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Izabella Penier

CULTURE-BEARING WOMEN:

THE BLACK WOMEN RENAISSANCE AND CULTURAL NATIONALISM

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The Black Women Renaissance and Cultural Nationalism

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Preface

The idea for this book grew out of my ongoing fascination with cultures of the Black Atlantic and my observation of two apparently parallel phenomena taking place at the end of the 20th century: the Black Women's Renaissance (BWR) of the United States and the "literary blossoming" (1989 anthology *Her True-True Name*) of Caribbean female fiction. The BWR began in the 1970s and continued into the 1980s, while the Caribbean blossoming reached its height in the 1980s. As the Caribbean critic Selwyn R. Cudjoe has observed, that rise of diasporic African and postcolonial women's writing should not be viewed in isolation. The flowering of talent among Caribbean women writers was "a part of a much larger expression of women's realities that [was] taking place in the postcolonial and civil rights era in the United States" (*Caribbean Women Writers* 5-6). In other words, these two literary movements came to fruition in the aftermath of the civil rights and feminist struggles of black people in the US and across the entire postcolonial world.[1]

Admittedly, "Caribbean female fiction" is a very broad term describing authors of different races: Creole women (like Jean Rhys) and mixed-race women (like Michelle Cliff); women writing in different languages (like the very famous francophone Maryse Condé); and women domiciled in different countries, such as France (Condé), the UK (Grace Nichols), Canada (Marlene NourbeSe Philip) or the United States. My study will address Anglophone African Caribbean writers living in the US, such as Paule Marshall and Audre Lorde, who were born into the families of Caribbean immigrants and have been integrated into the African American literary tradition, as well as immigrant writers, such as Jamaica Kincaid or Michelle Cliff, who retained their interest in their postcolonial Caribbean motherlands. Due to their residence in the US, these African Caribbean writers were participants in the same black literary culture as African American women writers, and their writing represented a convergence of diverse literary traditions. During the BWR, these African Caribbean writers built "inter-American bridges" that helped to "make sense of a common fragmented history" (Coser, *Bridging the Americas* 4) of black peoples in the Americas.

African American and African Caribbean women writers collectively contributed to the flowering of the BWR, but they did not share the same perspectives on blackness and femaleness, even though African American and African Caribbean cultures have analogous historical experiences. These cultures share the legacy of the

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1 For example, the editors of *Wild Women in the Whirlwind*, Joanne M. Braxton and Andree Nicola McLaughlin, noticed that the African American Renaissance was a part of a larger renaissance that saw the emergence of Ama Ata Aidoo (Ghana), Barbara Buford (UK), Bessie Head (South Africa) Flora Nwapa (Nigeria) Grace Ogot (Kenya). Carol Boyce Davies argues in "Writing Home" that black women's writing in the US, the Caribbean and Africa constitutes "various allied traditions" that prove the "ongoing cross fertilization" among writers of the black diaspora (*Out of the Kumbla* 70-1).

Middle Passage and enslavement, but henceforth the historical pattern does not hold. African American writers developed a rich "minority" culture in the country that was gradually growing to become the world's neocolonial superpower, and their literary tradition was created through dialogue with the white mainstream. The African Caribbean literary tradition, on the other hand, was shaped not just by the experience of slavery but also colonialism, as well as a postcolonial desire to rehabilitate denigrated African cultures. Black West Indians formed the majority in the colonized islands, which were subjected to centuries of imperial hegemony. In these two diasporic constituencies, descendants of African slaves were part of different imperial/national mythologies that sought to uproot them: namely, the colonial myth of the benevolent and culturally superior mother country and the American myth of cultural assimilation and economic success. Of these two hegemonic mythologies (the benign mother country and the American Dream), the colonial one apparently turned out to be more disempowering, as Caribbean writing, to a greater extent than African American writing, betrays a sense of displacement and historical amnesia. Consequently, these two groups of women writers that made up the BWR held different views on the issues that are the subject of this study: namely, the processes of national, ethnic and gender self-definition.

There were, of course, also close similarities between African Caribbean and African American feminist fictions in spite of the cultural, historical and political differences. Even though, as I will contend, these women writers came to different conclusions about the meaning of black cultural nationalism, the manner in which they structured the relationship between creative arts, ethnicity and feminism was similar. They were all concerned with the question of how to represent black and female diasporic identity in the context of national belonging that was variously defined: as being either a part of the American nation, or the postcolonial motherland, or an ethnic community with a distinctive history and culture. In dealing with these issues, BWR writers produced unique historical and heritage fictions that fused national/ethnic and feminist perspectives.

The most striking feature of that fiction was the writers' effort to re-write black diasporic histories and redefine black female identities through engagement with their maternal legacies. Their novels, which were in many respects culturally and historically distinct, often took the form of a feminist allegory of the daughter's recuperation of African maternal heritage. As Caroline Rody has argued in *The Daughter's Return: African-American and Caribbean Women's Fictions of History* (2001), the BWR practically invented a new subgenre in historical fiction, which she calls the maternal romance, in which black diasporic daughter-writers revisit African peoples' troubled pasts through their matrilineal connections. Despite differences in authorial tone, African American and African Caribbean daughterly writers shared many concerns and conventions, artistic choices and literary strategies, as reflected in their themes, tropes and motifs, as well as the characterizations, plots, and settings of their novels. These commonalities, in my opinion, gestured towards the creation of a black femi-

nist heritage novel that, like heritage discourses in general, was instrumental in cultivating the "'imagined community' of nationhood" (Anderson, *Imagined Communities* 162). In other words, by adopting this heritage rhetoric, some BWR writers re-appropriated and repossessed their pasts to create new, nationally unifying, black narratives.

All BWR narratives, especially those associated with womanism, appreciated black women, particularly mothers, for the special role they played in the cultural construction of their communities and nations. Particularly in the second decade of the Renaissance (1980s), female characters were presented as "culture bearing black women," (*Tar Baby* 269) to quote Toni Morrison out of context. They were symbolic mothers of the African American "people" or, alternatively (in African Caribbean fiction), "carriers" of oppressive and corrupted colonial or mainstream culture. Consequently, heritage narratives produced by BWR writers in the 1980s presented matriliny as the cornerstone of culture and tradition. These writers celebrated matrilineal roots, emphasized the iconic status of the Black mother and underlined the importance of female networks. Or, conversely, they condemned black women who gave preference to Western values and refused to be "bearers" of African traditions and aesthetic. In brief, BWR writers entered black women characters into the national imagination by emphasizing the role of women in keeping national/ethnic cultures alive.

In fact, BWR writers' focus on women as national subjects was a response to the masculine nationalism of the previous decades, which was dominated by the Black Power and Black Aesthetic movements in America, and by the anti-colonial and post-independence nationalisms in the West Indies. Both routinely ignored and marginalized black women's voices and concerns (Rody, *The Daughter's Return* 117).[2] In the American context, the revival of black nationalism in the 1960s and 70s produced a culturally specific brand of black nationalist rhetoric that both sparked and marked BWR writing. I would like to suggest that BWR narratives, which have only recently been associated with black nationalism, challenged some aspects of indigenous politics of black cultural nationalism (BCN) but also played a pivotal role in their continuation. Masculine black cultural nationalism used literature and art as a means of validating African American culture by showing that it possessed its own ideas and forms of aesthetic expression. By emphasizing the common ethnic ancestry of African Americans and their shared and exclusive heritage, BCN created an essentialist view of African American culture. The cause of BCN was advanced through the veneration of African-derived values, sensibilities, symbols, and rituals, which, as this book will

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2 The Caribbean nationalist literature from the 1950s to 1970s was also dominated by male writers (C. L. R. James, H. G. de Lisser, Roger Mais, Samuel Selvon, Kamau Brathwaite, Earl Lovelace and George Lamming). These writers attracted most of the critical attention and their works dominated the national literary scene and gained international recognition. All of them consistently overlooked issues of gender and insisted on seeing freedom in terms of patriarchal rhetoric that equated colonialism with emasculation and liberty with the free expression of patriarchal desires.

argue, also became central to the identity politics of many of the artists of the BWR in the decades that followed.

The impact of BCN on the BWR was particularly conspicuous in the historic and heritage novels written by African American womanists in the 1980s. The factors that support my identification of these writers as cultural nationalists include their theme of the quest for identity and roots, their use of distinctively black tropes, and their historical revisionism focused on black slavery and emancipation. What sets them apart from masculine black nationalists, however, is their deep reverence for black female ancestors and black female networks (Harry Reed, "Toni Morrison" 52). African American female writers refused to be tied up by BCN misogynistic myths that presupposed a certain idea of femininity that divided black women into groups, defining them as self-effacing mothers of past and future warriors; jezebels who collaborated with white male oppressors; and degraded matriarchs who "emasculated" black men. By creating strong and charismatic female characters, commemorating formidable black foremothers, and celebrating unique feminine folk cultures, these authors created their own feminist version of black cultural nationalism.

I would like to call this brand of cultural nationalism, after Elleke Boehmer, "matrifocal," because it ascribed a special mission to black mothers as transmitters of "ancient properties" (Toni Morrison, *Tar Baby* 305) to quote Morrison again. Matrifocal nationalism presented home as the place of reproduction of black culture, and women as guardians of that culture. It focused on the themes of mothering, female bonding, and matriliny as the main conduit for passing on knowledge about the history of both slavery and heroic black resistance. African American women writers, such as Toni Morrison, Gloria Naylor, Margaret Walker or Alice Walker, rewrote black history in the USA and revalorized black folk heritage by emphasizing the heroism of simple African American women who had been written out of the national script by nationalist black men. They fetishized indigenous black experience, and particularly vernacular feminine cultures and their unique potential for ensuring survival. They also mythicized black history by conjuring up collective memories of common women folk, whom they credited with preserving African traditions and values. In this way, they created what I would like to call, misquoting Paul Gilroy, a "volkish" tradition (*The Black Atlantic* 15), which, in the 1980s, became a hallmark of BWR writing.

By comparison, the fiction of African Caribbean writers represented a more complex and varied view on the question of national/ethnic identity and gender. Whereas African American women writers more often fell back on the ideology of cultural nationalism, African Caribbean authors posed questions about gender and nationalism in a broader context by interrogating their relationship to mothers and motherlands that they, or their mothers, had left behind. Their narratives more often exhibited a post-nationalist sensibility of gender identity, which, to a certain extent, constituted a counterbalance to the iconic, idealized picture of African-American women as guardians of African diasporic traditions. I will contend that while most African American women writers might be regarded as essentialist, African Carib-

bean authors, with their unique conceptualization of memory, subjectivity and gender, moved more quickly beyond essentialism, betraying disillusionment with the rhetoric of cultural nationalism. Their fiction presented more diversified views on the question of female identity, ethnicity and black feminism.

The colonial legacy bequeathed to African Caribbean female writers made the desire for a return to the black "Mother-of-History," to quote Caroline Rody, particularly hazardous, as the writers and their fictional daughters had to come to terms with personal stories involving mixing of races and cultural alliances, acts of cultural rejection and betrayals. I want to suggest that the narratives of the Jamaican Michelle Cliff and the Antiguan Jamaica Kincaid, in particular, cast doubt on the compatibility of black nationalism with feminism, even though these two writers take up somewhat dissimilar stances to black cultural nationalism. Whereas Cliff endorses cultural nationalism in her essays but inadvertently, I think, shows its limits in her novels, Kincaid vehemently rejects BCN for the sake of individualism and a more cosmopolitan identification. However, they both seem to be unanimous in their tough-minded assessment of Caribbean women's complex inter-cultural legacies. They display a more pessimistic or even ironic view on the possibility of recuperating indigenous cultures and histories. In effect, their fictions more often champion alter/native and post-nationalist models of gender and national identity. When juxtaposed with the narratives of their African American peers, these models problematize the iconic, idealized picture of black maternal figures as guardians of black indigenous traditions.

Caribbean immigrant writers showed a preference for immigrant tales that focused on the matrilineal ruptures caused by the history of colonization or forced migration. They tended to center on the inter-generational tensions between mothers and daughters, who often represented different cultural values and affinities. In African Caribbean literature, the mother image, also a frequently-encountered trope, appears to have a much more complex and problematical nature, which complicates the project of remolding BCN through the matrilineal channels of mother-daughter bonding. The Caribbean mother was identified with various cultural formations: with the culture of the exterminated Caribbean Indians, with England as the colonial "mother country," and with the concept of the "mother-island" or "mother-nation" taken from the Caribbean masculine and nationalist rhetoric of the decolonizing period. That is why, unlike African American daughters, Caribbean daughters/writers often articulate their identities in opposition to their colonized mothers. Even those African Caribbean writers who were at the forefront of the African American literary canon, such as Paule Marshall and Audre Lorde, more often than not dramatized the difficult and conflict-ridden relationship between the diasporic daughter and her mother(land).

That is why this study will maintain that while a great number of (womanist) novels of the BWR in the 1980s might be regarded as fully contributing to the case of cultural nationalism, Caribbean writers displayed a more nuanced attitude to that ideology. It will demonstrate that despite some similarities in themes, motifs and

tropes, the 1980s heritage novels by African American and African Caribbean women realized different politico-cultural agendas, and that these varying agendas reflected different theoretical discourses that dealt with the construction of national and cultural identities by members of the African Diaspora. While the African American agenda, shaped by the black cultural nationalism of the previous decades, was ethnocentric, the African Caribbean agenda, informed by postcolonial and anti-essentialist approaches to gender, ethnicity, and race, was more concerned with the place of black people within the black diaspora or in relation to their postcolonial homelands.

The book will also analyze the positive and negative ramifications of the BWR's endorsement of black cultural nationalism. On the one hand, the entry of BWR writers into the national arena, as cultural reproducers of the nation and as transmitters of its values, redefined the content and boundaries of the black aesthetic and allowed black women writers to come to voice. Nationalist-womanist fiction elevated the status of black women writers, provided a boost to the Renaissance and gave black women unprecedented levels of authority, visibility and readership. As BWR writers "turn[ed] to the novel to narrate the nation" (Thorsson, *Women's Work* 5) and to explore the parameters of national/ethnic cultural identity from a feminist perspective, they showed that, as Nira Yuval-Davis has put it, "contrary to what the notion of patriarchy suggests, women are not usually just passive recipients and non-participants in the determination of gender relations" (*Gender and Nation* 8). On the contrary, they proved that women's voices are indispensable "to imagine a shared experience of identification with an extended community" (McClintock, "'No Longer in a Future Heaven'" 109). In this way, African Caribbean and African American writers of the BWR joined other postcolonial women in "overturn[ing] preconceptions of the Third World women's experience as … passively oppressed, or lacking in powers of self-determination" (Boehmer 218).

On the other hand, I would also like to argue that the feminist heritage novel, firmly rooted in volkish tradition and most fully expressed through womanist fiction and literary criticism, was a mixed blessing for black feminism in the United States. I will contend that this tradition turned out to be counter-productive for the goals of black feminism as it created a limited number of positions from which black women's subjectivity could be articulated. As Deborah McDowell and bell hooks have pointed out, black folk culture became the only location from which an authentic and legitimate black female voice could be heard. Consequently, BWR narratives, especially those by womanists, often presented women in a normative way. In the words of bell hooks, though BWR fiction "brought into sharp focus the idea that black females must 'invent' selves, the question – what kind of self? – usually remain[ed] unanswered" ("Revolutionary Black Women" 224). Even though black female "fictions portray[ed] black women being wild in resistance, confronting barriers that impede self-actualization, rarely [was] the new 'self' defined" claimed hooks (ibid.). The kind of "new" black female identity that emerged from these black women's efforts to reinvent themselves was not a radical feminist subject, uncompromising in her fight for

black rights, but a conventional, idealized, self-sacrificing, national mother, a guardian of the domestic hearth, an icon of the womanist tradition. Following hooks, who thought that BWR writers turned out to be singularly "not able to express the wider, more radical dimensions of themselves, in sustained and fruitful ways" (ibid.), I will uphold the idea that it was the BWR's embroilment with BCN that undermined black feminism. The ethnocentrism of BWR made it into a "maid" for the hegemonic neoliberalism that, at the end of the 20th century, used culturalism and identity politics to "to repress all memory of social egalitarianism," as Nancy Frazer has argued ("Mapping the Feminist Imagination" 297).

In its polemical formulation of matrifocal nationalism, this study will follow in the footsteps of Paul Gilroy's seminal monograph *The Black Atlantic: Modernity and Double Consciousness*, which offers the most powerful indictment of black cultural nationalism to date. Since its publication in 1993, studies on the black diaspora have become one of the most dynamically developing strands of postcolonial studies. Gilroy has suggested repeatedly in his publications that there is a need to "de-nationalize" African American culture and create a post-nationalistic identity model based on a return to the tradition of W. E. B. DuBois and his concept of "double consciousness."[3] Gilroy's references to DuBois reminded researchers that African-American culture has a relatively long tradition of anti-essentialist thought, which was relegated to the backburner by cultural nationalist movements (Garvey's Back to Africa, The Black Power Movement, and Afrocentrism in the 1980s), and which was revived by the African Caribbean input into the BWR.

This book would not be possible without Gilroy's pioneering work. His study not only argued for "an expressly anti-nationalist form of diasporic cultural studies" (Chrisman, *Postcolonial Contraventions* 7) but also "challenge[d] … the critical paradigm of the 'empire writes back to the centre'" (ibid.). In the words of Chrisman: "[r]ather than being reduced to a response to an imperial metropolitan power, colonized and postcolonial cultures could now be understood as dialogues with other (formerly) colonized and diasporic cultures" (ibid.). Drawing on Gilroy and feminist Black Atlantic thinkers, Carole Boyce Davies, Myriam J. A. Chancy, Laura Chrisman, bell hooks and others, I would also like this book to achieve similar goals: firstly, to continue and expand avant-garde Black Atlantic research by introducing a framework for discussing and analyzing different ways in which black diasporic discourses on gender and nation intersect with each other; and secondly, by reading African American and African Caribbean narratives of the BWR comparatively, to show that writers from these parallel diasporic traditions are in dialogue with each other. Commonalities between these traditions do not, however, signal a unified black female vision, but rather a common experience and a variety of responses that this experi-

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3 Double consciousness is a sensation of being divided into several parts, making it impossible to have a unified sense of identity (Du Bois, *The Souls of Black Folk*).

ence has engendered. In fact, the work of BWR writers highlights the whole spectrum of stances towards gender, ethnicity, diaspora and national belonging.

The framework of analysis employed by this study is based not only on Black Atlantic cultural studies but also on another strand of postcolonial thought: namely, the nation-and-gender studies that came to being in the 1990s. Research into nation-and-gender is interdisciplinary in nature; it deals with social, political, cultural and literary discourses. It is associated with the work of a diverse array of scholars, such as F. Stratton, A. McClintock, N. Duncan, N. Yuval-Davis, M. Tamar, S. Ray, E. Boehmer, and S.Z. Andrade. Nation-and-gender studies supplemented the anti-essentialist accent in postcolonial studies with analysis of the role of women in the construction and maintenance of national identity in postcolonial states. It adopts a feminist methodology that questions two major social institutions, the "family" and the "nation," in the context of discourses and narratives of citizen-making and nation-making. It argues that family is not a private, personal realm, distinct from the public realm, where ideas connected with nationhood and citizenship are defined. On the contrary, it claims that national formation starts in the family, which is itself shaped by the practices of social organization. It also examines the institutions and (often contradictory) discourses of motherhood and mother-child (especially mother-daughter) bonding, through which cultural values are transmitted.

