, feelings undoubtedly incited by the sexism that was rampant in the movement. Meridian's resistance to both racist and sexist norms has broader implications because she "is able to probe the meaning of motherhood, not solely in a biological context, but in terms of justice and love" (Christian 243). In fact, as Meridian questions this exclusively woman-based institution and experience, she takes on a non-traditional role of motherhood, a role that Patricia Hill Collins identifies as the "community othermother" (190). Collins states, "U.S. Black women's experiences as othermothers provide a foundation for conceptualizing Black women's political activism" (189). The community "othermother" works for the good of the entire community, just as a mother works for the

good of her child or children; in this case, however, the tie is not blood-based but community-based. Collins writes:

Community othermothers' participation in activist mothering demonstrates a clear rejection of separateness and individual interest as the basis of either community organization or individual self-actualization. Instead, the interconnectedness with others and common interest expressed by community othermothers model a very different value system, one whereby ethics of caring and personal accountability move communities forward. (192)

Through her work to end racism and sexism, Meridian becomes an "othermother" and, in turn, a matriarch, a community mother, one who has power.

When the novel begins, which chronologically is very close in time to when the novel ends, we find Meridian in the role of community othermother. She is leading a group of children across a hostile Southern white town square to an exhibit of a mummified woman which they had been banned from viewing until their designated "day." Walker writes:

It was as if Meridian waited for them to get themselves nicely arranged. When the two were in the tank and swinging its muzzle in her direction, and the others were making a line across the front of the wagon, she raised her hand once and marched off the curb. The children fell into line behind her, their heads held high and their feet scraping the pavement.

...

Meridian did not look to the right or to the left. She passed the people watching her as if she didn't know it was on her account they were there. As she approached the tank the blast of its engine sent a cloud of pigeons fluttering, with the sound of rapid, distant shelling, through the air, and the muzzle of the tank swung tantalizingly side to side—as if to tease her—before it settled directly toward her chest. ... [W]hen she reached the tank she stepped lightly, deliberately, right in front of it, rapped smartly on its carapace—as if knocking on a door—then raised her arm again. The children pressed onward, through the ranks of the arrayed riflemen up to the circus car door. The silence, as Meridian kicked open the door, exploded in a mass exhilaration of breaths, and the men who were in the tank crawled sheepishly out again to stare. (6-7)

Through this act of resistance to social inequality, Meridian, the community othermother, challenges the dominant group and makes the world (slightly) less discriminatory for her

“children,” her community, and teaches them by her example. Meridian, in this instance, is allegorical for black feminism’s redefinition of motherhood and its challenge to the white patriarchal institution of motherhood that has alienated Meridian, and many other black women, from their maternal selves. Through these re-conceptualizations, Black feminism redefines maternity, matriarchy, and matriliney, and it is no coincidence that it is just a short time, chronologically, after this incident that Meridian is “healed” and embarks on a new journey of self-identification as a black feminist.

Mothers and Daughters in *The Bluest Eye*

The burden of motherhood is also present in Toni Morrison’s *The Bluest Eye*, and like Walker’s *Meridian*, the novel also delineates issues of matriliney, or as Andrea O’Reilly calls it, the “motherline” (11). Essentially, Morrison’s novel is not only about mother-daughter relationships, primarily the relationship between Pecola and Pauline Breedlove, but also more subtly about the relationship between Claudia MacTeer and her mother.⁹ Through these relationships, Morrison questions and critiques the effects that the white patriarchal institution of motherhood has had on both black mothers and daughters. These two pairs of mothers and daughters are startling contrasts to one another, and their juxtaposition in the novel, which was published in 1970, highlights

⁹ Also portrayed is the relationship of Junior and his mother, Geraldine, which is the most disturbing depiction of motherhood in the novel. Geraldine is the most thoroughly indoctrinated black mother in the text. As a woman, she has learned “how to do the white man’s work with refinement: home economics to prepare his food; teacher education to instruct black children to obedience; music to soothe the weary master and entertain his blunted soul” (83). She is the most overt representation of the damaging effects of the white patriarchal institution of motherhood in the novel, and likewise, her child, Junior, is the most dysfunctional child in the novel, to the point of being pathological.

Morrison's commentary on the state of black motherhood in the wake of the Civil Rights Movement and in the days of the nascent feminist movement.