While earlier research into nationalism omitted aspects related to gender and matriliny, feminist research into these areas has called attention to the role of home and women in passing on national and cultural ideals. Feminist researchers have brought to light the nationalist practice of symbolically representing female figures as the repository of cultural essence, and using these representations, in literature and art, to redraw the boundaries of their nations or ethnic groups. They have also analyzed how national/ethnic ideologies manipulate images of women to construct identities of indigenous ethnic groups and/or nations. Feminist research into nationalism also includes analysis of how women themselves have engaged with nationalist ideologies, by either embracing, adapting or disputing them. Even though nation-and-gender theory has had wide currency across the post-modern and postcolonial world, it has never been applied to black feminist narratives. I believe it can further broaden the thematic concerns and research methods of black feminist studies moving it closer to the discipline of post-anthropological scholarship, as Gilroy would have it. Finally, nation-and-gender scholarship not only highlights the gendered aspect of Black Atlantic mobility but also emphasizes the heterogeneity and pluralism of Black Atlantic constituencies that nationalist discourses wish to erase.

My use of insights from nation-and-gender theory will complete the intersectional methodology currently used in black feminism by adding the often-disregarded category of nationality to its analyses of the interlocking categories of race, class and gender. Intersectionality is the view that women (and sexual minorities) experience oppression in varying configurations and at varying degrees of intensity. Various social and cultural categories such as gender, race, class, ability, sexual orienta-

tion and religion, interact on multiple and often simultaneous levels, contributing to systemic injustice and social inequality. The only African American critic to have considered nationalism in her intersectional analyses is the sociologist Patricia Hill Collins, who claims, in her landmark study *Black Feminist Thought* (1990), that race, class, gender and sexuality remain closely intertwined with nationality (229). It is surprising, however, that Collins does not apply any insights from nation-and-gender studies to black cultural nationalism, but rather speaks just about the place of black women in the American nation. She is mostly interested in how "nation can constitute another form of oppression" (ibid.) by putting some women on a pedestal whilst discriminating against others. Following Yuval-Davis, who has remarked that "[n]ot all women in any society are constructed in the same way" (*Gender and Nation* 116), Collins rightly observes that ethnicity and race are the most important social factors that can limit women's civic rights. For example, in the US, ethnic women, that is to say non-white women, particularly African Americans, are, according to Collins, presented as the antithesis of true womanhood, and so unworthy of being considered symbols of US nationalism. As "mammies, matriarchs, welfare queens, jezebels," they stand for what *American* women are not: they "mark the boundaries for American women overall" (*Black Feminist Thought* 230).

In respect to black nationalism, Collins criticizes its "androcentrism," to use Boehmer's expression (*Stories of Women* 31), but as an Afrocentric scholar, she does not condemn what Paul Gilroy has called, after Gayatri Spivak, the "strategic essentialism" of BCN (*Against Race* 326). In her numerous publications, Collins also endorses the *volkish* tradition, and in this way, as bell hooks has pointed out (Gilroy, "A Dialogue with bell hook" 232) propagates a conservative vision of black womanhood and black family. By contrast, I will argue, in agreement with bell hooks (ibid.), that the endorsement of nationalist or ethnocentric ideologies in the 1980s' fiction of the BWR undermined, to a certain extent, the achievements of black feminism. In this way, this study will support the anti-essentialist black feminism of not only bell hooks but also Hortense J. Spillers, who was one of the first African American feminists to criticize the concept of ethnicity as a "mythical marker." Spillers criticizes ethnic thinkers, including BWR writers and critics, for seeing black women as a "repertoire of human and social arrangements" and "the essence of stillness, … fixated in time and space" ("Mama's Baby" 66, 78). This criticism also forms a central assumption of this monograph. Spillers was one of the first black feminist scholars to show how black male nationalism used women to establish the boundaries of the black "nation." In her famous essay: "Mama's Baby, Papa's Maybe: An American Grammar book" she puckishly claimed:

> Let's face it. I am a marked woman but not everybody knows my name. "Peaches" and "Brown Sugar," "Sapphire" and "Earth Mother" "Aunty," "Granny," God's "Holy Fool," a "Miss Ebony First," or "Black Woman at the Podium": I describe a locus of confounded identities, a meeting ground of investments and privations in the national treasury of rhetorical wealth. My country needs me, and if I were not here, I would have to be invented. (64)

By way of conclusion, I would like to explain why I think postcolonial research into nationalism and nation-states can shed new light on the black cultural nationalism that was practiced in the 1980s by most African American writers of the BWR. In *Between Woman and Nation,* the editors, Norma Alarcon, Caren Kaplan, Minoo Moallen, propose that not only nations, but also races, ethnicities or even minority groups defined by gender or sexuality are "imagined communities." Ethnic cultures, like postcolonial nations, occupy a marginal place in relation to the mainstream; they can also be subject to "internal colonization," as is the case for African Americans in the United States. In both contexts, in ethnic and postcolonial communities, nation is envisaged as a cultural community and nationalism is predominantly preoccupied with cultural representation, reflecting Manuel Castells's observation that contemporary nationalism is "more oriented toward the defense of already institutionalized cultures" (33) than nation-states. However, in postcolonial states and multicultural nations, nationalism is more than a celebration of traditional cultures and rooted identities. National/ethnic identification implies a "group membership [that] is not a theory … but a practical map that defines the environment with built-in expectations and rules for survival" (Carr, *Black Nationalism* 4). Finally, in both settings, nationalism is a strategy of resistance that is implicated in the margin-center model. It can serve as a means for popular social mobilization leading to the emergence of powerful anti-systemic movements, as Immanuel Wallerstein has observed. While anti-colonial nationalisms resulted in the creation of postcolonial nation-states, ethno-nationalism has been consistently used by minorities as a successful means of gaining political leverage to fight for social and economic rights for disenfranchised groups.

The term ethno-nationalism (or ethnic nationalism) was coined by Anthony Smith in *The Ethnic Origins of Nation*. It designates a group affiliation based on inherent traits, such as ethnicity, race, clan, tribe, cultural heritage or religion, that defines a group of individuals in the minds of its members. Ethno-nationalism, like nationalism, is a political concept based on a particular style of collective imagining and a fantasy of belonging. It is rooted in myths of common ancestral origins and manifested through particular representations of groups that highlight their shared linguistic, religious, and racial markers (Riggs, "*Ethnonationalism*" 599). This is what I refer to as heritage literature. Like theoreticians of nationalism, I believe that the ideology of nationalism does not necessarily have to be connected to membership of a nation-state. Nationhood is rather a matter of heritage and culture that shape one's identity: "one can neither acquire it if one does not have it, nor change it if one does; it has nothing to do with individual will, but constitutes a genetic characteristic" (Guibernau and Rex, *The Ethnicity Reader* 5).

Thus, there is not much difference between state-sanctioned nationalism and ethno-nationalism. Although in the first case, nationalism is linked to such concepts as independence and citizenship, in both situations, nationalism expresses, as Nira Yuval-Davis remarked, the "claim for a separate political representation of the collective," be it a nation or an ethnic group (*Gender and Nation* 16). Therefore, nationa-

lism can just as well denote "the loyalty to a nation deprived of its own state and the loyalty to an ethnic group embodied in a specific state, particularly where the latter is conceived as a nation-state" (Conversi, *Ethnonationalism* 2). Finally, nationalism can also be the preserve of "committed diasporas," that is immigrant constituencies/communities, which, despite their relocation from the homeland, remain "culturally and politically committed" to very conservative memories of "home" (Yuval-Davis, *Gender and Nation* 17). Ethnic nationalism can be as exclusive, authoritarian, and even populist, as any fully-fledged nationalism. Yuval-Davis states that "there is an inherent connection between the ethnic and national projects" (ibid. 16), and that if there is any difference between these "ethnic and national collectives," it is only "a difference in scale" (ibid.).

Another characteristic shared by nationalist and ethno-nationalist ideologies is that they mobilize to act in times of change or crisis (Yuval-Davis 16). According to Paul B. Rich, "[e]thnic mobilisation has been frequently understood by sociological analysts in terms very similar to those of nationalism" (*Warlords* 10). The impulse for (ethno-)nationalist surges can be provided by rapid industrialization or social change, such as migration, political and economic crises, assimilation or growing diversity within or around the group. All these factors can trigger what Zygmunt Bauman has described as a frantic search of identity (Bauman, "Identity in the Globalising World" 121). But in the case of ethno-nationalism, mobilization is more difficult as the group cannot rely on the apparatus of the state to rally its members around common political, social or economic goals. As Tom Nairn somewhat provocatively explains, for ethnic groups "[m]oblization had to be in terms of what was there; and the whole point of the dilemma was that there was nothing there – none of the economic and political institutions of modernity now so needed. All that was there was the people and peculiarities of the region: its inherited ethnos, speech, folklore, skin-colour, and so on" ("The Maladies of Development" 75). That is why for ethnic nationalism, even more than for state-supported nationalism, culture, and particularly heritage, as well as the development of ethno-national literature, are of paramount importance. For ethnic minorities, heritage and collective memory expressed through literature is often the only thing to fall back on.

That is why this study will focus on the issue of self-representation in BWR writing of the 1980s at a time of profound political turmoil when black prospects in the United States looked particularly bleak. I will focus on community-oriented novels which dignify and monumentalize black feminine culture and black women, and I will look at these works through the lens of nation-and-gender studies. I will argue that that decade, in which such masterpieces as Walker's *In Search of Our Mothers' Gardens*, Naylor's *Mama Day* or Morrison's *Beloved* were published, saw the full flowering of the BWR, which only then acquired its distinct vision of black heritage, memory, and matrtifocal nationalism (Boehmer, *Stories of Women* 101). I have identified two convenient cut-off points: at one end, the publication of Toni Morrison's *Tar Baby* (1981) that began the second decade of the BWR; at the other end, Jewelle Gomez's neo-slave

narrative, *The Gilda Stories* (1991), which proposed an alter/native reading of gender and black history. Admittedly, such neat periodization rarely works in practice, and the trends that I describe cannot be entirely confined to the 1980s. Morrison's 1977 novel, *Song of Solomon*, heralded the ascendancy of black feminist cultural nationalism, and the 1970s in general saw the coalescence of the womanist philosophy. Likewise, some novels published after the 1980s could be discussed within the same nation-and-gender framework. For example, Phyllis Alesia Perry's *Stigmata*, a historical novel published in 1998, seems to be a fruit of the BWR as it extends the tropes characteristic of the BWR, as found particularly in *Kindred* and *Beloved*. It narrates the story of a young woman called Lizzie, who shares one body with her female ancestors who are reincarnated in her. Her body is marked by stigmata, bloody wounds on her back, ankles and arms, which are signs of her tormented maternal past. Like the novels that will be discussed in Chapter Five (most notably *Beloved*), *Stigmata* explores the pain of Lizzie's martyred foremothers and uses their suffering as a means to discipline Lizzie's wayward bourgeois parents who have deviated from the values of the "tribe" (to use Tony Morrison's term for black community, people or nation) (Morrison "Rootedness" 341). Lizzie bears the scars of history which "unlock the door" to ancestral "rememory," to quote Morrison again, and in this way the novel continues BWR writers' valorization of black maternal heritage well beyond the defining decade of the 1980s.

On the other hand, some of Toni Morrison's later novels seem to signal a complete change of tack on the score of cultural nationalism. Such novels as *Paradise* (1997) or *A Mercy* (2008) seem to be in dialogue with "cultural insiderism" (Gilroy, *The Black Atlantic* 3), be it segregationism or womanism. *A Mercy*, set in the 1980s, is "looking back to preracial and pre-national period, a time before historical conditions demanded a cultural nationalism" (Thorsson, *Women's Work* 182). *Paradise*, set in 1976 (the year of the bicentennial anniversary of signing the Declaration of Independence) is a novel about black political disillusionment with white America and the concomitant danger of racial separatism. It questions the "isolationist logic" (ibid. 145) advocated by black power, and, as I see it, the womanist ideal of gendered segregation and often applauded all-female collectives (like the three prostitutes in *The Bluest Eye*, or the female households in *Song of Solomon*, *Beloved*, or *Mama Day)*. The Convent, which is home to a multi-ethnic community of outsider women, is, indeed, a refuge, but it is also a place of dissent and tensions, a place that cannot last. According to Thorsson, where *Sula* "elegizes segregation, mourning the loss of an all-black community" (148), *Paradise* "shines light on problematic outcomes of attempting to stave off this loss in two segregated communities one determined by race and the other by gender" (ibid.). The novel bears witness to the fact that times have changed between *Sula*'s 1930s' and *Paradise*'s 1980s' social and political landscapes. But it also proves that Morrison's vision underwent profound changes, as suggested by Thorsson's statement that "*Paradise* charts the violence required to preserve that segregation beyond the mid-century moment of *Sula*" (150).

My adoption, in this study, of a cut-off point of 1991 means that I also had to exclude some matrifocal African Caribbean narratives, but I have already discussed these in other publications. For example, Kincaid's controversial novel of 1996, *The Autobiography of My Mother*, grapples with the birth of national consciousness. This novel, which contains the quintessence of Kincaid's dark vision of colonialism and nationalist efforts at postcolonial revival, focuses on Xuela, a woman of mixed ethnic origin. She is "the abstraction of Caribbean people's history of wretchedness and denigration" (Paravisini-Gebert, *Jamaica Kincaid* 157) described in detail by Frantz Fanon in *Black Skin, White Masks*, a study generally considered to be a subtext to Kincaid's novel. Xuela's deepest wish is to bridge the fissures created by the upheavals of history through the recuperation of her matrilineal ancestral lines. Having realized, however, that it is not possible, she becomes the aberrant mother of the novel's title, and "her own lifelong abortionist" (Segal, "The Broken Plate" 24). Xuela consciously chooses not to give birth to the next generation of men and women who will carry the stigma of defeat attributed to colonized people, saying: "Each month my body would swell slightly, mimicking the state of maternity, longing to conceive, mourning my heart's and mind's decision never to bring forth a child. *I refused to belong to a race, I refuse to accept a nation*" (225; emphasis added).

The prose of the Haitian-American Edwidge Danticat, on the other hand, engages with the state-sanctioned nationalism of the Duvalier era (1956-71). François Duvalier's nationalism was a combination of black nationalism and U.S. cultural models and archetypes. Duvalier's imitation of American nationalism was based on the strong sense of identity, national history and religious belief that is a key feature of American exceptionalism. He adopted these models in order to validate peasant culture and vodou as foundations of Haitian nationalism. At the same time, he used his knowledge of history and vodou to control the lower classes and to infiltrate vodou societies that were presided over mostly by women. As Chancy points out, Duvalier tried to wipe out these predominantly female societies, which he treated as a rival power (*Searching for Safe Spaces* 208). Danticat's fiction exposes Haitian nationalism as being exceptionally hostile towards women. She denounces nationalism not only for actively persecuting Haitian women but also for erasing them from the Haitian history. Her 2001 collection of short stories, entitled *Krik? Krak!*, offers a corrective to the male-centered history of Haiti by creating a female lineage that goes back to a historic figure, Défilée-la-folle, or Défilée the Madwoman, in order to talk about women's involvement in anti-colonial insurgency and their contribution to national struggles. She sidesteps the whole gallery of male national heroes such as Dutty Boukman, Jean Jacques Dessalines, Toussaint Louverture and Henri Christophe, and recovers from obscurity Haitian women who have remained only a token presence in the collective memory of her country. Whereas the protagonist of Kincaid's *The Autobiography of My Mother* rejects motherhood to sabotage the national family at its roots, the women of *Krik? Krak!* invest in motherhood to create alternative matrilineal histories. Like African American women writers, Danticat puts herself in the role of feminist histori-

ographer and revisionist, clearing a space for Haitian women in the national mythology. Unlike them, however, she refuses to embrace the rhetoric of nationalism as a means of empowerment for women. She sees nationalism as one of the evils of Euro-American modernity that is instrumental in instituting and maintaining Duvalier's terrorist regime, which was one of the most horrifying systems of repression, predation and impoverishment known in world history.

This book is made up of an introduction, which elaborates on some of themes touched upon in this preface, and five chapters. The first chapter, "Mapping the Black Women's Renaissance," will highlight the themes and conventions of the novels published in 1970s in order to illustrate the spectacular volte-face that occurred in black women's writing in the early 1980s under the influence of womanist and Afrocentric aesthetics. The second chapter, "Matrifocal Nationalism, Afrocentric Womanism and the Fear of Disinheritance," will provide an overview of the black motherhood studies that were instrumental in reversing black feminist thinking about motherhood at the time of 1980s' culture wars. It will trace the development of black feminist thinking about maternity to show how this paved the way for essentialized conceptions of maternal subjectivities that came to predominate in the second decade of the BWR. The next two chapters will explore two different aspects of BWR nationalist imaginings in line with Nira Yuval-Davis's observation that nationalism in conjunction with gender has two different dimensions, historical/genealogical and cultural/ethnographic:

> [one] major dimension of the nationalistic project to be related to gender relations ... is the genealogical dimension which is constructed around the specific origin of the people (or their race) (*Volknation*). The myth of common origin or shared blood/genes tends to construct the most exclusionary/homogenous visions of the "nation." ... Another major dimension of nationalist projects is the cultural dimension in which the symbolic heritage provided by language and/or religion and/or other customs and traditions is constructed as the "essence" of "the nation" (*Kulturnation*). (*Gender and Nation* 21)

Hence the fourth chapter, which is entitled "*Kulturnation*: The Black Women's Renaissance Folk Heritage and the Essential Black Female Matrix," will explore the myth of the South, black folk cultural practices as the core of black nationalism in the 1980s, and the representation of black women as keepers of African American indigenous traditions. This chapter will elaborate on the evocation of African folklore as Morrison's "site of memory" or Nora's *lieux de mémoire*. The fifth chapter, "*Volknation:* The Black Holocaust and the Politics of the Slave Sublime," will engage directly with collective memories that deal with slavery as the common historic experience that cements the unity of the African American "people." It will submit to scrutiny the literary sublimation of suffering that is presented in the neo-slave narratives, which Paul Gilroy has called the slave sublime.

Both chapters will attempt to situate the ethno-nationalism of the BWR in the larger political, social and cultural context of the 1980s, which was affected by the

ascendency of conservatism and its rolling back of the frontiers of the welfare state. These two chapters will also compare and contrast African American and African Caribbean immigrant writers' somewhat divergent approaches to the 1980s' infatuation with the notion of black motherhood as the source of cultural authenticity and the springboard for feminist agency. Offering a comparative and critical analysis of these maternal romances that are allegorical, historical and ethnographic at the same time, this study will argue that BWR writers, particularly those rooted in African American, rather than Caribbean/postcolonial traditions, replaced the patrilineal genealogy which was typical of male nationalist writing, with a female line of precursors and mentors. They also positioned black daughters-writers, rather than nationalist sons, as the legitimate heirs to African-based traditions.

The last chapter, "Culturalism, Classism, and the Politics of Redistribution," will serve as a coda. It will situate the matrifocal cultural nationalism of the second decade of the BWR in the context of political science and feminist social criticism, particularly Nancy Fraser's criticism of the cultural turn in American feminism that occurred at the end of the 20th century. According to Fraser, feminism in general in the 1980s set out to tackle the "misrecognition and misrepresentation" of women rather than prioritizing the more pressing problem of social inequality and "maldistribution" (Fraser 305). Black feminism, especially womanism, with its attachment to ethnicity, roots and cultural identity politics, failed adequately to address the fact that African American women are divided along the lines of class and education. It was also distracted by its focus on "'who' we are" rather than "what we want to achieve," to quote Yuval-Davis (*Gender and Nation* 126) out of context. In effect, I will argue that BWR writers and critics unwittingly colluded with neoliberal multicultural policies that valorized cultural difference at the expense of economic equality. As Fraser has remarked, since then feminism has understood that its future depends on its ability to deal with the linked injustices of misrepresentation and misdistribution at the same time, and also on its ability to "re-frame" (Fraser 304), that is to go beyond the tunnel vision of ethnic and cultural nationalism.

1 Introduction: The Black Women Renaissance, Matrilineal Romances and the “Volkish Tradition”

The Black Women’s Renaissance was a flowering of talent among African American female writers in the last decades of the 20th century. This outpouring of creative energy by black women writers took the form of narratives that represented matrilineal connections[4] between African American foremothers, mothers and daughters as the most important channels through which African cultural and aesthetic traditions were passed between generations. This Renaissance, sometimes called the Afra American Renaissance (Braxton xxi) or the Second Renaissance,[5] was catalyzed by feminist and civil rights movements of the earlier decades and aimed to reconsider and re-articulate the experience of black women in the United States. The writers and black feminists who initiated the Renaissance not only challenged the dominant readings of black history but also provided a corrective to constructions of black womanhood. They exposed the patriarchal and racist ideologies of American society by highlighting black women’s exclusion from both the male-dominated civil rights movements and mainstream white feminism. By rewriting their people’s history and redefining their black feminist heritage, these black feminist novelists gave shape to what Elleke Boehmer described in a different context as “the matriarchal yearnings of dispossessed women seeking their own place in tradition and history” (*Stories of Women* 88).

In the 1970s and 80s black women writers in the United States began to publish their novels in unprecedented numbers and received numerous prestigious American awards. Toni Cade Bambara’s *The Salt Eaters* won the National and American Book Award in 1981. In 1983, Walker became the first African American woman to win a Pulitzer Prize for fiction with her novel *The Color Purple*, which also won the National Book Award in 1983. The same year Gloria Naylor’s *The Women of Brewster Place* won the American Book Award for the best first novel. Toni Morrison became arguably the most influential writer of African American literature of the late 20th century. Her fifth novel in particular, the neo-slave narrative *Beloved* (1987), gained the status of an iconic text in American letters. Its reputation could be rivalled only by

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4 I define matrilineal narrative after Tess Cosslett as a narrative that “either tells the stories of several generations of women at once, or which shows how the identity of the central character is crucially formed by her female ancestors” (“Feminism” 7). According to Cosslett, “in feminist matrilineal narratives there are two time-frames going on at once. There is a synchronic horizontal plane, on which the generations of women are united by a common femaleness; and a diachronic, vertical axis of descent, leading back into the past and forward into the future” (7). Therefore, female bonding both across synchronically within one’s generation and diachronically with mother and foremothers is the main characteristic of matrilineal fiction.

5 The first African American Renaissance was, obviously, the Harlem Renaissance.

Ralph Ellison's *Invisible Man*, which was published 35 years earlier. *Beloved* received many prestigious book awards: in 1987 the American Book Award and a year later the Pulitzer Prize. Eventually in 1993 Toni Morrison was awarded the Nobel Prize for Literature for her whole body of work. She was the first African American author to be granted that prestigious honor.[6] The success of writers like Toni Morrison, Paule Marshall, Maya Angelou, Alice Walker, Toni Cade Bambara, Gayl Jones and Gloria Naylor helped to inspire a generation of younger black female novelists, including Jamaica Kincaid and Michelle Cliff, and later Edwidge Danticat and Octavia E. Butler.[7] The Renaissance continued well into the 1990s when black women's prose became, in the words of Hortense Spillers, "a vivid new fact of national life" ("Cross-Currents" 245).

The Renaissance is said to have started with the publication of Toni Cade Bambara's *The Black Woman: An Anthology* (1970), and of several novels, including: Maya Angelou's *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings* (1969), Alice Walker's *The Third Life of Grange Copeland* (1970) and Toni Morrison's *The Bluest Eye* (1970). However, Paule Marshall's literary début preceded all the aforementioned authors. Marshall, an African Caribbean writer born to Barbadian immigrants living in Brooklyn, New York, published her first novel *Brown Girl, Brownstones* in 1959. It was, in fact, this novel by Marshall that opened the creative floodgates of black women's writing and launched the black feminist Renaissance. That is why, this book will engage with both African American writers, who occupied the center stage of the Renaissance and African Caribbean immigrant writers living in the USA, such as Audre Lorde, Paule

6 The BWR and the new visibility of African American women led to a very dynamic development in the fields of literary and cultural criticism as well as black feminism, which was geared towards the recuperation of black female contributions to African American literary and cultural traditions. Many important books of black literary and cultural criticism gained national recognition and awards. For example, Barbara Christian's *Black Women Novelists: The Development of a Tradition, 1892–1976* was awarded an American Book Award in 1983 and bell hooks's study in cultural criticism, *Yearning: Race, Gender, and Cultural Politics*, received an American Book Award in 1991.

7 The Renaissance was also instrumental in promoting the work of popular fiction writers even though they did not receive attention from black feminist critics. Terry McMillan garnered attention and critical accolades for her first novel, *Mama*, published in 1987. It won the Doubleday New Voices in Fiction Award and the American Book Award in 1987, but it was not until 1992 that McMillan achieved national attention with her third novel, *Waiting to Exhale*. The book remained on *The New York Times* bestseller list for many months with an appeal that crossed racial lines. By 1995 it had sold over three million copies. The movie that followed, starring Whitney Houston and Angela Bassett, was also a blockbuster. Both the film and the novel contributed to an increasing level of visibility of female black middle-class identity in popular culture. The novel has, however, never reached the same status in the African American literary canon as the highbrow historical and heritage narratives by the writers of the BWR. Other popular writers include: Sapphire, Bebe Moore Campbell, Sister Souljah, Tina McElroy Ansa, A. J. Verdelle, J. California Cooper, Pearl Cleage. See Thulani Davis's "Don't Worry, Be Buppie" for a critical discussion of these popular writers and E. Shelley Reid's "Beyond Morrison and Walker: Looking Good and Looking Forward in Contemporary Black Women's Stories" for response to Davis.

Marshall, Michelle Cliff, and Jamaica Kincaid, who garnered rather less scholarly attention. Some of these women writers with Caribbean roots (Lorde, Marshall) are closely identified with the African American literary tradition because their themes resonate with aspects of African American life and experience. Others (Cliff, Kincaid) produced postcolonial narratives set both in the US and the Caribbean and tackled topics similar to postcolonial writers. One of the objectives of this book will be to point to commonalities and differences in these authors' treatment of such issues as historical revision, national identity, black motherhood and matrilineage. On the one hand, their inclusion in this monograph reflects the fact that the experience of all peoples of the African Diaspora in the New World have a lot in common, so that their texts should be read comparatively. On the other hand, my comparative analysis of their fictional works will, I hope, underscore differences in approaches to the construction of national, ethnic, cultural, and gender identities in various constituencies of the black diaspora.

Post-civil rights black women's writing was not an ideologically uniform period in African American cultural history, not just because the writers came from different geographical locations within and outside the United States. The 1970s were, to a certain extent, still under the sway of a black nationalist ideology that promoted racial self-awareness and the celebration of blackness, as evidenced in the works of Mari Evans (e.g. "I am a Black Woman"), Nikki Giovanni (e.g. "Nikki-Rosa"), and Sonia Sanchez (*We a BaddDDD People*).[8] At the same time, however, a new and powerful counter-current began to emerge in the 1970s in BWR fiction that more and more often shocked readers with uncompromising critiques of black communities, their propensity for assimilation and emulating Western values and internalizing racist stereotypes. Novels such as Morrison's *The Bluest Eye* "highlight[ed] dangers of all-out assimilation" with mainstream white culture (Dana A. Williams, "Contemporary African American Women Writers" 72), a phenomenon which had, of course, also been a major concern for black nationalists (BN) in the preceding decade. What was completely new and disconcerting in novels of the BWR, at least for some black audiences, was the fact that they dramatized "the destruction of women in the wake of [the black community's] prevailing attitudes" (Walker, *The Third Life of Grange Copeland* (1970), (qtd. in Dana A. Williams, "Contemporary African American Women Writers" 72). BWR novels of the 1970s, such as Morrison's *Sula* (1973), Walker's *Meridian* (1976), and Jones's *Eva's Man* (1976), to mention just a few titles, embraced feminist radicalism and advocated a revolt against black communities' patriarchal values and conservative mindsets. Even though, for some critics like bell hooks, the rebellious black female protagonists of these narratives were not radical enough ("Revolutionary Black Women"), these 1970s novels demonstrated a major departure from

8 See Barbara Christian's "Trajectories of Self-definition: Placing Contemporary Afro-American Women's Fiction" (*Conjuring* 240).

the nationalist rhetoric of the 1960s, and its goal to reverse racist stereotypes by presenting black people only in a positive light. Later, in the 1980s, as I will show in the following chapters, the pendulum swung back to the earlier ideological and political position. The 1980s, as Dana A. Williams has observed, ushered in the next phase in the development of the BWR with a new focus on the trope of the mental and spiritual healing of black women. Such novels as Naylor's *The Women of Brewster Place* (1982), Walker's *The Color Purple* (1982), or Bambara's *The Salt Eaters* (1980) proposed complex new strategies for empowering women through bonding between mother and daughter and within female networks. Many novels took the form of historical narratives that suggested that healing could be achieved through engaging with the "ancestral matriarchal past" (Williams, "Contemporary African American Women Writers" 75). Such historical narratives as Gayl Jones's *Corregidora* (1976), Octavia Butler's *Kindred* (1979), Sherley Ann William's *Dessa Rose* (1986), and Morrison's *Beloved* (1987), "invoke[d] the slave past and interrogate[d] its role in the construction of the female *self*" (ibid.). Finally, heritage narratives, such as Gloria Naylor's *Mama Day* (1988), Paule Marshall's *Praisesong for the Widow* (1983), and Michelle Cliff's *Abeng* (1984) and its sequel, *No Telephone to Heaven* (1987), underlined the importance of black heritage – folklore, African rituals and cultural practices – as strategies for healing. These novels did not engage directly with the subject of slavery, but they emphasized the crucial role of African and slave cultural heritage in achieving personal integrity and well-being. I will argue that these historical and heritage narratives, which focused on the issues of cultural resistance and survival, reiterated and rearticulated some of the most fundamental concerns of black cultural nationalism.

The Second Renaissance drew spectacular levels of critical attention because of its subversive goal of re-writing black diasporic histories thorough maternal lenses. But in fact, as Caroline Rody points out in *The Daughter's Return: African-American and Caribbean Women's Fictions of History* (2001), this historical turn in black women's fiction was not only limited to African American feminist writing. The writers discussed in this study emerged from literary obscurity during the BWR at the height of the period of decolonization, which also coincided with a period of emancipation for ethnic minorities and women in the USA. The writers of the BWR gained cultural authority when a multitude of formerly unarticulated stories was erupting throughout the whole world (Rody 5). This imperative to give voice to the conquered and the vanquished was apparent in the writing of all of the most sophisticated postcolonial and ethnic authors. They looked back in time to call to account several ages of western imperialist domination that had brought for many non-European people's enslavement, forced relocation, segregation and continuing economic deprivation.

For this reason, this study will not only attempt to deliver a comparative analysis of African American and African Caribbean fictions, but will also look at them through the prism of postcolonial theories of nation and nationalism. As Caroline Rody has noted, the end of the epoch of imperialist expansion brought about a resurgence of many previously suppressed national histories of peoples from the West's

metropolitan margins and minorities, and postcolonial critics also redefined the nature of historical narratives. These narratives moved from the universalizing claims of "History with a capital H," as Eduard Glissant put it, to "the cross-fertilisation of histories'" (*Caribbean Discourse* 93). This shift was nowhere more visible that in the field of postcolonial and ethnic literatures that were engaged "in the struggle against a single History" (ibid. 76). In an era that was dedicated to providing a counter discourse to the grand narrative of western History, BWR writers entered the stage with a distinctive political and cultural agenda. As they opened up the past to imaginative revision, they wrote their own histories into the official "History" of various black constituencies of the New World. In the words of Rody:

> they reinscrib[ed] the received historical narratives in order to debunk and purge them; to relocate the site of the historical and to redefine the history's meanings; to challenge the prevailing discourses of power and knowledge, infuse oral tradition into the written, and reassert devalued folk memory; and to reinvent ethnic, political and literary bloodlines. (*The Daughter's Return* 5)

The attachment to "history as memory," so conspicuous in the writing of the BWR, is, as Pierre Nora claims, characteristic of all marginalized peoples who "menace" contemporary societies "by rewriting of history from the point of view of the victims" (Nora's Feb. 2006 interview for *Le Monde*, qtd. in Rothberg, *Multidirectional Memory* 269). The menace, as Nora perceived it, lay in the fact that "memory divides [societies] and history alone unites, [them]" (ibid.). Marginalized and victimized communities tend to privilege the "remembered" version of history over the "learned" one because of their need to reassert the reality of their own historical drama against the officially sanctioned accounts that have tried to erase it. Since the late 1980s, with the publication of Nora's *Realms of Memory* (*Les Lieux de Mémoire*),[9] there has been a growing interest in his conceptualization of memory as a different mode of preoccupation with the past than history, especially among subaltern cultures. This is because, as Nora suggests, whereas history commemorates the achievement of the dominant culture, memory recalls the struggles of all those who are marginalized in official historical accounts. It is no wonder that Nora's work has been so useful in analyzing the African diasporic culture's "continual reliance on oral narratives and ceremonials for remem-

9 For interesting discussions of the dichotomy between memory and history and its meaning for Black Atlantic literatures and cultures see the volume edited by Genevieve Fabre and Robert O'Meally, *History and Memory in African-American Culture*. It is worth noting that Nora was criticized by Anglo American postcolonial thinkers for his schematic approach to the history-memory dichotomy, his preference for history, his elision of Frances's colonial and postcolonial past. See also Michael Rothberg's "Introduction: Between Memory and Memory: From Lieux de mémoire to Noeuds de mémoire." *Yale French Studies. Noeuds de mémoire: Multidirectional Memory in Postwar French and Francophone Culture* No. 118/119, 2010, pp. 3-12.

bering itself to itself," as Alan Rice puts it in *Radical Narratives of the Black Atlantic* (24).

Black Women's Renaissance texts flourished at a time when collective memory superseded History as the chief mode of writing the past of subaltern peoples. The narratives of the BWR were also bent on reversing the great sell-out of memory to history, as Nora might have it. For instance, Morrison's "memory-talk," as David Scott described it ("'The Archaeology of Black Memory: An Interview with Robert A. Hill" 80), attempted to open up the vast possibilities not just of retrieving the lost past but of counter-memory; that is to say, a kind of remembering that flies in the face of the official history of the black diaspora in the New World. This use of counter-memory strived to undo the legacy of uprooting, subjection and oppression by foregrounding the histories of the marginalized and disempowered. In her essay suggestively titled "The Site of Memory," Toni Morrison explains her narrative strategy, which she calls "literary archaeology." In the following, wonderfully revealing passage, which I quote at length, she compares black memory to the wild waters of the Mississippi river that resist all attempts to be regulated:

> You know, they straightened out the Mississippi River in places, to make room for houses and livable acreage. Occasionally the river floods these places. "Floods' is the word they use, but in fact it is not flooding; it is remembering. Remembering where it used to be. All the water has a perfect memory and is for ever trying to get back to where it was. Writers are like that: remembering where we were, what valleys we ran through, what the banks were like, the light that was there and the route back to our original place. It is emotional memory – what the nerves and the skin remember as well as how it appeared. (Morrison, "The Site of Memory" 98-9)

All Morrison's novels, which are marked by the author's unabated interest in the history of black slavery, Reconstruction, the Great Migration and the Harlem Renaissance, are exercises in, what she terms "literary archeology." Her image of the flooding Mississippi River may be seen as another version of Pierre Nora's famous *lieu de mémoire*, an expression of how "emotional" memory occasionally inundates the "straightened" narrative of history.

The 1980s were also notable for the prominence of interest in "heritage," both in literature and popular culture, and in the construction of "alternative" and "parallel" histories by ethnic or postcolonial peoples, all of which were corollaries of "the memorial approach" (Butler, "Heritage and the Present Past" 463) to the past. Heritage scholarship was launched in the 1980s and gained considerable momentum over the next three decades. It introduced into literature and scholarship the theme of "community," along with the motifs of participation, cultural difference and identity. BWR writers also raised in their heritage narratives important questions about gender, collective memory and folk cultures. They operated as cultural scribes, promoting a certain image of blackness and femaleness, and their prose, rooted in southern mythology, reproduced stories and characters that have meaning, significance and poignancy primarily for black audiences in the US. The great appeal of

such novels was their concern with getting the details of the heritage of slavery right in an effort to produce an apparently authentic vision of the black past. Like other folk heritage models, BWR narratives, “cast heritage as traditional, unchanging cultural practices that have been handed down since time immemorial and nostalgia as the tendency to imagine oneself in a simpler, better time when life was easier, things were cheaper and people had more respect for one another” (Reed, “Of Routes and Roots” 382). In short, they illustrated how African American people were forcefully made to “straighten out” in the name of sometimes misguided notions of progress.

Many of Morrison’s contemporaries shared her preoccupation with memory and black heritage, returning, in their historical novels, to the experience of slavery and segregation. These so-called neo-slave narratives[10] became the main form of African American historical novels. Besides Toni Morrison’ *Beloved* (1987), arguably the most famous novel about American slavery, other neo-slave narratives include Margaret Walker’s *Jubilee* (1966) and Sherley Anne Williams’ *Dessa Rose* (1986). It is worth noting that with the exception of *Jubilee*, these neo-slave narratives were published in the 1980s, during the so-called “memory boom” (Huyssen, *Present Pasts* 2003). Some of these narratives mixed the historical and the vernacular with popular literary genres such as science fiction (*Kindred* by Octavia Butler 1979) or fantasy and gothic (Morrison’s *Beloved* and Jewelle Gomez’s *The Gilda Stories* 1991). These novels are examples of imaginative attempts to revisit the past and, in the words of Gilroy, “sift it for resources with which to bolster contemporary political aspirations” (*The Black Atlantic* 220). In Gilroy’s opinion, they “represent a profoundly self-authorizing moment in the construction of a *cultural* and *national* imaginary” (*The Black Atlantic* 220, emphasis added).

As Edouard Glissant explained, using the example of Caribbean cultures, the struggle to create a “national imaginary” is chiefly realized in the realm of national literatures that often display an “ethnopoetic” nature (*Caribbean Discourse* 93). Ethnopoetics is, according to Glissant, a unique literary strategy that both reclaims the past and re-imagines cultural roots, thereby achieving two related goals: first, re-visioning history from the point of view of the conquered; and second, re-valorizing African-based diasporic folk cultures. In this way, maintains Glissant, ethnopoetic literatures satisfy uprooted peoples’ desire for “the primordial source [...] the explanation of origins, the echo of genesis, that which reorients the evolution of the collective drama” of history (ibid. 79). On the one hand, ethnopoetic literatures produce a sense of continuity and stability that compensates for the vicissitudes of the history; on the other, they give preference to essentialist cultures by insisting on the fixity of identities and the rooted nature of cultural memory. In Chapter 4, I will argue that the

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10 The term was coined by Ishmael Reed while working on his 1976 novel, *Flight to Canada* and used by him in a 1984 interview with Reginald Martin, conducted July 1-7, 1983, in Emeryville, California (Reed, “A Conversation”).

1980s novels of BWR writers are perfect examples of the ethnopoetic desire to create a new essentialist communal mythology and provide “frames of reference of the collective relationship of men with their environment” (*Caribbean Discourse,* 70). Since the idea of ethnopoetics is based on an “ethnographic approach” (Glissant, *Caribbean Discourse* 14), these novels could be also classified, following James Clifford, as “ethnographic allegories.” Clifford, who coined this term, maintains that ethnographic allegories are narratives that “simultaneously describe real cultural events and make additional moral, ideological, and maybe even cosmological statements” (“On Ethnographic Allegory” 8).