As in those of Alice Walker, motherhood is fundamental in Toni Morrison's collective works. Mothers and motherhood are situated in a position of such primacy that it would be impossible to discuss any of Morrison's texts without discussing a mother's actions or role in that work. These depictions, however, are in stark contrast to the definition of motherhood in white patriarchal society. In her book analyzing the theme of motherhood in Toni Morrison's novels, Andrea O'Reilly writes:

Building upon black women's experiences of, and perspectives on motherhood, Morrison develops a view of black motherhood that is, in terms of both maternal identity and role, radically different than the motherhood practised and prescribed in the dominant culture. Morrison defines and positions maternal identity as a site of power for black women. From this position of power black mothers engage in a maternal practice that has as its explicit goal the empowerment of children. (1)

Just as Alice Walker posits that black motherhood is a source of empowerment, so, too, does Toni Morrison. Many of her mothers themselves have strong maternal figures, although they are often criticized by the dominant culture for being *too* controlling. In order to emphasize how strong black mothers redefine motherhood in her novels, however, Morrison also includes vivid depictions of the consequences of traditionally defined motherhood¹⁰. The internalization of white patriarchy's norms by Pauline and Pecola Breedlove underscore the calamity that befalls black women and children in this racialized oppressive system.

¹⁰ Morrison's first novel, *The Bluest Eye* sets the thematic tone for what is to come in her later works, particularly *Beloved*, although the mothers and motherhood are pivotal in *all* the novels in Morrison's canon. See *Toni Morrison and Motherhood: A Politics of the Heart* by Andrea O'Reilly for further reading on this subject.

Initially, Pauline and Pecola Breedloves' relationship is anything but burdensome. Pauline says: "that second time, I actually tried to get pregnant. ... I felt good, and wasn't thinking on the carrying, just the baby itself. I used to talk to it whilst it be still in the womb. Like good friends we was. ... I be mixing something in a bowl for the other chile and I'd talk to it too. You know, just friendly talk" (Morrison 124). Unlike Mrs. Hill, Pauline found delight in her impending motherhood and, especially, dreamed that this baby would be a daughter. She was beginning a personal relationship with her child: she was "mothering" her. Adrienne Rich states that this relationship "implies a continuing presence, lasting at least nine months, more often for years. Motherhood is earned, first through an intense physical and psychic rite of passage—pregnancy and childbirth—then through learning to nurture, which does not come by instinct" (12).

External factors caused a disruption in this nascent relationship, though—specifically, Pauline Breedlove's internalization of white norms of beauty, an internalization born in her love of Hollywood movies. With every chance she gets, she goes to the movies, and:

[a]long with the idea of romantic love, she was introduced to another—physical beauty. Probably the most destructive ideas in the history of human thought. Both originated in envy, thrived in insecurity, and ended in disillusion. In equating physical beauty with virtue, she stripped her mind, bound it, and collected self-contempt by the heap. She forgot ... simple caring for. She was never able, after her education in the movies, to look at a face and not assign it some category in the scale of absolute beauty, and the scale was one she absorbed in full from the silver screen. It was really a simple pleasure, but she learned all there was to love and all there was to hate. (122)

O'Reilly suggests that Pauline's internalization of the white standard of beauty, along with the white definition of family, is a direct result of her disassociation from her "motherline," which O'Reilly defines as "the ancestral memory [and] traditional values

of African-American culture” (12). Because of this disconnection, “Pauline is rendered vulnerable to the dominant white supremacist ideology which results in the effacement and disparagement of her self as a black woman” (O’Reilly 55). While O’Reilly is right that Pauline is “vulnerable to the dominant white supremacist ideology,” her theory that this vulnerability causes Pauline to disassociate from her self is misconstrued. *Because* of her lack of self-definition, Pauline is susceptible to internalizing white norms. Her lack of self is a direct result of the sexism that she encounters on a daily basis in her own life and community.

Partly to blame for this disconnect and internalization of the dominant ideology is Pauline’s own black society. Although set in 1941 in the time of WWII, *The Bluest Eye* was written during a time when the Civil Rights Movement was transitioning into the Black Power movement, and Morrison uses black society in *The Bluest Eye* to comment more on that particular era than on the situation of black society, specifically black women, during the ‘40’s. This internalization is seen in both Pauline’s and Pecola’s (as well as many other characters’) emphasis on the concept of beauty. One of the fundamental values of the Black Power movement is epitomized in the statement “black is beautiful.” In part, because Pauline and Pecola do not believe that “black is beautiful,” specifically that *they* are beautiful, they are tragic characters. However, like its predecessor, the Civil Rights Movement, the Black Power movement had also internalized sexist norms, and, in this aspect, that movement, too, was flawed. Those sexist norms of black society are equally complicit with the internalization of white definitions of beauty in causing Pauline and Pecola’s misery.