Clifford’s definition of ethnographic allegories and Edouard Glissant’s discussion of the postcolonial ethnopoetic project can serve to explain why BWR writers’ explorations of history were combined with an effort to chronicle black folk heritage. BWR novels, particularly those published in the 1980s, are rooted in the folklore, customs, rituals and practices of the black slaves and the peasant cultures of the American South and the Caribbean. They embed oral folk stories that are passed through the medium of the novel to urbanized and westernized diasporic Americans. BWR writers insisted on the continuing relevance of this folk heritage as a vital and life-sustaining “frame of reference” and a weapon against racism on the one hand, and classism and sexism on the other. In their novels, interviews, and essays, BWR writers asserted their belief that the African American struggle for full emancipation would never be effective without honoring collective memories of the past and African-derived traditions.

I would like to propose that BWR narratives of the 1980s are not only a “literature of reconnection” to African roots and heritage but are also allegorical accounts of survival and emancipation that invent for black people a self-image through creative writing (Fido, “Textures of Third World Reality” 42). Like many Third World novels, the texts of BWR writers could be described, in Frederic Jameson’s terms, as “national allegories” in which “*the story of the private individual destiny is always an allegory of the embattled situation of the public third-world culture and society*” (“Third-World Literature” 69). Frederic Jameson claims that “a certain nationalism is fundamental in the Third World” (65), and I would suggest that this idea can be extended to minority cultures. Even though BWR novels focus on the individual struggles of black female protagonists, as is the case in many Third World texts, “the individual story, the individual experience cannot but ultimately involve the whole laborious telling of the experience of the collectivity itself” (ibid. 85-6). BWR texts are national allegories that, in the words of Stephen Slemon, “[help] produce new ways of seeing history, new ways of ‘reading’ the world” (“Postcolonial Allegory” 164). Jameson’s claim about the allegorical nature of *all* postcolonial texts provoked a lot of criticism, most notably from Aijaz Ahmad. In his essay, “Jameson’s Rhetoric of Otherness and the ‘National Allegory,’” Ahmad accused Jameson of homogenizing vastly disparate postcolonial literatures to propose one general paradigm for reading the link between the individual and the nation in the Third World. Still, if we see national/ethnic iden-

tity and history not as fixed products but rather as processes that are culturally and discursively constructed, the conceptual metaphor underlying Jameson's paradigm can be enlightening. It proposes that we should see a nation or an ethnic minority as a child, who is born, grows, struggles and achieves wholeness and integrity, often against all the odds.

African American literature has produced an interesting variant of the postcolonial national allegory in which the concept of the nation has been replaced with its ethnic equivalent – the tribe. In *From Behind the Veil: A Study of Afro-American Narrative*, Robert Stepto argues that many African American narratives are allegories that fall into one of two categories: narratives of ascent or narratives of immersion. A classic ascent allegory launches an "enslaved" and semi-literate figure on "a ritualized journey" to freedom in a symbolic North, "the least oppressive social structure afforded by the world" (167). There, the hero or heroine becomes an "articulate survivor" of the more oppressive environment in the South. He or she becomes increasingly literate and free, but unfortunately also more alienated from his or her ethnic background – the tribe. The immersion allegory, on the other hand, expresses "a ritualized journey into a symbolic South," a narrative of reconnection to those aspects of "tribal literacy" that ameliorate his or her condition of solitude. The immersive version of national (ethnic or "tribal") allegory takes the hero/heroine to the narrative's "most oppressive social structure" in the South, where their loneliness is, however, assuaged by "the newfound balms of group identity" (ibid.). As he or she reaffirms his/her membership of the tribe, he/she becomes "an articulate kinsman." Stepto's immersion paradigm is particularly useful for analyzing allegorical relationships between "culture-bearing" mothers and their daughters, whom mothers try to turn into assimilated "articulate kinswomen." BWR narratives of immersion tell stories of black women's spiritual journeys towards a new form of collective/tribal/national self-awareness. They are emblematic tales about female resistance to ethnic deculturation, in which the protagonists strive not only for self-empowerment but also for the "uplift of the black race," to use a popular expression.

As Caroline Rody has observed in *The Daughter's Return, African-American and Caribbean Women's Fictions of History*, one of the conspicuous features that many novels of the BWR share is that they are family sagas, in which African Americans are envisaged as an "embattled" people, whose history is played out in the lives of family members, particularly women. This observation seems to be especially apt in relation to the feminist epics of the 1980s, which focused on the fates of daughters who had to revisit the painful histories of their female ancestors and communities in order to redress their inaccurate and unjust rendering in the mainstream national imaginings of African American as well as white American discourse. It is, indeed, a striking fact, as Rody has noted, that a whole generation of female writers made a romance of their maternal histories. These black women writers "frame[d] … [their] historical return[s] to the massive calamities of African American and Caribbean history within a plot of daughterly desire for a mother-of-history" (6), producing allegorical and often (auto)

biographical family romances whose aim was to “repair a severed matrilineage” (ibid.). By making daughters the narrators of their historical and ethnopoetic novels, BWR writers engaged in the same project as many postcolonial female authors who, as Elleke Boehmer put it, “set about writing the erased or marginalized role of the daughter, indeed the daughter-writer, into the male authored national family script” (*Stories of Women* 15).

Rody borrows the term “family romance,” I think, from Marianne Hirsch’s study, *The Mother/Daughter Plot: Narrative, Psychoanalysis, Feminism* (1989), which analyses mother-daughter relations in white mainstream culture. In her study, Hirsh claims that feminist romance is a daughterly narrative that perpetuates the denial of subjectivity that the mothers had suffered. It puts at its center the daughter’s quest for an independent idiosyncratic identity that can be achieved only through “mother-hate.” In other words, in order to individuate herself and become a woman, the daughter must grow to be completely unlike her mother. As a consequence, Hirsch claims that the white mother “remains in the position of the other,” and the mother and the daughter are “forever trapped by the institution [of motherhood]” (Hirsch 136-7). In white feminist family romances, she says, the mother is “excluded from the discourse of the daughter who owns it” (ibid.).

Likewise, in BWR prose, the relationship between black mothers and daughters remains pivotal in the process of the daughters’ identity formation. But contrary to white family romances, black narratives more often emphasise strong cultural alliances between mothers and daughter, rather than their mutual estrangement. The matrilineal narratives I discuss in this book are also written mostly from the perspective of daughters. However, unlike white feminist novels, they show great appreciation, if not utmost reverence, for maternal cultural and historical legacies. They often tell stories of several generations of women and show how the identity of the daughter is continuous with, rather than separate from, her foremothers. Alternatively, particularly in the Caribbean (and Black British) literary tradition, they dramatize the consequences of historical and cultural upheavals which break this crucial relationship between mothers and daughters. They often depict the daughters’ confusion and painful, often unsuccessful, search for agency in the wake of their mothers’ failure to pass on their female cultural knowledge. Therefore, as Rody also points out, by bringing to the foreground the relationship between black mothers and their daughters, African American and Caribbean émigré authors in the US recast the genre of historical fiction and allegorical family romance. They not only successfully adapt them to make them suitable for the Black Atlantic context and their feminist agenda; they also inflect these well-known genres with black vernacular idiom. Regardless of whether they revere or rebuke their fictional mothers, these female writers use the “family plot” as an “attempt to rewrite origins, to replace the unsatisfactory fragments of a primordial past by a totalizing fiction answering desire and recuperating loss,” as Janet Beizer put it in a different context (*Family Plots* 7).

The romance tradition, understood as an allegorical *bildungsroman* – a quest to explore how the self relates to society – is, in fact, a well-established American genre. Ever since the literary critic Richard Chase published his seminal work *The American Novel and Its Tradition* (1957), romance has been recognized as the major critical paradigm for American fiction. Chase maintained that for many prominent American writers, such as James Fenimore Cooper, Mark Twain or F. Scott Fitzgerald, myth and symbolism, rather than social realism, were the most important modes of literary expression. The first African American writer to make a huge success of the romance tradition was Ralph Ellison, whose novel, *Invisible Man,* has become one of the most important books in the canon of all American fiction.[11] At that time, it seemed that Ralph Ellison had set out to write a canonical American classic, anticipating by some years Chase's American romance thesis. In contrast to Ellison's novel, the maternal romances of the BWR focused mostly on daughters whose relationship to their biological mothers and historical foremothers was a prerequisite for finding empowerment and a rightful place in the history of the African American "nation." These female writers also combined realist conventions with the motif of an allegorical quest, but their novels were also deeply rooted in African American or Caribbean mythologies. African-derived folklore was for them a source of alternative, non-western, ideologies and values. They also used sub-textual webs of symbolism to describe their characters' encounters with, and responses to, the ordeals suffered by black people under slavery and segregation, and at the time of the struggle for civil rights (in the US) or independence (in the Caribbean). Unlike Ellison, they looked further back in time, reaching to the African roots of the New World cultures of the black diaspora. Rody comments that: "Staging dramatic, often fantastic, encounters with the past, [these writers] foreground[ed] the mother-daughter relationship as the site of transhistorical contact" (*The Daughter's Return* 3), and the mother-daughter relationship could also be described as a site of inter-generational continuity.

In agreement with Belinda Edmondson, I would like to argue that BWR writers not only produced in their historical and heritage fictions a "prehistory of the present,"[12] but also occasionally conjured up essentialist myths and identities to strengthen the unity of African American people and to mobilize their resistance against economic, political and social oppression. Particularly in the 1980s, BWR narratives, by writers such as Morrison, Naylor, Marshall and Cliff, insisted on the folk character of African cultures and, more often than not, idealized the black (fore)mother and matriliny. Their ethnographic novels, as Eduard Glissant claimed, endorsed an essentialist view of culture, according to which that culture had an immutable essence that had sus-

11 In a 1965 survey, *Invisible Man* was hailed as the best novel written in America after World War II (*New York Herald Tribune*).

12 György Lukács uses this term in *The Historical Novel*, a study of Walter Scott and his contribution to the creation of Scottish nationalism.

tained African Americans through centuries of oppression. A corollary of this essentialist worldview was perceiving ethnic and gender identities as possessing intrinsic qualities which were passed down the maternal line. Contrary to the 1970s, therefore, when BWR novels often judged black mothers harshly or showed motherhood as limiting for black women, the 1980s saw a spectacular volte-face in the treatment of the trope of the black mother, particularly in the fiction of African American women. Novels such as *Mama Day* (Naylor), *Praisesong for the Widow* (Marshall), *The Salt Eaters* (Bambara) and *Betsey Brown* (Shange) pictured maternal figures as cornerstones of black resistance and custodians of life-sustaining African American traditions. At the same time, while African American romances idealized the black mother as a model for black women's social and political activism, the work of African Caribbean writers, such as Lorde and Kincaid, for example, expressed skepticism about the BWR's revalorization of motherhood. The largely autobiographical Caribbean American fiction attempted to infuse its portrayal of the mother-daughter relationship with more psychological realism, and also explored other, less conservative, models of black female subjectivity. Jamaica Kincaid in *Annie John* and *Lucy*, and Michelle Cliff in *Abeng* and *No Telephone to Heaven*, highlighted the conflict between the postcolonial daughter and the colonial mother, who becomes a symbol of a cultural traitor and collaborator. Irrespective of the judgment that these novels passed on black mothers, all of them reiterated the same fundamental and essentialist assumptions that women are defined as carriers of cultural values, and that their reproductive choices and practices of mothering can sustain or obliterate cultures.

BWR writers' appreciation of maternal cultural legacies was elevated to the status of African American feminist literary canon by such black feminist critics as Barbara Christian, Mary Helen Washington and Barbara Smith. Their celebratory readings of BWR fiction were instrumental in establishing the tradition of maternal folk romance as the main female tradition in African American letters. They saw the BWR writers' project of recovering the past and their investment in folklore as the source of a black female authority, and of a positive image of black women. For example, Barbara Smith's essay, "Toward a Black Feminist Criticism," which is considered a founding text of black feminist criticism, pointed to folk elements, such as "root-working, herbal medicine, conjure and midwifery, as integral to black women's common approaches to creating literature."[13] Smith's formulations about the centrality of these elements to the black feminist canon, along with her conviction that there is a unique black feminist aesthetic and "specifically black female language" (Smith, qtd. in McDowell, "New Directions" 431), did a lot to constitute historical heritage fiction as the major tradition in black feminist writing. Other black feminist critics, such as Barbara Christian, Mary Helen Washington, Susan Willis and Marjorie Pryse, followed Smith's lead in narrowing down and consolidating what McDowell called "the circle of empowe-

13 See also Valerie Lee's *Grannies Midwives & Black Women Writers. Double Dutched Readings.*

red texts" (McDowell, *"The Changing Same"* 51). These critics, as Madhu Dubey has also observed, elevated the status of writers who propagated folklore as "a prehistoric origin" or "a static past" (*Black Women Novelists* 6), and who privileged the rural South as the foundation of black culture.

These black critics' readings of BWR prose were given even wider currency by the development of womanism. Womanist ideology, which was invented by Alice Walker, who is often considered as model writer by black feminist critics (most notably Washington), paved the way for black women's writing to be recovered from oblivion and institutionalized in academia. The term was explained most fully in Walker's famous 1984 collection of essays, *In Search of Our Mothers' Gardens*, but it was coined earlier in Walker's novels and short stories from the 1970s. Thus, womanism developed against the BWR, and it influenced black women's writing and criticism immensely in the late 1970s and 1980s. As Debora McDowell has argued, black feminist criticism of that period was dominated by the belief that there is an organic line of descent and connection from black women writers to black women critics, with "the latter [being] responsible for the survival of the former" (*"The Changing Same"* 164). The Black Women's Renaissance, womanism and black criticism mutually constituted and defined each other. In just the same way that BWR fiction of the 1980s paid tribute to heroic black mothers, Walker's collection highlighted the achievements of common, uneducated, black women, such as Walker's own mother. These simple black women, argued Walker, despite their poverty and the ongoing discrimination that they suffered, were artists, able to hand on to their daughters a creative spark and a determination to succeed. Womanism created and popularized an alternative form of black feminist thought that emphasized cultural survival, female bonding and creativity, and the longevity of black female aesthetic traditions that were passed on from mothers to their daughters. Walker's *In Search of Our Mothers' Gardens* became a foundational text for BWR writers, whose novels often unquestioningly celebrated the wisdom, perseverance and creativity of ordinary black women.

Womanism, I would like to propose, can be credited with bringing about a radical shift in the 1980s in BWR attitudes towards motherhood, matriliny and black heritage. The narratives of the 1970s often used social realism to represent the destructive impact of structural oppression on black motherhood, and to show how "female possibility" is "literally massacred on the site of motherhood," as Adrienne Rich put it in a different context (*Of Woman Born* 13). The novels of the 1980s rethought the meaning of black motherhood and the social and political ramifications of what Patricia Hill Collins called "motherwork" (*Black Feminist Thought* 213). In effect, the 1980s saw a spectacular volte-face in the treatment of the black mother trope. Many critics, such as Deborah McDowell, think that this shift was caused by "the pressures of negative publicity" (*"The Changing Same"* 135); that is to say, in response to the criticism that black women's fiction of the 1970s received for its naturalistic and unflattering depiction of black families, black men and black communi-

ties. She suggests that it was "the constraining influence" of black nationalist critics, who castigated women for their departures from the ideology of the Black Aesthetic Movement, that made BWR writers "[adjust] their aesthetic vision" (ibid.).[14] In my opinion, however, this U-turn seems to be not so much a retreat as a strategic repositioning that allowed BWR writers to tap into the cultural resources that emerged through the womanist focus on memory.

This repositioning was evident in Walker's own literary output. In the 1970s, for example, Walker's fiction was preoccupied with the love-hate relationship between black mothers and their daughters (most notably in *Meridian*), and often portrayed black daughters wracked with guilt because of the inter-generational conflict with their mothers. Walker's later works, however, particularly her essays, sought to resolve that intergenerational conflict on a historical and cultural, rather than a personal and psychological plane, by foregrounding the vital role of mothers in preserving black heritage. In other words, the daughterly romances of African American women in the 1980s made peace with their "culture bearing" mothers and, in a sense, sought to compensate "for the dispersion of the cohesive sense of cultural community" (Dubey, *Black Women Novelists* 161) that had occurred in the 1970s. This strategy is, for example, very conspicuous in the novels that Michelle Cliff published in the 1980s. They denounce the colonial mindset of contemporary Jamaican mothers, whilst at the same time paying homage to great national mothers, such as Nanny, the half-historical, half-mythical leader of the Maroons.[15] Cliff's novels, like the overwhelming majority of 1980s fiction of this genre, depict motherhood as the cornerstone of communal life, collective memory and female culture, all of which were crucial to the cultural survival and well-being of the Jamaican and African American "nations."

Womanism and black feminist criticism, the two pillars on which the BWR was founded, were very successful attempts to forge unity within black feminism and the black feminist literary tradition. However, black feminist critics working within the poststructuralist framework of the 1990s, challenged these articulations as essentialist and prescriptive. Informed by postmodernist and postcolonial interventions, such critics as Hortense Spillers, Deborah McDowell, Patricia Hill Collins, bell hooks, and Hazel Carby argued that womanism and black feminist criticism were based upon a false sense of unity and an essentialist conceptualization of black womanhood. McDowell, for instance, argued that womanism was based on Walker's own subjective certainties about black culture, and that these needed more thorough interrogation (*The*

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14 As an example of this aesthetic shift from radical feminist issues, see McDowell's "*The Changing Same,*" where she discusses "the very value system espoused in these [black nationalist, anti-feminist] reviews" (135), and compares Ntzoake Shange's *for colored girls* (1976) with *Betsey Brown* (1985), arguing that the latter novel focused on "family centered values" (ibid.).

15 Maroons were escaped slaves who ran away from Spanish-owned plantations when the British took over the Caribbean island of Jamaica from Spain in 1655. The word maroon comes from the Spanish word "cimarrones" (mountaineers).

Changing Same" xi). She also claimed that the bulk of black literary criticism in the 1970s and 80s remained attached to nationalist and ethnic frameworks of analysis. Such frameworks were impossible to uphold after what McDowell called the 1990s' "'paradigm shift' from the 'Age of Criticism' to the 'Age of Theory'" ("*The Changing Same"* xi). Similarly, in *Reconstructing Womanhood: The Emergence of the Afro-American Woman Novelist* (1987), Hazel Carby criticized black feminist critics (especially Barbara Smith) for constructing a homogenous literary historiography out of the very divergent field of black female cultural production. Carby claimed that black feminist criticism should be a locus of contradictions that highlights both commonalities and differences ("White Woman Listen!"). She also claimed that even if there is a black feminist canon, this cannot be said to be as linear as it seemed in the 1970s and 1980s. Finally, intersectional and materialist black critics, such as Patricia Hill Collins and bell hooks respectively, claimed that black feminism in the USA was "handicapped" by cultural nationalism and essentialism and that most black feminists and womanists remained unaware that their writing had been shaped by male ideologies of black nationalism. These researchers proposed a new intersectional methodology, which did not concentrate solely on womanist experiences but rather delineated a "matrix of domination" (Collins, "Black Feminist Thought in the Matrix of Domination" 221) or a "politic of domination" (hooks, *Talking Back* 175), which considered complex relations of domination and subjugation within the black community.

My analysis of BWR fiction of the 1980s, builds on these anti-essentialist critiques by poststructuralist black feminists. It is also informed by theories of the Black Atlantic. In *The Black Atlantic: Modernity and Double Consciousness,* Gilroy provocatively contends that looking for roots, or for stable and presumably authentic forms of subjectivity and identification, has been for African Americans the main strategy for "nation" building and racial uplift since the post-emancipation period. Speaking about Afrocentrism, the background against which black female fiction evolved in the 1980s, Paul Gilroy called such ethnocentric attempts to homogenize African American culture "cultural insiderism" (*The Black Atlantic* 3). In his opinion, cultural insiderism was nothing more than a dramatic reaction to "growing cleavages within the black communities" (*The Black Atlantic* 32) that were caused by age, location and education, as well as by the overarching signifiers of gender and class that are also central to this study. Gilroy states that "uneasy spokespeople of the black elite – some of them professional cultural commentators, artists, writers, painters, and film makers as well as political leaders – have fabricated a volkish outlook as an expression of their own contradictory position" (ibid. 32). Though Gilroy speaks only of Afrocentrist middle-class elites, I will argue that the same anxiety animated the BWR in the 1980s, and that this "volkish" or "pastoral" tradition is nowhere more clearly visible than in the BWR prose of the 1980s and its critical reception. As I will contend in more detail in the following chapters, although the BWR sought to conceal the class cleavage in black communities, it also brought to the surface the gap between black intellectuals and writers, who were engaged in the preservation of black heritage and history, and

the black working class, which was more concerned about pressing issues of everyday economic survival.

McDowell has argued that, in fact, the class anxiety that underlay the BWR goes back as far as the Harlem Renaissance, when the yawning gap between Du Bois's Talented Tenth and the rest of the black population first came into being. It was then that the New Negro movement and the volkish tradition, or "the proletarian-bohemian tradition," as Wilson J. Moses called it (65), was born. That tradition, rooted in "plantation folklore, the blues style, and proletariat iconoclasm" (ibid.) became a vehicle for the black elite's assertion of allegiance to the black proletariat. This suggests that the attachment to roots and authentic racial identity has always been a highly class-based phenomenon. BWR prose, womanism and early black criticism, with their celebration of the folk aesthetic and uniquely female culture are, in my opinion, a part and parcel of "the proletarian-bohemian tradition," and the "cultural insiderism" that promoted the "idea of blacks as a national or proto-national group with its own hermetically enclosed culture" (Gilroy, *The Black Atlantic* 33). This tradition has endowed the historical ethnopoetic/ethnographic romances rooted in black folklore with the resistant and counter-discursive energy that has made them into the master narrative of African American historical revisionism.

I will argue that this tradition eventually became formulaic and excluded other types of fiction from black literary criticism's field of vision. Thus, as Madhu Dubey has noted, for example, writers who did not tap into this tradition were "conspicuously absent from most black feminist works on the black women's fictional traditions, including Barbara Christian's *Black Women Novelists*, Susan Willis's *Specifying*, and Marjorie Pryse and Hortense Spillers *Conjuring*" (*Black Women Novelists* 2). Dubey explains that:

> [the] critical neglect of [Gayl] Jones is not surprising, for her novels do not confirm the ideological aims and the formal predilections of black feminist criticism. Jones's fiction cannot be absorbed into a tradition impelled by the struggle against negative stereotypes [in the 1970s], or into the tradition authorized by black folk practices associated with the rural South [in the 1980s]. (Ibid.)

Dubey emphasizes the fact that writers such as Hurston, Walker and Morrison were "canonized" because they skilfully harked back to Southern folklore, while others like Gayl Jones, who "render[ed] the urban manifestations of oral forms such as blues" (ibid. 7), were marginalized because they did not invest folklore with intrinsic or absolute value. Jones's neglect illustrates very well Lorde's observation that "Black writers … who step outside the pale of what writers are supposed to be, are [sometimes] condemned to silences in black literary circles that are as total and destructive as any imposed by racism" (Lorde, qtd. in Claudia Tate, *Black Women Writers at Work* 101).

The emergence of the matrifocal volkish tradition, with its emphasis on roots, folklore and cultural authenticity, has not only led to the privileging of texts embed-

ded in historical discourses and folk heritage; but also it has re-written the history of African American feminist prose. While *Iola Leroy* by Frances E. Harper was once considered to be the founding text of black woman's fiction, the volkish tradition consigned to oblivion an entire "Woman's Era"[16] of nineteenth-century African American intellectual history. As Maria Giulia Fabi argues in *Passing and the Rise of the African American Novel* (2001), these 19th century female writers were wilfully forgotten because their non-black, white-looking, or racially indeterminate characters did not fit into the new pastoral articulation of the African American canon.[17] In effect, within the dominant narratives of African American literary history, "the circle of empowered texts," as Spillers has called them ("Cross-Currents" 251), has tended to include few by women and fewer still by those from the nineteenth century. For this reason, my own readings of BWR historical and heritage works will not dwell on the achievements of the "pastoral" tradition that have been widely discussed and are unquestionable. I will focus rather on the ramifications of their "strategic essentialism" (Gilroy, *Against Race* 326) that was aimed at building a shared community/nation through the politics of historical and ethnopoetic counter-discourse.

1.1 African Americans as an "Imagined" Community and the Roots of the "Volkish" Tradition

The volkish tradition in BWR writing reached its apogee in the 1980s. That fiction seemed consciously to aim to forge a coherent, politically and ideologically motivated vision of African Americans as an ethnic group with a distinct and unique identity based on a collective past. It was a highly politicized literature that was geared towards bolstering ethnic solidarity and reconstructing an alternative collective identity for African Americans at a time when profound social and political changes threatened to erase their distinctive culture and their collective memory of the past. The

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16 Frances E. Harper coined this term in her speech before the World's Congress of Representative Women, meeting in their conference in Chicago, Illinois, 1893. During that decade black women, including Harper and other black female writers such as Anna Julia Cooper, Ida B Wells-Barnett, and Pauline Hopkins, used their writing to protest against racism.

17 This exclusion of women-authored texts (and their "mulatta" protagonists) has been addressed by Hazel Carby in *Reconstructing Womanhood: The Emergence of the Afro-American Woman Novelist*, (1987); Ann duCille in *The Coupling Convention: Sex, Text, and Tradition In Black Women's Fiction* (1993); Deborah McDowell's "*The Changing Same": Black Women's Literature, Criticism, and Theory* (1995), and Claudia Tate's *Domestic Allegories of Political Desire: The Black Heroine's Text at the Turn of the Century* (1996); Fabi, M. Giulia's *Passing and the Rise of the African American Novel* (2001). Even though Alice Walker's writing contributed immensely to the rise of the volkish tradition and the canonization of Zora Neale Hurston and authors writing in her wake, she also devoted a considerable amount of attention to the novels before the Harlem Renaissance in *In Search of Our Mothers' Gardens* (1983).

historical and heritage strands of pastoral traditions have long been recognized in the critical literature on nations and nationalism as the fabric of "imagined communities," to use Benedict Anderson's term. According to Anderson, a nation "is imagined because the members of the smallest nation will never know most of their fellow members, meet them, or even hear of them, yet in the mind of each lives the image of their communion" (Anderson 15, 40). He argued that what holds the imagined community together is a common culture (46) that is created, first and foremost, by its national literature.[18] In the postcolonial and ethnic context, the novel, which "operates as a powerful medium of self-articulation" (Boehmer, *Stories of Women* 27), played the main role in the project of nation-building. Thus, the emergence of postcolonial and ethno-nationalisms went hand in hand with the rise of anti-colonial and ethnocentric narratives that were historical and ethnographic at the same time.

Many scholars of nationalism and ethno-nationalisms have emphasized the active role these narratives played in securing the survival of the national/ethnic group. Anne McClintock, for example, reminds us that nationalism is "a doctrine of crisis" (McClintock, "No Longer in a Future Heaven" 106) that is summoned at particularly difficult moments. While "nations can be imagined" "'nationalism' means a deep, critical perspective on the core issues pertaining to the daily lives of the groups involved" (Carr, *Black Nationalism* 4). Even if the crisis that the group/nation is undergoing is not existential, nationalism may be "a way to forge a counter-culture" (McClintock, "No Longer in a Future Heaven" 106). That seems to be particularly true in multicultural societies, where minority groups struggle to keep their distinctive identity and to counter their oppression collectively. In brief, as Frantz Fanon succinctly commented, a "national literature," and, by implication, the ethnic novel, is:

> a literature of combat in the sense that it calls on the whole people to fight for their existence as a nation. It is a literature of combat, because it molds the national consciousness, giving it form and contours and flinging open before it new and boundless horizons … (Fanon 120)

Eric Hobsbawm and Terence Ranger, in *The Invention of Tradition*, demonstrated that many of the ethnographic traditions that are found in national/ethnic novels are not really traditions but rather representations that have been repeated so many times that they have been naturalized (qtd. in Loomba 164). They claim that the political effectiveness of these cultural representations actually depends on their concealment of the constructed and "imagined" character of cultural identity. Anderson has also upheld the idea that the group's collective vision of the past is constructed and "imagined"; that is, put together selectively from disjointed fragments in response to a people's ideological needs (*Imagined Communities* 5-7). Anderson's remarks resonate

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18 McClintock added later visual pageantry as the nation binding element (see "No Longer in a Future Heaven"), which certainly played a role in Garvey's Back to Africa movement that I discus later.

with Hayden White's observations that historical facts are merely the raw material that historians/writers work on, but the facts alone are not sufficient to make a convincing case for one's vision of the past. White argues that all historical narratives (discourses and novels) are rhetorical expressions of a mostly imagined historiography, since they represent the author's view of his/her people's past. This discursive character of historical narratives often results from what Anderson has described as the "amnesias" that attend "profound changes in consciousness." It is precisely because the story of a people's development "cannot be 'remembered,'" claims Anderson, that it "must be 'narrated'" (Anderson, *Imagined Communities* 204). Therefore, national histories and novels, in just the same way as ideas of nationhood and nationalism, are merely cultural artifacts or elaborate plots that try to piece together the remnants of the dim and distant past.

For the African Americans as a people, the amnesia was caused in the first place by the experience of the Middle Passage and slavery, which erased African languages, customs, and beliefs and led to a substantial loss of cultural heritage. A second, and equally far-reaching change in African American consciousness was brought about by the Great Migration, which saw six million black people move out of the rural Southern United States to the urban Northeast, Midwest, and West. This mass population movement, which started in the 1910s and finished at the beginning of the BWR in the 1970s, was described in 1991 by Nicholas Lemann, as:

> one of the largest and most rapid mass internal movements in history – perhaps the greatest not caused by the immediate threat of execution or starvation. In sheer numbers, it outranks the migration of any other ethnic group – Italians or Irish or Jews or Poles – to [the U.S]. For blacks, the migration meant leaving what had always been their economic and social base in America and finding a new one. (Lemann, *The Promised Land* 6)

Before the Black Women's Renaissance began, black people in the United States had become a largely urbanized population on their way to cultural assimilation with the ethos of the white middle class.

However, the Great Migration also brought about the first fully conscious and successful attempt to rethink or re-imagine what it meant to be a member of this transfigured Negro "nation." The first Renaissance in African American arts and letters in the 1920s, the Harlem Renaissance, sparked the New Negro Movement – the ideological and artistic program of the Harlem Renaissance activists.[19] The New Negro Movement was launched by Alain Locke, who was one of the first black intellectuals to notice that the Great Migration had given black people in the north more political leverage to fight for their rights. The race riots that raged in the black ghettos of northern metropolises during and after World War I showed that the attitudes of black

19 According to some critics, like Houston A. Baker, the Harlem Renaissance predates 1920s. See Houston A. Baker, Jr. *Modernism and the Harlem Renaissance*, University of Chicago Press, 1987.

communities were changing radically. They were shifting from despondency, resignation, and a feeling of defeat to stiff resistance and fierce anger. African Americans were, in the words of the black Jamaican poet, Claude McKay, tired of "running," and ready to "face the murderous, cowardly pack [of white oppressors] dying but fighting back" ("If We Must Die").

The New Negro Movement was not only committed to helping Negroes to "fight back," it also attempted to build a sense of unity and solidarity among the dislocated and disadvantaged northern blacks. It encouraged black people to see themselves in a new light – as proud, strong, resourceful and creative people, rather than as oppressed and downtrodden victims of the dominant white majority. The movement no longer perceived race as a source of marginalization and vulnerability but as a force of creative regeneration. To aid blacks in this process of renewal, Locke set out to create a new vision of black culture, and what he called "a popular aesthetic" that would give African American people a sense of pride in being black. This new aesthetic encouraged blacks to search for their African roots and for the unique values in what was left of their African heritage. Folktales, sermons and Negro spirituals were to become the new wellsprings of African American cultural life. In other words, Locke encouraged his fellow writers and artists, including Zora Neale Hurston, who was destined to become a literary progenitor for the female writers of the BWR, to redefine black culture by looking for inspiration in folklore, and to "[elevate] folk gift to the altitudes of art" (Hemenway, *Zora Neale Hurston* 50). The New Negro Movement harnessed creative writing and the visual arts to the task of creating a "counter culture." It imposed on black artists a special mission to counteract stereotypical images of blacks as dependent, unassertive and imitative, and to show, to white and black audiences alike, that black people were not culturally deprived and backward. It wanted Negro artists to celebrate the vitality and bravado of common black folk who had the courage to turn their backs on white value judgments and censorship.

The Harlem Renaissance transformed the consciousness of African American elites, turning them into an "imagined community" that shared a common history, culture, and political agenda. Marcus Garvey's "Back to Africa" movement, which was propelled by a doctrine of racial purity and separatism, did the same for the black masses. Contrary to the Harlem Renaissance, which was launched and animated by the Negro intelligentsia, Garvey's nationalism, characterized by colorful pageantry and appeals for the rediscovery of African heritage, attracted attraction among poor African Americans. Both movements, with their emphasis on reconstructing and naturalizing African traditions through spectacle, performance or literary pursuits, laid the foundations for black cultural nationalism.

Both movements also shared attitudes towards black women; they reinforced patriarchal gender relations in their ranks. For instance, the *Messenger*, the political and literary magazine of the Harlem Renaissance, regularly featured forums such as the symposium: "Negro Womanhood's Greatest Needs," which ran throughout the 1920s. In theory, the symposium advocated the importance of establishing equality between

black women and men, but in practice, it confined women to traditional domestic and auxiliary roles. Black women were burdened with cultivating "the hearthstone" from which all "great women and men evolve" (Bonnie Bogle, "Negro Womanhood's Greatest Needs," *The Messenger* 9 April 1927; qtd. in McDowell, "*The Changing Same*" 172-173). It is striking that the women who participated in these discussions mostly collaborated with such a division of gender roles, envisioning black womanhood as a secondary adjunct to manhood. One of the female correspondents of the symposium outlined her vision of black woman's contribution to building what Du Bois called "a Negro nation within nation" ("A Negro Nation within Nation") as follows: "[upon her] shoulders rests the big task to create and keep alive, in the breast of black men, a holy and consuming passion to break with the slave traditions of the past; to spurn and overcome the fatal, insidious inferiority complex of the present" (Bonnie Bogle, "Negro Womanhood's Greatest Needs," *The Messenger*; qtd. in McDowell "*The Changing Same*" 172-173).

Despite the fact that women were relegated to an inferior position in the burgeoning national imagination, there were several prominent female writers among the Harlem Renaissance literati, such as Jessie Fauset, Nella Larsen, or Dorothy West, to name just a few. The emergence of the pastoral tradition in the 1980s elevated the status of only one of them – Zora Neale Hurston, a writer and anthropologist who had built a bridge between the rich black folklore of the American South and the historical/heritage prose of the Black Women's Renaissance.[20] Hurston did, indeed, recognize and exploit the literary possibilities of the black folk tradition more than any other black writer of her times, and by doing so, she anticipated the oral character of the Black Women's Renaissance. The Second Renaissance writers, critics, and womanists paid respect to the genius of Zora Neale Hurston's voice, but in doing so they put the literary achievements of her female contemporaries in the shade. Hazel V. Carby points out that Hurston established the pre-eminence of the folk aesthetic in the African American women's literary tradition: "[in the] search for a tradition of black women writers of fiction a pattern has been established from Alice Walker back through Zora Neale Hurston which represents the rural folk as bearers of Afro-American literary history and preservers of Afro-American culture" (*Reconstructing Womanhood* 175). In line with Alice Walker, who is credited with re-discovering and canonizing "Queen Zora," black feminist critics (most notably Barbara Christian in *Black Women Novelists*) emphasized Hurston's importance as a model for BWR writers. Hurston became an inspiration for such contemporary Black American

20 The excavation of black history and literature from the perspective of African Americans also resulted in some remarkable books of fiction authored by men. Ernest Gaines's folk autobiography *The Autobiography of Miss Jane Pittman* (1971), Alex Haley's *Roots* (1976), Charles Johnson *Oxherding Tale* (1982) and *Middle Passage* (1989), and David Bradley's *The Chaneysville Incident* (1981) are perhaps the most interesting examples.

female authors as Toni Morrison, Gloria Naylor, Maya Angelou, Toni Cade Bambara and Edwidge Danticat, who hailed her as their literary foremother and the "genius of the South."[21]

Needless to say, as Gloria Hull (*Color, Sex, and Poetry* 7) has noted, Hurston was not as appreciated in her own time as she was during the Afra American Renaissance, and she was often both excluded from, and averse to, the conservative and male-dominated New Negro movement. Just like other female writers of the Harlem Renaissance, she had to overcome many obstacles to get access to the patronage or sponsorship on which Harlem Renaissance artists depended. Hurston was also sidelined by later male intellectuals who gained prominence after the Harlem Renaissance. One of her most trenchant critics was Richard Wright, who felt particularly ill-disposed to Hurston's treatment of black folk heritage. Wright, like many black nationalists in the 1960s, thought that the traditional black folk culture of the South was not compatible with the 20th-century modernity and urban industrial life. Wright's criticism prefigured the attitudes of the Black Power movement, with its racialism, separatism and radical militancy. From Richard Wright in the 1940s to LeRoy Jones in the 1960s, black male writers dominated the literary scene and focused mainly on the black-white conflicts in northern cities. Hurston and her anthropological pursuits were totally forgotten at that time because her writing was not considered to be either political or radical enough. The ideological tug-of-war between Hurston and her male contemporaries, and her marginalization in the period between the first and the Second Renaissance, illustrates how difficult it was to forge an inclusive vision of the African American "imagined community" in light of the gender bias that was inherent in these early formulations.

The Black nationalism of the 1960s and the beginning of the 1970s was a crucial step forward in "imagining" the African American "nation," in which art and literature played a key role. In the words of the novelist Charles Johnson, this cultural nationalist surge "harken[ed] back to the generation of Marcus Garvey and the Harlem Renaissance" (*Being and Race* 85). It rethought the "popular aesthetics" of the New Negro Movement and proposed in its stead the Black Aesthetic, which Hoyt Fuller described as "a system of isolating and evaluating the artistic works of black people which reflects the special character and imperatives of black experience" ("Towards a Black Aesthetic" 9). The Black Aesthetic was described as the "aesthetic and spiritual sister of the Black Power concept" by Larry Neal ("The Black Arts Movement" 272), and, in the words of one of its founders, Addison Gayle Jr., as "the cultural arm of black nationalism" (Saundra Towns, "Addison Gayle" 12). Formulated by different artists and critics, the Black Aesthetic found its fullest expression in Addison Gayle's anthology of the same title that was published in 1971. The Black Aesthetic

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21 Alice Walker, who is credited with re-discovering Hurston, put a tombstone on Hurston's grave that reads: "Zora Neale Hurston, a genius of the South. Novelist, folklorist, anthropologist."

critics shared a remarkably homogenous vision of what constituted the uniqueness of African American culture. Contrary to the Black Power Movement, its revolutionary-Marxist arm, the Black Aesthetic prioritized race over class, and assumed that "Black people in [the USA] make up a cultural nation" (Karenga, "Black Cultural Nationalism" 165). In the words of Joseph R. Washington, the black aesthetic sought to "create the illusion of a nation within a nation, a set of standards proposed as distinctive and unique for Black people" ("Black Nationalism" 38). Washington summarizes the position of Black Nationalism as follows: "[the] theology of Black Nationalism [was] African communalism. The ideology [was] Black separatism. The philosophy [was] socialism or the dictatorship of the proletariat complete with the thesis (Black is right), antithesis (white is wrong). Its aesthetic [was] cultural *elitism* based on a faith in people of African descent" (ibid. 35).