This sexism, which was pervasive in both the white and black communities, created an environment wherein the women in Cholly Breedlove's life became targets for his internalized hatred for white men. Because Cholly is unable to confront white men because of his subordinate position to them, he instead transfers those feelings to those people in his society who are subordinate to him—women and children, in particular his wife and daughter. Because Pauline (and Pecola) lives with the brutal consequences of black sexism, white supremacist ideology seems to be a way out of the brutality for her. Pauline feels that if she were beautiful, her life would be better because the images of white life, of white beauty that she has seen at the movies, will transcend her cruel reality, one that is perpetuated because of sexist norms in black society.

This sexism, which results in Pauline's internalization of other white norms, has a profound effect on her relationship with her daughter, who instead of becoming her "friend" instead becomes the source of her shame. Pauline Breedlove cannot love her daughter because she has internalized these white norms: Pecola is a woman, and women are lesser beings in society. Likewise, despite Pecola's "head full of pretty hair ... she [is] ugly" (126), and therefore, unworthy of Pauline's love. Because of this lack of love from her mother, Pecola is doomed. According to Barbara Christian, "an Afro-American child's sense of self-concept and security can hardly be derived from Anglo-American society. A positive self-concept must come from his or her own community, natal family, ultimately from the mother" (Christian 220). Pecola, following her mother's example, has internalized the white criteria of beauty, which is a false standard that she can never meet. Pauline does not have a nurturing self-image of herself, and, as she

becomes increasingly subsumed in white ideology, she becomes more and more disconnected from Pecola and from her own reality.

As an element of her desire to be a part of white society, Pauline embraces the mantle of one of its only stereotypical roles available to black women, the "mammy."

Patricia Hill Collins writes:

By loving, nurturing, and caring for her White children and 'family' better than her own, the mammy symbolizes the dominant group's perceptions of the ideal black female relationship to elite White male power. Even though she may be well loved and may wield considerable authority in her White 'family,' the mammy still knows her 'place' as obedient servant. She has accepted her subordination" (72-73).

Pauline Breedlove is Morrison's personification of this stereotype. She cares more for her white family than for her own, and, through her, Morrison levels a scathing critique on this white depiction of black motherhood. In one particularly vivid scene, Morrison depicts Pauline's rejection of her own daughter in favor of the young white girl in her care:

It may have been nervousness, awkwardness, but the pan tilted under Pecola's fingers and fell to the floor, splattering blackish blueberries everywhere. Most of the juice splashed on Pecola's legs, and the burn must have been painful, for she cried out and began hopping about just as Mrs. Breedlove entered with a tightly packed laundry bag. In one gallop she was on Pecola, and with the back of her hand knocked her to the floor. Pecola slid in the pie juice, one leg folding up under her. Mrs. Breedlove yanked her up by the arm, slapped her again, and in a voice thin with anger, abused Pecola directly and Freida and me by implication.

...

The little girl in pink started to cry. Mrs. Breedlove turned to her. "Hush, baby, hush. Come here. Oh, Lord, look at your dress. Don't cry no more. Polly will change it." She went to the sink and turned tap water on a fresh towel. Over her shoulder she spit out words to us like rotten pieces of apple. "Pick up that wash and get on out of here, so I can get this mess cleaned up."

Pecola picked up the laundry bag, heavy with wet clothes, and we stepped hurriedly out the door. As Pecola put the laundry bag in the wagon, we could

hear Mrs. Breedlove hushing and soothing the tears of the little pink-and-yellow girl. (108-09)¹¹

Pauline's abusive treatment of her own daughter juxtaposed with her coddling of the white child signifies how completely she has internalized the dominant paradigm. Mrs. Breedlove is treating Pecola in accordance with the dominant group's dictates. Patricia Hill Collins writes, "By teaching Black children their assigned place in White power structures, Black women who internalize the mammy image potentially become effective conduits for perpetuating racial oppression." (73).