The Black Aesthetic turned to literature and the arts to re-imagine a common culture that would be the glue that binds African American ethno-nationalism. It proposed a series of clearly delineated expectations for "national" art, which was supposed to be didactic and politically engaged. Harry Reed, in "Toni Morrison, *Song of Solomon* and Black Cultural Nationalism," argued that by harnessing art in the service of politics, the Black Aesthetic "[sought] to control, direct and shape [the] political destiny" of African American people (50). Reed argued that black nationalism focused on two ideas. The first idea was to build a political entity and to achieve acceptance for the idea that the group (Black Americans) constituted a nation; the second was that the most fundamental function of Black art was to reverse the negative image of blackness and to endow it with active and affirming qualities.[22] Addison Gayle, in "Blueprint for Black Criticism," appealed for black characters to be modeled on exemplary historical figures such as Sojourner Truth, Harriet Tubman, Martin Delany, H. Rap Brown, and Fannie Lou Hamer, who were progenitors of black emancipation.

The Black Aesthetic privileged forms of art that allowed artists to address the black community directly. Drama and poetry were preferred because they facilitated direct communication between the artist and the audience (Dubey, *Black Women Novelists* 22). Through street graffiti, performances and recitals of poems (which were often informal happenings staged in the street), black artists sought to establish unmediated contact with their audiences. Their purpose was to affirm a unified black community through actively engaging its members in direct participation. The Black Aesthetic successfully created a black audience for its art that existed independently from the white establishment. There were several independent publishing houses (Broadside Press, Third World Press, Free Black Press, Lotus Press, Black River Writers) and journals (*Freedomways, Journal of Black Studies, Soulbook, The Journal of Black Poetry*). New black studies programs were springing up in American univer-

22 See also Addison Gayle, "Cultural Strangulation: Black Literature and White Aesthetic" and Carolyn Gerald, "The Black Writer and His Role."

sities. In brief, black nationalists contributed immensely to increasing black literacy and interest in culture and the arts, and in this way, they managed to rally black people around shared cultural and political goals.

Black Women's Renaissance literature and criticism emerged in the wake of the Black Aesthetic movement. Black women writers began publishing their novels at the heyday of black cultural nationalism in the late 1960s and early 70s. As Madhu Dubey aptly remarks, BWR novels that were "published in this period inscribe[d] within them their adjustment to the expectations of their contemporary audience (which, we must remember, was consolidated largely through the efforts of the black nationalists)" (ibid. 32). The implied reader of BWR fiction was molded by the Black Aesthetic movement and its belief that art should serve a useful political function for the community.

The Black Aesthetic movement created patterns of literary influence that shaped the narrative voice, characterization, artistic strategies and tropes used by black women writers. Most of the artists of the BWR addressed the expectations of this implied reader, which, as Dubey observes, is especially visible in their interviews. When these authors talked about the objectives of their art, they countered what McDowell called "the pressures of negative publicity" and "the constraining influence" of black nationalist critics, who often castigated women for their departure from the Black Aesthetic (McDowell, "*The Changing Same*" 135). Black women writers often made concessions to the principle of the functionality of art. For example, in "Rootedness: The Ancestor as Foundation," Morrison claimed that the black writer's work "must be political," but it cannot be "a case study" or a "recipe." The novel "should be beautiful and powerful, but it should also *work*. It should have something in it that enlightens; something in it that opens the door and points the way" (Morrison, "Rootedness" 341). Gayl Jones, on the other hand, admitted that she had "an unfortunate public image" because she could not write "politically correct" and appropriately didactic novels ("About my Work" 235). Gloria Naylor admitted to being "self-conscious" about her first novel. She claimed that she "bent over backwards" to avoid "a negative message com[ing] through about the men." She also "worried about whether or not the problems that were being caused by men in the women's lives would be interpreted as some bitter statement [she] had to make about black men" (Gloria Naylor, "A Conversation" 579). Similar assertions can be found in interviews and non-fiction by Alice Walker and other Black feminist writers. Dubey states that as a result:

> black women's fiction of the 1970s constitute[d] a highly mediated response to black nationalist utterances on a number of different but interrelated objects, including the black woman, the black community, the question of political change, and the function of art, among others. Black women's texts conduct[ed] a subtextual dialogue with black nationalist discourse, adopting the several strategies of directly contradicting, berating, appeasing, beguiling, and dodging an assumed and typical Black Aesthetic reader. The ideological context of black nationalism is thus internalized by these texts, constructed as the hypothetical addressee or interlocutor of their fictional discourse. (*Black Women Novelists* 11)

Mindful of the expectations of their audiences, and shaped by black nationalist discourse, BWR writers and critics shared with black cultural nationalism the idea that black literature and culture were the most important sites of struggle for self-determination. Many feminist texts, both fictional and non-fictional, brought a feminist perspective to a broad range of issues that were also high on the black nationalist agenda, and the ideas that they set forth, particularly in the 1980s, were not oppositional to the Black Aesthetic program, as I will demonstrate in the next section.

1.2 Two Versions of the National "Family Plot": Black National Theatre and the Historical/Heritage Writing of the Black Women's Renaissance

The ideological contest and the jostling for power between the BWR and BN in the 1970s and 80s was very often expressed in the language of family conflict, as suggested, for example, in Deborah McDowell's essay, "Boundaries: Or Distant Relations and Close Kin" ("*The Changing Same*"). Alternatively, as Christine Froula intimated in the article "The Daughter's Seduction: Sexual Violence and Literary History," it was presented as a gendered and inter-generational conflict between the "daughter's story and the father's law." Froula argues that in black history:

> the relations of literary daughters and fathers resemble in some important ways the model developed by Judith Herman and Lisa Hirschman to describe the family situations of incest victims: a dominating authoritarian father; an absent, ill or a complicitous mother; and a daughter who, prohibited by her father from speaking about the abuse, is unable to sort her contradictory feelings of love for her father and terror of him, of desire to end the abuse and fear that if she speaks, she will destroy the family structure that is her only security. (622-3)

In this extended metaphor, the literary daughters are BWR writers emerging from obscurity in the 1970s to give testimony to their past abuse and challenge the hegemony of black male writers, the oppressive literary forefathers of the earlier decades. Many of the BWR novels of the 1970s bear witness to the very real physical suffering of black daughters at the hands of their abusive fathers, whether real or adoptive. These books include texts analyzed by Froula, such as Angelou's *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings* and Walker's *The Color Purple*, but many others, most notably Morrison's *The Bluest Eye*, fit this paradigm.

Froula's metaphor of a family feud invites us to see the 1970s historic transfer of prestige and power from male to female authors as an exciting episode in the national family narrative. It could be defined, I think, as a shift from a paternal to a maternal model of the family romance genre. In the rhetoric of black nationalism, the myth of the perfect black family, which African American literature was supposed to depict, pertained not only to real families headed by men but also to "the extended family, the unity of the tribe" (Royster, "In Search of Our Fathers' Arms" 367). Paternalist

discourse emphasized the importance of keeping the extended family unified by honoring "the tradition that is nearly as old as black American literature itself" and the "unspoken but almost universal covenant … to present positive images of blacks" (Mel Watkins, "Sexism, Racism"). That tradition was the source of the 1960s and 70s paternal prohibition that forbade black writers to speak openly about gender inequality and ill-treatment.

As McDowell remarked in the following extract, during the 1970s BWR writers were under constant attack from:

> an enfeebled black nationalism, long past saving, which like other nationalist rhetoric, was bound up in masculinist anxieties and gendered ideologies of dominance and control. Metaphors of "family," "kinship," and "community" structured these attacks that bordered on calls for censorship and attempted to demand that black women writers meet a representational ideal in the name of creating racial unity and wholeness. That ideal held familiar injunctions for women that seemed to echo those the German National Socialists (Nazis) held for "their" women – kinder, kirche, kuche (children, church, and kitchen) ("*The Changing Same*" xv-xvi)

While black female social protest novels of the 1970s unraveled the fantasy of an idealized nuclear black family by emphasizing the endemic subordination of women and destructive patterns of behavior of black men, the narratives of the 1980s finished off what was left of male authority by showing the centrality of women in sustaining "the unity of the tribe." Such novels as *Mama Day, Abeng and Praisesong for the Widow* celebrated multigenerational black families that were presided over by vigorous and wise maternal figures, thus giving, in the words of McDowell, "a new twist on the family plot" ("*The Changing Same*" 123). As McDowell laconically puts it, "[this] time it [was] the black male locked outside the family fold, and borrowing from Morrison's *The Bluest Eye*, 'his own kin had done it'" ("*The Changing Same*" 123). Using a term from business terminology, I would like to argue that the BWR could be seen as a "hostile takeover" of the black nationalist family plot that saw black women writers, womanists and female critics beat black nationalists at their own game. In their maternal romances, BWR writers switched the myth around, so that, for the first time, the black family plot was empowering for women. This feat was, in my opinion, accomplished in two steps: in the 1970s, with the aid of social protest conventions, BWR writers de-constructed the myth of the ideal nuclear black family; and in the 1980s, they re-constructed it afresh around their own feminist agenda and through the generic conventions of matrilineal, ethnopoetic romance/allegory.

It would be, of course, absurdly simplistic to argue that the BWR was motivated by the impulse to "filibuster" the work of "'talented' black men" (as Ishmael Reed complained in *Reckless Eyeballing*), but nonetheless, the BWR did "wrench" the national family plot from the hands of black men. The BWR marks the attainment of new heights of social and political power for African American women, who benefited from the simultaneous rise of the civil rights and feminist movements. Their rise caused a shift in the "power relations between black men and women in the liter-

ary sphere" (McDowell, "*The Changing Same*" 120), whereby, for the first time in the history of African American literature, black women's voices were more audible and authoritative than the voices of men. As Darryl Pinckney has put it, "[black] women writers seemed to find their voices and audiences" at the same time as "black men seemed to lose theirs" (Pinckney 18). In effect, the 1970s and 80s saw "an unacknowledged jostling for space in the literary marketplace" (ibid. 125), which reached a crescendo in feuds between black women and black men writers, such as, for example, those already mentioned between Ishmael Reed and Alice Walker, or between Stanley Crouch and Toni Morrison.[23]

In retrospect, it seems only right that BWR writers should have wanted to write men out of the black family plot. Male nationalist organizations had placed restrictions of the roles that black women could perform in the movement, though they did that, allegedly, with the acquiescence of black women. According to Robert Staples, in the 1960s "there was a general consensus among men and women" that it was time for the men to take charge and hold the leadership positions in the movement ("The Myth of Black Macho" 27). With the exception of Angela Davis, who was one of the most radical and prominent activists of the era, women in general were tasked with "[manning] the telephones or [fixing] coffee while the men wrote position papers or decided on policy" (Bambara, "On the Issue of Roles" 208). Consequently, very few women artists actively participated in the mainstream activities of the Black Aesthetic. Among them, besides Davis, were poets such as Sonia Sanchez, Nikki Giovanni, Mari Evans, Alice Walker, Ntozake Shange and Audre Lorde.

Even when these women were acknowledged as poets and revolutionaries, they were always seen, first and foremost, through the prism of conservative notions of black womanhood. Their public engagement and literary careers were perceived as being secondary to their roles of mothers and wives. For instance, when Haki Madhubuti discussed the work of Sonia Sanchez and Lucille Clifton, he praised them for not "[compromising] [their] values, [their] art, or [their] people for fame or gold" (Madhubuti, "Sonia Sanchez" 419-20). The values that Madhubuti had in mind were traditional family values – these female poets were, above all, commended for their dedication to their families, which were deemed to be more important than their lives outside the hearth and home. In other words, as Madhubuti elaborated, these female poets did not "become literary and physical prostitutes" to "make it." Sanchez was admired for "raising … her children, maintaining a home, working fourteen-hour days" (Madhubuti, "Sonia Sanchez" 432). He cherished her poetry for upholding the value of family because it "highlights Black women as mothers, sisters, lovers, wives, workers, and warriors," and shows commitment to the "Black family" (ibid. 432). Clifton was also put on a pedestal for being "a full-time wife, overtime mother," and

23 Ishmael Reed critiqued Alice Walker's *The Color Purple*, and attacked womanists in *Reckless Eyeballing* (1986). Crouch published a scathing review of *Beloved* ("Aunt Medea").

only "part-time street activist and writer of small treasures," who, nonetheless, remained focused on what undoubtedly should be the most important aspect of this poet's life – "the children, the family" (Madhubuti, "Lucile Clifton" 159, 156).

Although women's poetry shared the investment in orality and the political commitment that characterized the Black Aesthetic program, it never achieved the same level of public endorsement as the poetry of black men. This lack of full acknowledgment could partially have been caused by the fact that the women's poetry was more personal and contemplative, and quite often skeptical about what Lorde called the "unilateral definition of what 'blackness' is" (qtd. by Tate, "Audre Lorde" 101). This skepticism was shared by Nikki Giovanni and Ntozake Shange, and was most fully expressed in Alice Walker's collection *Revolutionary Petunias and Other Poems*, which was published in 1973. In the 1970s, these female poets and writers became more and more vocal about the black nationalist tendency to unify black communities at all costs, hide inner conflicts, and construct representations of women in a way that belittled their contributions to the cultural and political movements that were transforming the social landscape of America. They questioned the Black Aesthetic's tendency to ascribe to all blacks the same backgrounds, desires, and goals, and they began to unravel, thread by thread, the tightly knitted fabric of black nationalist ideology. In the words of Henry Louis Gates:

> Women writers such as June Jordan challenged the cultural nationalists' painting of blackness almost entirely in male terms. Southern writers such as Alice Walker questioned the Black Arts movement's assumption that the urban Northeast was the only place were "real" black people lived. Homosexual writers such as Audre Lorde protested the ways in which lesbians and gays fell outside the cultural nationalist definition of "blackness." Immigrant writers such as Paule Marshall reminded readers that US Afro-American culture was not the only black culture, but that the experience of the black living in the Caribbean was equally relevant. ("Introduction" 2016)

These female writers defied the "the father's law": that is, the prohibition to speak critically about the black "tribe." They also resisted assumptions about gender relations that were prevalent in the so-called "masculine decade." Contrary to black cultural nationalists, BWR writers turned to prose in order to deconstruct and interrogate the ways in which black cultural nationalism misrepresented black womanhood.

There were several different discourses on women in black cultural nationalism that either praised or castigated different models of womanhood, and that the BWR sought to remould. In general, black nationalists advocated the imposition of a very conservative gender hierarchy that required women to be self-effacing and obedient to men. Amiri Baraka, for example, appealed to biological determinism to explain why black women should be subservient to men, saying that "nature has made woman submissive," he claimed, "she must submit to man's creation in order for it to exist" (qtd. in Paula Giddings, *When and Where I Enter* 318). In his plays, romanticized visions of women as good mothers and faithful wives are interwoven with brutal

scenes of men abusing women who "misbehave." Baraka's female characters are either revered "mothers," nurturing children and unconditionally supporting their men's aspirations, or dangerous "castrators and bitches" that need to be beaten into submission. This misogynistic concept is reiterated in the work of other prominent writers. Eldridge Cleaver, for example, valued women only for their services to the patriarchal black family and to male leaders. His essays eulogized women as mothers of past and future black freedom fighters, and reductively spoke of the black woman as a "womb" that "nurtured Toussaint L'Ouverture, that warmed Nat Turner, Gabriel Prosser, and Denmark Vesey" (*Soul on Ice* 208). Similarly, Robert Staples lavished praise on women, but solely for their reproductive powers, saying that "from her [a black woman's] womb have come the revolutionary warriors of our time" ("The Myth of the Black Matriarchy" 346). In brief, as far as women were concerned, black nationalists saw value only in reproductive femininity insofar as black women's procreative function contributed to the revolution. As Robert J. Patterson has stated, they wanted black women to give birth to "(male) babies (warriors) for the revolution as a way to consign black women to the role of mother and force their economic dependence" ("African American Feminist Theories and Literary Criticism" 93).

Black women writers in general were very suspicious about this narrowly defined role that was assigned to them in the national script. As Florynce Kennedy wryly commented, making black women responsible only for "breeding revolutionaries" was "not too far removed from a cultural past, where Black women were encouraged to be breeding machines for their masters" (qtd. in Staples, *The Black Woman in America* 147). Black cultural nationalists seemed to be unaware of this and other contradictions in their way of thinking about the black family and the black "tribe." Black nationalists advocated a radical break from the slave past and a complete denunciation of white middle-class family ideology. In reality, however, they perpetuated the degradation that black women had experienced under slavery by forcing them to comply with "the white US bourgeois ideology that [black nationalists] set out to subvert" (Dubey, *Black Women Novelists* 12).

In black nationalist-inspired critical social theory, as in the Black Aesthetic, the figure of the strong, persevering black mother became, in the words of the sociologist and black feminist Patricia Hill Collins, "a controlling image." She said that motherhood, "working on behalf of the new Black nation" (*Black Feminist Thought* 174), was considered to be the ultimate benchmark of women's value for the African American community. Lesbians, as well as "Jezebels" (lax women), were condemned as deficient mothers, who rejected heterosexual relationships and motherhood or refused to take proper care of their offspring. It seems paradoxical, therefore, that in spite of black nationalist fixation with the image of the resilient black mother, more often than not, the real mothers themselves were not held in such high esteem. And while in their literary works, many African American thinkers glorified super strong black mothers, in practice mothers were frequently abandoned, maltreated and denigrated by their husbands and sons. These men could, as Collins contended, "routinely praise

Black mothers, especially their own,” and go into raptures about their “devotion, sacrifice, and unconditional love,” but still expect their mothers “to place their needs behind those of everyone else” (ibid. 174).[24]

Black Nationalism’s ambiguity about black motherhood was nowhere more visible than in the American national discussion that erupted in the wake of the infamous Moynihan Report, *The Negro Family: The Case for National Action*, which was issued in 1965 by the US Department of Labor. The report, authored by the future Senator Daniel Patrick Moynihan, described the “Black matriarchy” as the center of a “tangle of pathology” afflicting Black families and leading to a cycle of poverty. “A fundamental fact of Negro American family life,” argued Moynihan, “is the often-reversed roles of husband and wife, in which Black women consistently earn more than their men.” While the report admitted that, “[i]n essence, the Negro community [had] been forced into a matriarchal structure,” it penalized the matriarchal arrangement of African American families as a kind of dysfunctional “subculture,” and blamed it for “retard[ing] the progress of the group as a whole.” Black women were blamed for high rates of divorce, desertions by husbands, births out of wedlock, and the consequent endemic poverty of black families. The report explained that matriarchy is “out of line” with American society, since:

> Ours is a society which presumes male leadership in private and public affairs. The arrangements of society facilitate such leadership and reward it. A subculture, such as that of the Negro American, in which this is not the pattern, is placed at a distinct disadvantage. (29)

As Patricia Hill Collins explains, the report popularized “two independent images that together define[d] Black Women’s roles in White and in African-American families.” “The first image,” observes Collins, “is that of the Mammy, the faithful domestic servant. Like one of the family, Mammy conscientiously ‘mothers’ her white children, caring for them and loving them as if they were her own.” Collins adds that “Mammy is the ideal Black mother for she recognizes her place. She is paid next to nothing and yet cheerfully accepts her inferior status” (*Black Feminist Thought* 44). The second negative image is that of “the too-strong matriarch,” who is “overly aggressive” and “unfeminine” (usually obese and sexually unattractive). She “emasculates” her lover or husband, who “understandably, either desert[s] or refuse[s] to marry the [mother] of [his] children” (ibid. 75), and “raises weak sons and ‘unnaturally superior’ daugh-

24 Lesbianism, and homosexuality in general, were strictly forbidden and excluded from any BN representations of “blackness.” Blackness and lesbianism remained mutually exclusive and incompatible markers of identity well into the 1980s, when three lesbian novels were published in one year (1982): Audre Lorde’s *Zami: A New Spelling of My Name*; Alice Walker’s *The Color Purple* and Gloria Naylor’s *The Women of Brewster Place*. Only then did it become conceivable that blackness is a broad enough concept to accommodate alternative sexual identities.

ters" (ibid. 44). Consequently, the report contributed to what Franklin described as the "feminization of poverty" in the urban black underclass ("Feminization of Poverty" 142).

The critique of black matriarchs reached a fever pitch after 1965. The report was a watershed for Black Nationalist thinkers, who did not mince their words about these independent women – the mothers, grandmothers or aunts taking care of their mostly female households. These women were pictured as reactionaries, who impeded not only the economic progress of black communities, but also the black revolution. Officially, black nationalists rejected the findings of the report, but they nonetheless shared some of its assumptions and theses. The African American men's discussions on "emasculating" matriarchs drew perverse and unacknowledged inspiration from this misguided governmental report. The findings of the report were echoed in various black nationalist publications that insinuated that domineering black women prevented black men from exercising their masculinity. Calvin Hernton, for example, wrote, that black women were characterized by "a sort of stud-ism, which expresses itself in a strong matriarchal drive" (*Sex and Racism in America* 132). Robert Staples claimed that "Black women had held up their men for too long and it was time for the men to take charge" ("The Myth of Black Macho" 27). In this way, black women, who were the most economically disadvantaged group in American society, became the common enemy for both the federal government and nationalist black men.

The stereotype of the black matriarch stemmed from the image of Sapphire, a masculine, aggressive woman who drove her partners away with her overbearing nature. Another common stereotype, which was endorsed by black nationalists, was that of the Jezebel, a sexually promiscuous and immoral woman who gained power through sexual relationships with white men.[25] These two negative "controlling images" of black womanhood originated in the time of slavery and were appropriated by black cultural nationalist ideology and used against black women to limit their participation in the Black Power Movement. They associated black women with the slave past and with the betrayal of the black race. Nathan Hare, for instance, in "Will the Real Black Man Please Stand up?" claimed that black women had been manipulated by the white man, saying that: "Historically, the white oppressor has pitted male against female and ... forced and seduced the female to take on his values and through her emasculated and controlled the man" (32). Eldridge Cleaver in "Black Eunuch," argued that "all down through history, [the white man] has propped her [the black

25 One of the most notorious stereotypes of black women, particularly mothers, is that of the "welfare queen" or "welfare mother." These pejorative phrases, coined in 1974, were used to refer to women who allegedly collected excessive welfare payments through fraud or manipulation. Reporting on welfare fraud began during the early 1960s in magazines such as the *Reader's Digest*. The term gained extra currency during Ronald Reagan's 1976 presidential primary campaign. See "Mammies, Matriarchs, and Other Controlling Images" in Collins's *Black Feminist Thought*.

woman] up economically above you and me, to strengthen her hand against us [black men]” (*Soul on Ice* 162).

Black women responded variously to these allegations. In an interview with Robert Stepto, Morrison unapologetically stated that “[e]verybody knows, deep down, that Black men were emasculated by white men, period. And that Black women didn’t take any part in that” (Stepto, “Intimate Things in Place” 17). Michele Wallace’s seminal book, *Black Macho and the Myth of the Superwoman* (1979) blasted the male bias of black politics that emerged in the sixties. Other women writers adopted a more conciliatory stance. In 1969, Frances M. Beal issued a pamphlet titled “Double Jeopardy: To Be Black and Female,” in which she addressed the black cultural nationalist thesis that black women actively participated in the emasculation of black men. Even as she defended black women against the charge of willful collaboration, Beal reiterated the black cultural nationalist belief that, at least economically, black women were in a better position than black men. Instead of incriminating the matriarchy, though, she blamed the white capitalist society for deliberately setting black women against black men:

> In keeping with its goal of destroying the black race’s will to resist its subjugation, capitalism found it necessary to create a situation where the black man found it impossible to find meaningful or productive employment. More often than not, he couldn’t find work of any kind. And the black woman likewise was manipulated by the system, economically exploited and physically assaulted. She could often find work in the white man’s kitchen, however, and sometimes became the sole breadwinner of the family. This predicament has led to many psychological problems on the part of both man and woman and has contributed to the turmoil that we find in the black family structure. (100)

Beal argued, in a conciliatory fashion, that many black men and women did not fully understand that they were both victims of an unjust social and economic system. Black women too often turned against their partners or husbands, considering them too lazy or incompetent to provide for their families, while black men retaliated against such attacks by being abusive to their partners or even by leaving their families in difficult circumstances. Unlike black nationalists, however, Beal claimed that in this conflict between black men and women, it was the women who were hardest hit since they suffered from “double jeopardy,” that is from economic deprivation, racism and sexism all at the same time.

In the 1970s, the odds were stacked heavily against black women, who did not have any allies in their fight to free motherhood, family and their communities from the power of damaging and demeaning theories and stereotypes. It suited the Black Aesthetic movement to represent the black woman as a reactionary force that was holding back the progressive and revolutionary black male. The black woman was the symbolic carrier of a decayed form of identity that was completely antithetical to the future that black nationalists envisaged for the new black nation under the leadership of “emancipated” and empowered black men. One of them, Eldridge Cleaver, ended

his diatribe against complicit black women in *Soul on Ice* with a shocking assertion that sums up this view of the position of black women in the African American nation: "the white man made the Black woman a symbol of slavery and the white woman a symbol of freedom. Every time I embrace a Black woman, I'm embracing slavery" (160). In "Towards Our Theatre: A Definite Act," Keorapetse W. Kgositsile, a South African poet living in exile in the USA, advocated violence to reform "[old] decadent would-be Black woman" whom he called a "hideous little imitation life pungent like the stench of stale menstrual flow" (147). Kgositsile berated the black woman "for straightening her hair" and threatened that "the Revolutionary Black Theatre would straighten out her mind instead."[26] He added that "if [she is] too twisted and/or petrified to be straightened out, it would pulp [her] to death" (147).

Black nationalism's discontent with the "regressive" black woman was part and parcel of a larger unsolved problem that the Revolutionary Black Theater had with the history of African people in the New World. Black nationalists wanted to transform the future of African American people by drawing a line between the degrading past and a more promising future. Baraka repeatedly asserted that revolutionary black culture should present not "history or memory" but "new men, new heroes" (Gayle, *The Black Situation* 61). Black nationalists saw the black ghettos of America as the crucible of the male revolutionary subject, who was posed in opposition to both the old folk consciousness and the middle-class ethos of assimilated blacks. Black male writing of the period often used images of rebirth or conversion that produced "a new man."[27] The new man derived his power from "the unconscious energy of the Black Experience" (Henderson, "Survival Motion" 124). The definition of the new black man connoted an essential and authentic blackness, and a natural sexual potency and vigor that was not to be found in the decadent white culture. Black nationalists reversed the old racist notion of blackness that equated it with ugliness and backwardness and replaced it with their new notion of blackness as beautiful, powerful and bristling with unlimited possibilities. They wanted to achieve progress by "killing the past" (Dubey, *Black Women Novelists* 159) and embracing a future free from the oppression, denigration and self-loathing that had held black people like a trap.

Since the Black Aesthetic theory was based on an absolute discontinuity between the slave past and the revolutionary future, or "a conception of change as an abrupt linear rupture" (ibid.), black cultural nationalists' approach to black folk heritage and oral culture was, to say the least, mixed. Some black nationalists, such as Amiri Baraka and Larry Neal, for example, reasserted the New Negro movement's belief that folklore was the source of an authentic black literary voice. Oral folk culture was seen as a mode of expression that was free from the assumptions and stylistic con-

26 The term "Revolutionary Theatre" comes from the manifesto essay by Baraka, in which he proposes to view theatre as a political weapon, a theatre of cruelty aiming at forcing change.
27 See the essays in Barbour's *The Black Power Revolt*.

ventions of Western aesthetics, and this gave it the capacity to express an authentic, original and uniquely black consciousness. Blues music, for example, was elevated to the status of "the paradigm, … the outline of the Black Experience in America" (Henderson, "Blues, Soul and Black Identity" 13), and "[the] essential vector of the Afro-American sensibility" (Neal, "The Ethos of the Blues" 108). Amiri Baraka claimed that only the blues mode could convey the essential identity of black people and that the world that the blues songs projected was "the Blackest and potentially the strongest" ("*The Changing Same*" 118). Sometimes he praised the blues for being the record of the race's memory; at other times, however, as, for example, in "The Myth of a Negro Literature," he called for abandoning the old forms and creating new ones that were free of the burden of the past and memory. He was not the only black nationalist who had misgivings about the value of blues as a vehicle of "racial memory." Sonia Sanchez, for instance, wrote in "Liberation / Poem" that "blues aint culture/they sounds of oppression" (*We a BaddDDD People* 54). Ron Karenga, another leading theoretician of the Black Aesthetic, associated blues with "resignation" and with an "acceptance of reality" ("Black Cultural Nationalism" 36) that was detrimental to the new revolutionary goals. Since the Black Revolutionary Theatre aspired to change the sordid reality in which most black people lived their lives, the Blues, with its message of suffering and endurance, was thought, by and large, to be counter-productive. The Blues aesthetic was not compatible with the principle of the "functionality" of art because it "[did] not commit [black people] to the struggle of today and tomorrow, but [kept them] in the past" (ibid.). The past and everything that brought it back was, according to Larry Neal, the "enemy of the revolutionary" ("The Black Arts Movement" 265). As Julian Mayfield postulated, for the black revolutionary it was, therefore, imperative to "[wipe] [history] clean from the very beginning as if it never happened" ("You Touch My Black Aesthetic" 30).

BWR fiction of the 1970s was motivated by the desire to provide a corrective to the "controlling images" of women that were presented in black nationalist discourse, as Madhu Dubey argued in her 1994 study *Black Women Novelists and the Nationalist Aesthetic*. In the 1980s, it then set out to reverse the black cultural nationalist approach to memory, folklore and orality. The BWR made slavery the foundational experience of African American people, a commonly shared myth of origins that could unite the increasingly diverse black collective. This experience, which was frequently revisited in black women's novels and expressed in the idiom of the black vernacular, became the cornerstone for a feminist version of the Black Aesthetic. As Dubey contends, BWR writers made also good use of folklore in the 1970s, and "[a] Black Aesthetic perception of oral forms … reappears in much of the later black feminist writing on the subject" (*Black Women Novelists* 5). In the 1980s, especially, in the wake of the revival of Zora Neale Hurston's work, folklore was lovingly re-embraced as a wellspring of the metaphors, tropes, and characters that gave BWR fiction its unique and magical character. This time, it was not only blues that attracted a lot of attention: conjuring, specifying, quilting, the laying on of hands and other dis-

tinctively African cultural practices were proudly extracted from the slave past, and absorbed and transformed by the writing of the BWR (Lee, *Granny Midwives and Black Women Writers*). The literary rendering of these old practices also created a new anti-realist mode of writing that became emblematic of the fiction of the 1980s. Madhu Dubey states that it "interrupt[ed] the realist legacy" and combined postmodern techniques with folk sensibility in search of a new, independent and authoritative voice which could "inscribe a [new] black feminist subject" (*Black Women Novelists* 5). In the 1980s, the writers of the BWR tried to recover and appropriate folk materials (slave songs, the blues, trickster tales), and elevate the rural South to the status of homeland of their distinctively female African American culture. These folk materials were treated with utmost reverence as traces of "cultural origins that [could] withstand the displacement and fragmentation wrought by oppression" (ibid.). They provided a link between the female folk heritage of the American South and the post-Great-Migration male-dominated culture of the urban North.

BWR writers' attitude to the slave past was very clear; in their opinion, the experience of slavery and segregation attested to the strength and resilience of African American culture in the face of inconceivable oppression. This resistance, and the longevity of black folk practices was, more often than not, associated with black women, the most disenfranchised and oppressed group in American society. BWR novels, from the 1970s onwards, focused on contemporary womenfolk to show the human cost of social and economic oppression, male sexism, and historical change. They did not always deal directly with the experience of slavery, but they emphasized the fact that the ideological and material consequences of slavery continued to the present day. They reiterated the idea that structural oppression continued to ruin the lives of African Americans in the South and North alike, and implicitly made slavery relevant to any discussion of contemporary black political aspirations. Even in the early 1970s, therefore, BWR novels refused to treat history as a linear progression in which everything tragic or degrading could, or should, be left behind. As Dubey contends:

> none of the novels published by black women in this period can endorse the black nationalist discontinuity between oppression and liberation, past and future, all of these novels, in their interplay between cyclic and linear structures, attempt to mediate and resolve the temporal contradiction of black nationalist discourse. (Ibid. 26)

Consequently, the 1970s novels already dramatized what Dubey called the "structural tension between cyclic and linear time" (ibid.). They illustrated the futility of the desire to escape the vicious circle of history that continued to thwart black people's attempts to transcend the slave past. Many black women's novels from the 1970s, as Dubey has noted, such as Alice Walker's *Meridian*, Gayl Jones' *Eva's Man* and Toni Morrison's *Sula*, among others, had a cyclic structure that "enact[ed] the repetition of the past in the present, and imped[ed] the linear progress of the narrative" (ibid.). Dubey contends that in the following decade, all BWR novels "use[d] cyclical structu-

res to enact an imaginative recovery of the historical past, of the black oral heritage, and of the lost value of cultural community" (ibid. 161). Those cyclic returns disrupted the linear progression of the historiography of black cultural nationalism and emphasized the "generational continuity" that was achieved through the female line. The valorization of matriliny was, as Dubey remarked, an "emergent impulse": it was already visible in the BWR prose of the 1970s, but "the redemptive possibilities of the generational cycle" were "fully realized only in later novels, such as Paule Marshall's *Praisesong for the Widow* (1982) and Gloria Naylor's *Mama Day* (1988)" (ibid.), which I will discuss briefly in one of the following chapters.

Finally, the 1980s novels of the BWR should also be scrutinized against the backdrop of Afrocentric nationalism that emerged at around the same time as BWR fiction turned full circle to endorse the more conservative black cultural nationalist values of the black family and tribe. Molefi Kete Asante's book, *Afrocentricity: The Theory of Social Change*, in which Asante called for scholarship to be based on the idea that Africa is the center of civilization, was the movement's bible. For Asante, African culture was the source of a holistic black personality that could be constructed independently from western notions of a subject. This personality was purported by Asante to differ from from the individual self of bourgeois humanism because it was collective and because it opposed the splintered and shifting discourse of post-structuralism, being itself stable and complete. Although his ideas were not as widely accepted as the black cultural nationalism of the 1920s and 1960s, his call for Afrocentric scholarship was answered by some black critics. Among them were some female critics, including: anti-feminists, such as Charlyn A. Harper-Bolton, and feminists, such as Filomina Steady, Rosalyn Terborg-Penn, Carol Gilligan and Patricia Hill Collins. The first group endorsed a very traditional model of black womanhood that was based on an absolute rejection of feminism, while the latter group did their best to combine nationalism and feminism in such a way as to give women more agency.

I will discuss the work of feminist Afrocentrists in the following chapters, but it might be useful at this point to look more closely at the discursive production of womanhood by anti-feminist Afrocentrists who fully accepted the claims about women that were being made by nationalists. These critics set out to recuperate an African sense of woman-ness and to revive the spiritual quality of African cultures that had been "lost and buried in … [the]African past" (Mayfield, "You Touch My Black Aesthetic" 27). They admonished black feminists for embracing western values and-for accepting "the Euro-American definition of 'woman' … devoid of any African sense of woman" (Charlyn A. Harper-Bolton; qtd. in White, "Africa on My Mind" 148). According to Harper-Bolton, the "contemporary African American woman must recognize that in keeping with her African heritage and legacy, her most important responsibilities are to the survival of the home, the family, and its children" (ibid. 140). Thus, Afrocentrists championed an unrealistic, ahistorical ideal of black motherhood and the black family, based on the idealized concept that pre-colonial Africa was a culturally unified place. They also assumed that there was an organic link between

African women of the pre-colonial past and contemporary African American women, as Harper-Bolton suggests when she states that: "[th]e contemporary African American woman carries within her very essence, within her very soul, the legacy which was bequeathed to her by the traditional African woman and the African American slave woman" (ibid. 145). She believed, therefore, that black women, and especially black mothers, were crucial to an "Afrocentric construction of … political memory" (ibid.). Consequently, in the 1980s, the African American "culture war" between conservative views of a traditional, Afrocentric black "nation," and more liberal, diversified and inclusive visions of the African American future" was rekindled, with the issue of black womanhood and motherhood becoming a key battleground. It is important to emphasize that the sudden re-evaluation of black motherhood, traditional womanhood and African-based common values that occurred in BWR prose of the 1980s and its evident swing to the political right were part and parcel of both these black cultural wars and the conservative politics of the Regan era, which I will discuss further in the following chapters.

Class was another important aspect of the 1980s' conservative nationalist resurgence, both in the Afrocentric revival and in the BWR. As Algernon Austin argues in *Achieving Blackness: Race, Black Nationalism, and Afrocentrism in the Twentieth Century* (2006), Afrocentrism had its roots in the 1920s in Marcus Garvey's Back to Africa Movement and in the Black Power Movement, but unlike them it was not a working-class, grass-roots movement. Austin states that consequently, "Black Power's leftist critique of the political economy of capitalism was nonexistent in Afrocentric ideology" (130) and points out that "it was incorrect to think of black nationalism as only a lower-class phenomenon" (ibid. 170). He also contends that: "Instead of calling for 'African socialism', Afrocentrists made conservative arguments about family values, cultural identity, and self-esteem" (ibid. 130). They turned the center of gravity from the political to the cultural, using women as biological reproducers and cultural keepers, or, as Yuval Davis put it, as the "border guards and … embodiments of collectivity" (Yuval-Davis, *Gender & Nation* 23). The African American woman, in Afrocentric discourse and in many 1980s novels of the BWR, was a monolithic and undifferentiated category, existing in a state of static isolation as a relic of the past.