Pauline stands in direct contrast with Morrison's authentic, empowered black mother, in the form of Claudia's and Frieda's mother, whose focus "in both practice and thought, is how to preserve, protect, and more generally empower black children so that they may resist racist practices that seek to harm them and grow into adulthood whole and complete" (O'Reilly 4). When she thinks of her mother, Claudia recalls:

Love, thick and dark as Alaga syrup, eased up into that cracked window. I could smell it—taste it—sweet, musty, with an edge of wintergreen in its base—everywhere in that house. It stuck, along with my tongue, to the frosted windowpanes. It coated my chest, along with the salve, and when the flannel came undone in my sleep, the clear sharp curves of air outlined its presence on my throat. And in the night, when my coughing was dry and tough, feet padded into the room, hands repinned the flannel, readjusted the quilt, and rested a moment on my forehead. So when I think of autumn, I think of somebody with hands who does not want me to die. (Morrison 12)

¹¹ The little white girl calling Pauline "Polly" itself also represents the full extent of Pauline Breedlove's indoctrination into the dominant ideology just as Morrison evokes ironic condemnation with Pauline's surname. This renaming recalls the renaming of plantation house servants by their white masters. It also incites anger in the novel's narrator Claudia, who expresses outrage at the fact that the little white girl calls Pauline "Polly": "The familiar violence rose in me. Her calling Mrs. Breedlove Polly, when even Pecola called her mother Mrs. Breedlove seemed reason enough to scratch her" (108).

Pauline, in contrast, does not love her daughter and models her white-defined subordination to her, rather than to comfort, to protect, and to empower her. In doing so, she utterly abandons Pecola.

Without mothering or any access to her matriliney, Pecola has no chance for survival. O'Reilly claims, "In Morrison's work, children who do not receive the preservation, nurturing, and cultural bearing of motherwork never develop the authentic selfhood Morrison champions and thus grow to be psychologically wounded as adults. Never having been loved ... by their mothers, unmothered children never learn how to love themselves" (40). This deprivation is particularly true of Pecola, who is constantly yearning for love. Because she, like her mother, has internalized dominant standards of beauty, she thinks that, if she just had blue eyes, people would love her and her mother would love her. She thinks "if those eyes of hers were different, that is to say, beautiful, she herself would be different. ... If she looked different, beautiful, maybe Cholly would be different, and Mrs. Breedlove, too" (Morrison 46). Without a mother's love and protection, protection being a key element of Morrison's depiction of empowered black motherhood, Pecola is in great danger of being "psychologically wounded," and her ultimate wounding comes in the form of being raped by her father, Cholly.

While Cholly, himself a motherless, "psychologically wounded" child-turned-adult, is mostly to blame for Pecola's destruction, so are Pauline and the entire black community. Pauline is just as complicit in Pecola's descent into madness as Cholly because Pauline's abandonment and her disbelief when Pecola informs her of what has happened compound the already disastrous situation in which Pecola finds herself. O'Reilly suggests that the importance of authentic black motherhood is apparent in

Morrison's fiction because her novels depict "the suffering for children ... that occurs when [mothering is] absent" (44-45). Morrison's depiction of the consequences for Pecola of Pauline's absorption into the dominant white ideology is not only an example of the tragic effects of the dominant society on black women, but is also a critique of black motherhood as defined by that dominant culture and, in part, by the feminist movement, which saw motherhood through the lens of white motherhood: as "a narrative or thematic conflict between the duties of home and the demands of work" (O'Reilly 42).

In contrast to Pecola and Pauline Breedlove, the novel's narrator Claudia and her mother have a more functional, empowering mother-daughter relationship. Mrs. MacTeer embodies the attribute of preservation that O'Reilly finds in Morrison's empowered mothers. In Mrs. MacTeer, Toni Morrison presents an alternative to the white definition of motherhood. Patricia Hill Collins posits "African-American mothers place a strong emphasis on protection, either by trying to shield their daughters as long as possible from the penalties attached to their derogated status or by teaching them skills of independence and self-reliance so that they will be able to protect themselves" (185-86). Unlike Pauline Breedlove and Walker's Mrs. Hill, Mrs. MacTeer actively tries to educate her daughter about the realities of the world for black women. O'Reilly states "*The Bluest Eye* exemplifies the need for mothers to maintain a strong authentic self so that they may nurture the same in their daughters" (55). Mrs. MacTeer has a strong sense of self, and the lives of Claudia and her sister Frieda, not surprisingly, turn out very differently from Pecola's. Mrs. MacTeer retains her own empowered sense of self and rears her daughters in an environment wherein her example fosters their "whole and complete" growth into adulthood (O'Reilly 4).

Conclusion

Through the various depictions of motherhood in their novels, both Alice Walker and Toni Morrison critique the dominant social portrayal of the black mother and the effects of these stereotypes on black mothers. Both novels condemn the white patriarchal institution's confining definition of motherhood through their narratives of the suffering it causes in the lives of mothers and children, and both offer alternate visions of mothering. These alternatives all focus on empowering mothers in different ways. All are at least partially created in response to black women's subordination in twentieth-century society and social movements.

Both the sexism of the Civil Rights (and Black Power) Movements and the racism of the feminist movements are implicated in the depiction of mothers in each of these texts. The Civil Rights Movement's sexist rhetoric incited guilt in Meridian over her decision to give away her son and to be sterilized. Similarly, sexism in the black community and the Black Power Movement created a hostile environment for Pauline and Pecola Breedlove, which has the effect of causing a complete loss of self and the subsequent internalization of the dominant ideology. Unlike the Breedloves, however, Meridian is on a journey to self-awareness, and, because of this commitment to herself and to her community, she is able to transform her demeaning experiences with sexism in the Civil Rights Movement into empowerment as she uses her undue guilt to fuel her quest for social justice, which includes seeking to improve the lives of entire communities of children and adults.

Just as Morrison critiques the movements for racial equality, she also criticizes the feminist movement's essentially white, middle-class depiction of motherhood and

challenges that concept by realistically depicting the effects of white norms of motherhood on black women and families. In response, she offers another framework, that of the empowered black mother, represented by Mrs. MacTeer in *The Bluest Eye*. While Morrison advocates a form of empowered exclusively-black motherhood, Walker presents alternative models of motherhood through Meridian as “community othermother” and through her inclusion of Lynne as mother in *Meridian*. Specifically, Lynne’s inclusion in this category represents a redefinition of motherhood on Walker’s part. Through Lynne, Walker suggests the universalism of the experience of motherhood for *all* women, regardless of race, class, age, or sexual orientation. Rather than responding to a divisive definition with another divisive definition, Walker acknowledges the promise of an understanding of motherhood in which motherhood is defined by mothers themselves.

Conclusion

Over the course of U.S. history, black women have been, at the same time, both the most fundamental and the most marginalized members of American society. Excluded almost entirely from institutional U.S. society, black women have had everything to gain and nothing to lose in the struggles for social justice. That those very movements purporting to remedy injustice themselves marginalized black women has been problematic. Because of the institutional racism and sexism of the Feminist and Civil Rights Movements, black women have continued to be subordinated in society. As black women have sought to find their own place and their own voice during and following these two movements, they have begun to respond to inequalities and stereotypes within and outside those movements by articulating their own proposals and their own theories on the injustices that black women faced in society and encountered in strategies for change. These critiques and proposals for change have been most apparent in the art created by black women writers during this era.

Meridian, *The Salt Eaters*, *Kindred*, and *The Bluest Eye* are resounding examples of black women's responses to the realities of their social position. They include critiques of the ways in which the Feminist and Civil Rights Movements failed them and also identify issues which they share. They suggest, particularly, that a broader spectrum of experiences entirely unique to women, such as motherhood, and those predominantly endured by women, such as rape, have the potential to unite women of all colors. These texts also suggest that autonomy and a strong sense of self-identity are necessary components of black feminism. Without these two attributes, black women risk

internalizing the dominant ideology and continuing the perpetuation of social inequality like those who have more empowered identities in society.

The characters in these novels all provide commentary on the situation of black women in society in their own unique way, whether through the realities of mothers, like Alice Walker's Mrs. Hill and Toni Morrison's Pauline Breedlove and Mrs. MacTeer, or through sexual violence, like Walker's Lynne Rabinowitz or Octavia Butler's Dana, or through the reality of black women's betrayal by all members of society, like Toni Cade Bambara's Velma and nearly all of the characters in *Meridian*. The most resounding example of these tensions and of black women's journeys as exemplified in black womanist discourse is Alice Walker's title character Meridian, and, for this reason, I use this text, and in particular this character, as a bridge to compare and to articulate various facets of black women's ideologies throughout this analysis.

Interestingly, as I was conducting this research, I stumbled upon the fact that "Meridian Hill" is also the name of a park in Washington, DC, named for the surveyor's marker situated at the longitude that transformed Jones Point, Virginia into the District of Columbia. It is *the* line, *the* point from which our nation, our government, our society radiates. This name is certainly no simple happenstance. Just as Meridian Hill Park is central to the nation's capital, the nation's identity as the location by which all else is measured, so, too, is Meridian Hill, the title character in Alice Walker's novel *Meridian*, the gauge by which all others derive their meaning both in the novel and in this thesis.

My thesis represents a starting point, another surveyor's marker, by which to explore and to measure other aspects—class, sexual orientation, age—that are, as briefly mentioned in the first chapter, also fundamental to black feminist studies. Clearly, the

quality of the lives and the art of black American women represent a significant bridge to any understanding of how we learn to define ourselves.

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