One has to admit, nonetheless, that by contrast with the Afrocentrists, who looked to Africa in their quest for origins, BWR historical romances chose not to bypass slavery in their search for the essence of blackness. Whereas Afrocentrists reinstated Africa as the origin of the African diaspora, BWR writers never saw Africa as the source of a glorious heritage that could compensate for the dispossession caused by slavery. Contrary to their Afrocentrist contemporaries, the BWR's impulse for historical reclamation and cultural preservation did not compel these writers to cleanse black history of all "undesirable" elements that did not sit well with the goal of restoring black pride. In BWR prose, the idea of an African essence was replaced by a diasporic, though still ethnocentric consciousness, which was re-focalized around the black folk cultures of the extended Caribbean (African American and Caribbean). In the words of

Thorsson, the American South became "a seat of power specifically useful for black American women," which made it possible for them "to get away from problematic, essentialist uses of Africa. They treat the U.S. South with the romantic gaze that other authors reserve for Africa. Marshall and Naylor do not escape problematic, romantic portrayals of the South" (*Women's Work* 92), nor do other writers of the BWR. The corollary of treating the Caribbean and the American South as an important geographical touchstone, was that the extended Caribbean, like Africa, became a catch-all notion for diverse African-derived cultural practices and narratives. Although these were, admittedly, diluted by the constant relocation of members of the African diaspora, through the process of colonization and urbanization, they seem to remain, as Avey, the protagonist of *Praisesong for the Widow*, puts it, "in … [the] blood" (Marshall 35). Thus, the BWR's fixation on the extended Caribbean was as politically effective for female writers as the Afrocentric fixation on Africa was for the nationalists.[28]

1.3 The Black Women's Renaissance and Black Cultural Nationalism: Can Nationalism and Feminism Merge?

In spite of its imperfections and gender imbalance, black cultural nationalism was the dominant ideology engaged in combatting discrimination and oppression in the 1960s and 70s. By the 1980s it already seemed passé and had been replaced by its less popular Afrocentrist offspring. This periodization, along with the inherent misogyny of black nationalists, and black women writers' strident criticism of black cultural nationalism's representation of black womanhood, were the main reasons why the BWR was considered as being the polar opposite of the Black Aesthetic. But as Edmondson remarked in *Making Men*:

> Interestingly, the best examples of the black aesthetic … are to be found in the more recent fiction of African American women, such as Toni Morrison's *Song of Solomon*. Much of this literature, ironically, is often perceived as politically moderate or even conservative because of its indifference to analyzing or depicting white racism, instead focusing on day-to-day lives of its black characters. (88)

There were a few critics who saw the idea that black cultural nationalism and the BWR were dichotomous as problematic, and argued that there is an intrinsic continuity between black nationalism and the BWR. One of these is Charles Johnson, a black novelist who is famous for such novels as *Middle Passage* (1998) and *Oxherding Tale* (1995), who argued, in his study *Being and Race: Black Writing since 1970* (1988), that African American female writing after 1970 "emerges as a literature … not wholly

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28 See also John Williams, "Return of a Native Daughter: An Interview with Paule Marshal and Maryse Conde," in *Sage* 3:2 1986, pp.: 52-3.

separate from the earlier Black Arts Movement of the 1960s" (97-8). In particular, he says that "black writing of the 1980s [Afrocentrism] stands on the shoulders of the confrontationalist fiction of the Angry school" (ibid. 82). Likewise, BWR literature was still preoccupied with social and cultural crisis and the search for identity in the shifting political climate of the era. That literature, contended Johnson, was a fusion of "Black Arts and women's movement" (ibid. 98). Johnson suggested that the women of the BWR produced novels of "racial melodrama" (or "racial paranoia," as he also puts it), that were linked to the black nationalist ethos by their investment in social realism and social protest. The books he calls attention to are the most famous novels of the 1970s: *Corregidora*, *Eva's Men*, *Sula*, *The Bluest Eye*, *The Song of Solomon*, *The Salt Eaters*, *The Color Purple*, *The Third Life Grange Copeland*, and *The Women of Brewster Place*. Johnson sees in these books a reiteration of the theme of longing for reconnection with African roots. He claims that this theme, which becomes, indeed, a central focus in the 1980s, is "as old as Cultural Nationalism itself" (*Being and Race* 105). Given the above, it is clear that Johnson views BWR writers' affinity with the Black Aesthetic as their flaw, and he berates them for failing to "[present] a coherent, consistent, complete 'identity' for black women, one that distinguishes its essential elements from cultural nationalism" (ibid. 117).

By contrast, Harry Reed ("Toni Morrison" 1988), Madhu Dubey (*Black Women Novelists and the Nationalist Aesthetic* 1994), Dana A. Williams ("Contemporary African American Women Writers" 2009), and Courtney Thorsson (*Women's Work: Nationalism and Contemporary African American Women's Novels* 2013) present this continuity between the nationalist ideology of the 1960s and the BWR in a positive light. Williams praises post-civil rights American black women writers for "extend[ing] the beauty and breadth of the Black Arts Movement" ("Contemporary African American Women Writers" 71). She lauds Angelou, Bambara, Morrison, Shange, and Alice Walker for emphasizing the need to love one's culture. Dubey's study draws attention to the fact that the BWR emerged from the Black Aesthetic movement and shared some of its assumptions, such as its valorization of black folklore and of the social and political mission of art, and also its audience, whose expectations influenced the BWR. Dubey suggests that for these reasons, "black nationalist discourse [was] a pre-text of black women's novels in the 1970s," although she said that that pre-text was "dislocated from its original [black cultural nationalist] context" and "[reframed] in a fictional context" (*Black Women Novelists* 11). Consequently, as Reed argues, the BWR realized the mission that was imposed on Black writers by the Black Aesthetic; namely, to "present alternative archetypes to help shape black personality but also to develop distinctive cultural forms for the community" ("Toni Morrison" 51). He says that those forms emphasized the fact that "black people possess a culture, style of life, worldview and aesthetic values distinctively different from white America" (ibid. 50). Both black cultural nationalism and the BWR believed that art and literature have an important role to perform in building the political leverage and social cohesion of the African American people.

At the same time, Dubey refutes the assertion that the BWR failed to create a tradition that was distinctive from the Black Aesthetic. She is quick to point out that the differences between black cultural nationalism and the BWR, at least in the 1970s, outweigh any similarities. According to Dubey, the BWR restructured and moved beyond those ideological assumptions of black cultural nationalism that were unpalatable for black feminists. First of all, she contends, African American women writers challenged Black cultural nationalism by refusing to tailor their female characters to the dictates of black nationalist men, who wished to see black women as mothers of future warriors. Secondly, she uses examples from novels such as Gayl Jones' *Corregidora*, Toni Morrison's *The Bluest Eye*, and Alice Walker's *The Third Life of Grange Copeland* to make her point that by depicting the domestic violence and sexual oppression that women had to suffer, these writers showed that the black nationalist movement was empowering only to black men.

Dubey also maintains that BWR writers were deeply skeptical of any cultural program for the future that was founded on the erasure of the slave past. Dubey draws on Sherley Anne Williams, who, in her Preface to *Dessa Rose*, described the difference between black cultural nationalist attitudes towards the slave past and her own as follows: "I loved history as a child until some clear-eyed young Negro pointed out, quite rightly, that there was no place in the American past I could go and be free. I now know that slavery eliminated neither heroism nor love; it provided occasions for their expression" (5-6). For BWR novelists, this heroism and love was chiefly associated with their slave foremothers, whom they celebrated in their fictions. It is not surprising then, as Dubey remarks, that when black cultural nationalism set out to erase the memory of the slave past, Toni Morrison saw the move as a threat to black female heritage and culture. Morrison stated: "You don't have to change everything … Under the guise of change …, you destroy all sorts of things … That kind of change is masculine" (Tate, "Toni Morrison" 123).

All of these studies follow in Harry Reed's footsteps in proposing to look at the BWR as both a continuation of and a corrective to black cultural nationalism. In Reed's opinion, black women's writing exposes and amends one serious shortcoming of the black nationalist position. Their prose bears witness to the fact that cultural nationalism should not just be seen as a means to achieving short-term political goals, since it was, first and foremost, essential to the very survival of African Americans. Reed claims, for example, that is this shortcoming of black cultural nationalism that Morrison's work redresses. Her novels show that survival is equally, if not more important, than reaching political goals. Morrison's work is, therefore, as Reed puts it, "a simultaneous affirmation and criticism of BCN [black cultural nationalism], which in her fiction is put at the service of black society to 're-generate it from within'" ("Toni Morrison" 52). This is a comment that I would extend to all of the creative output of the BWR. BWR writers, like Morrison, are black cultural nationalists because of their interest in black heritage, as evidenced in their writing on the themes of identity, roots, orality and musical motifs, and their deep reverence for ordinary folk women.

These black women, like Pilate from *Song of Solomon*, carry the nationalist cultural agenda of her novels since they are the embodiments of black cultural archetypes. They survive because they preserve African wisdom. As Reed says, "[their] personae incorporate bits of Ancient Africa, New World Slavery, Southern Reconstruction and the present" (ibid. 53). One might say that they mobilize memory in order to create a sense of the "unity of the black historical experience" (ibid.). Rooted in the world of black folklore, they are old-timers who possess "the basic quality of the old black world" (ibid.). Their memory, Reed says, is "an active and ideological process" (ibid.), though, as he stipulates, not in a "political" sense; at least not in the sense that the term was understood at the height of black nationalist era.

In Reed's opinion, the fact that female writing is not as politically engaged in black-and-white wars as the narratives of black men also explains why black women writers were overlooked in nationalist cultural critiques. Neither female writers nor their characters were militant political revolutionaries. They were rather "cultural workers" and "archivists" or "redemptive scribes."[29] They were focused on providing a counter-balance, or an antidote, to the adverse outcomes of adjustments which were entailed by the Great Migration and assimilation. Therefore, as Reed aptly concludes, it is essential to recognize that "black women writers have always been contributing but unacknowledged black cultural nationalists" (ibid. 51-2).

Courtney Thorsson's monograph, *Women's Work: Nationalism and Contemporary African American Women's Novels,* which was published in 2013 when my research on the BWR and nationalism was already well underway, is based on assumptions similar to Reed's. Thorsson maintains that BWR writers "employ[ed] a practiced cultural nationalism that defines a distinct literary movement in contemporary novels, demanding that scholars address the continued relevance of nation in a post-black arts writing" (1). Thorsson's study reads like a sequel to Dubey's monograph, in which she continues Dubey's discussion of the BWR and nationalism by offering close readings of the 1980s novels: *The Salt Eaters* (1980) *Sassafras, Cypress and Indigo* (1982) *Praisesong for the Widow* (1983) *Mama Day* (1988) and *Paradise* (1997). The study foregrounds the importance of what Bambara has called "inner nation" (Thorsson 7), referring to indigenous domestic rituals and practices, such as cooking, dancing, root working, conjuring and storytelling, which the book describes as "women work" and women's contribution to the project of nation-building.

In line with Reed, Dubey and Thorsson, I would like to argue that BWR prose of the 1980s built on the history of African Americans in the New World, and particularly on black folk heritage as the foundations for female political activism. In my opinion, the rehabilitation of the slave past and the history of female resistance

29 Toni Cade Bambara described herself as a "cultural worker" (Bonetti, "An Interview with Toni Cade Bambara"), while Marilyn Sanders Mobley called Toni Morrison a "cultural archivist" and a "redemptive scribe" (*Folk Roots and Mythic Wings* 11).

did not reject black nationalist formulations at all. BWR fiction of the 1980s merely amended these formulations and presented them in a new guise. By reversing black cultural nationalism's approach to folk memory and black womanhood, BWR fiction gave the national narrative and the family plot a feminist twist that deposed men and reinstated women as the heads of the African American "tribe" and as heirs to the Black Aesthetic cultural program. Like Reed, I see Black women writers as contributing to the cause of black nationalism in many alternative and subtle ways. In my opinion, they uphold a nationalist ideology by presenting home as the place of reproduction of black culture and women as the guardians of that culture, and by "fetishizing" indigenous experience, black folklore and the power of black cosmology. They also do this by celebrating what Paul Gilroy termed "the slave sublime," (*The Black Atlantic* 187) as the foundational experience of black people in the USA, an argument that other critics have not mentioned.

The writers of the BWR, like those of black cultural nationalism, considered themselves cultural heirs or spokespersons for the entire race, and they spoke on its behalf as autocratically as the black nationalist men. They challenged the BN desire to write black slavery, folk heritage and female wisdom out of their national history. Through fiction, they waged an ideological battle over the definition of black history and heritage, and of the black aesthetic. They contended that it was black women's job to turn the tide of national amnesia and to reconstruct folk culture and memory of the past, making the maintenance of black history and heritage a gendered undertaking. The impurity of memory and its proclivity for mythmaking, proved to be a very efficient strategy for popularizing the pathos and the mythos of the slave past (the slave sublime), as I will argue in the following chapters. It bound black people to a history through shared rituals of remembrance and a clearly defined political agenda. The fallibility of memory also made it possible to romanticize the South as the place of origin of African American culture. In BWR fiction of the 1980s, the South is an occasionally terrifying, but primarily magical place. It has its own mythical temporality, seeming to exist outside linear time. It is a place of healing that occurs through immersion into black heritage which is seen as an antidote to the processes of westernization and assimilation that are fatal to the African American soul. The BWR made a religion of the nostalgically remembered slave past and female Southern folk culture. Their rationalization and validation of black folk customs and traditions captivated both black and white imaginations in the 1980s.[30] But at the same time, as I will to contend later, this nationalist mythmaking turned out to be suffocating and alienating for anyone who did not feel affinity with this BWR nostalgia for black Southern heritage.

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30 See Sabine Broeck's "Trauma, Agency, Kitsch and the Excesses of the Real: *Beloved* within the Field of Critical Response."

1.4 Looking at the Black Women's Renaissance through the Lens of Nation-and-Gender Studies

Nation-and-gender studies is an interdisciplinary feminist methodology that has its roots in studies on nation and nationalism that were launched by such thinkers as Benedict Anderson, Ernest Gellner, Eric Hobsbawm, and Anthony Smith. It came to being in the mid-1990s as a result of sustained feminist critique of theories of nationalism. Feminist theoreticians of nation criticized their male counterparts for their failure to address interactions between gender, sexuality and nationality. Joanne Sharp observed that "Anderson's thesis of imagined community assumes an imagined citizen" but that "this citizen is [also] gendered" ("Gendering Nationhood" 99). She says that the "imagined bonding between individuals and the nation in narratives of national identification is differentiated by gender" (ibid.). Nation-and-gender studies is also a postcolonial methodology that examines the gender-marking of various anti-colonial and postcolonial nationalisms. It is important to note that it scrutinizes, among other things, postcolonial novels, and the way in which they forced the politics of gender relations into the mold of national identity. As Elleke Boehmer argues in her seminal study *Stories of Women: Gender and Narrative in the Postcolonial Nation* (2005), the postcolonial novel was often "deployed in the service of nationalism," and it depended on a "distinctive configuration of character… to derive paradigms for … [the] symbolization of both masculine and feminine gender[s]" (27). She says that in effect:

> [nationalism] which has been so fundamental to the decolonization process around the world, [bore] a clear mark of gender, and this gender marking … can be explained as a specific historical development of power defined by sexual difference. To put it more plainly … without this marking of gender, it is well-nigh impossible to conceive of the modern nation. (Ibid. 22)

Boehmer calls this phenomenon the "androcentrism of the nation" (ibid. 31), while Anne McClintock, another leading researcher on gender and nationalism, recapitulates this argument in the following statement:

> Excluded [from power, privilege, and resources] as national citizens, women [were] subsumed only symbolically into the national body politic. Thus, male political power was heavily dependent on a "naturalized," and none too "accidental," ideology of gender difference. Nationalism [was] constituted from the very beginning as a gendered discourse, and cannot be understood without a theory of gender power. ("No Longer in a Future Heaven" 105)

Boehmer claims, therefore, that whether we look at the administrative structures and policies of nationalism, or at its symbolism in literature, culture, and the arts, the new postcolonial nation was "normatively male territory, [and] a masculine enterprise" (*Stories of Women* 23).

Nation-and-gender critics looked at these gendered iconographies, policies and social practices through which nationalist ideas were being articulated. Though they spoke about different constituencies and used different methodologies[31] (from sociology, cultural studies, gender-and-sexuality studies, and history), these scholars' research unmasked similar "rationales and mechanism, through which the nation [was] almost invariably expressed as a male or male-led community, … one which [might], however, simultaneously be symbolized in the overarching figure of a woman: the woman-as-nation" (ibid. 23). Together, they called into question the authoritative approach to female figures, whereby women were symbolically identified as the repository of a cultural essence and used to redraw the boundaries of their nations (or ethnic groups). These critics unraveled the complex processes of the construction of national subjectivity, which made the postcolonial nation "historically a male-constructed space, narrated into modern-self-consciousness by male leaders, activists, and writers, in which women were cast as symbols or totems, as the bearers of tradition" (ibid. 22). Consequently, these researchers illuminated how female stereotyping was entangled with the process of constructing a nationalist repository of symbols, in which femininity often signified traditional and authentic culture untouched by the ravishes of the colonial/dominant culture.

As mentioned earlier, nation-and-gender scholars investigated the role of the novel in creating gendered national mythologies. Novels played a paramount part both in the colonizing mission of European powers and in the postcolonial countermove that aimed to reinstate indigenous national cultures. Both projects, the colonial and the postcolonial, conceptualized gender roles and relations in similar terms, picturing men as forward-thrusting agents of change and women as passive receptacles of imperial-national or national-native cultures. In the words of Elleke Boehmer:

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31 Nation-and-gender research is of an interdisciplinary nature and explores various nationalisms. Such research stems from the socio-cultural theory of gender, mainly from Judith Butler's 1990 work *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity.* This work has been enriched by analyses of how images of women are used and manipulated by national/ethnic particularisms to construct the unique identities of given ethnic groups and nations. Among the many works which appeared independently of each other in this field, the following are worthy of special attention: *Contemporary African Literature and the Politics of Gender,* by Florence Stratton (1994): *Imperial Leather: Race, Gender and Sexuality in the Colonial Context,* by Anne McClintock (1995); *Body Space: Destabilizing Geographies of Gender and Sexuality* (1996), edited by Nancy Duncan; *Dangerous Liaisons: Gender, Nation and Postcolonial Perspectives,* by Anne McClintock, Aamir Mufti, and Ella Shohat (1997); *Women, Citizenship and Difference,* edited by Nira Yuval-Davis and Pnina Werbner (1998); *Gendered Ironies of Nationalism. Sexing the Nation,* edited by Mayer Tamar (1999); *En-gendering India: Woman and Nation in Postcolonial Narratives,* by Sangeeta Ray (2000); *Women and the Nation's Narrative: Gender and Nationalism in Sri Lanka,* by Neloufer de Mel (2001); *Stories of Women: Gender and Narrative in the Postcolonial Nation,* by Elleke Boehmer (2005); and *The Nation Writ Small: African Fictions and Feminisms 1958-1988,* by Susan Z. Andrade (2011).

> overdetermined by colonial history, national structures in post-independent nations have conventionally been organized according to masculine patterns of authority, in particular, the *family drama* embodied in images like "father of the nation," "son of the soil." Women by contrast, [were] cast into more passive roles/metaphors of the motherland, Mother Africa, Bharat Mata. (*Stories of Women* 14)

Thus, national autobiographies, which were the privileged genre of nationalist fiction, pictured national leaders as fathers of the nation and offered their lives as examples to follow. For instance, Boehmer states that works such as Nehru's *An Autobiography*, Nkrumah's *Autobiography*, Kenneth Kaunda's *Zambia Shall Be Free* "encourage[ed] the identification with the leader as a model citizen," and "place[d] emphasis on oneness, on national unity, and masculinity" (ibid. 83).[32] Furthermore, these autobiographies, as Fredric Jameson argued, were often allegorical portrayals of the nation giving birth to itself, of the national coming-to-being. Whether the male heroes were the great national leaders or unknown "sons of the soil," the quest of the male subject for political and national self-consciousness was synonymous with the rise of the nation. Regarding their composition, postcolonial national allegories often followed the conventions of the *bildungsroman*, in which the growth of the protagonist mirrored the growth of the nation. The novels sketched the heroes' and the nation's emergence into subjecthood, usually coming to a narrative closure at the moment of independence or in anticipation of it.

The exemplary male hero, the father of the nation or the son of the soil, was in fact, as Boehmer contended, a *metonymy* of the nation, while his mother was often depicted *metaphorically* as the mother of the nation. Male roles were metonymic because the man was "a part of the national community or contiguous with it" (ibid. 29). In the national literatures and the political pageantry of nations, the male figure was cast as a subject of the nation – a soldier, model citizen, hero. His mother, on the other hand, was a symbol for "the national territory and of certain national values" (ibid. 33). She incarnated the strength and the virtue of the nation, and was, as Boehmer states, the "fecund first matriarch" (qtd. in Nasta, *Motherlands* 6), and "her ample, childbearing, fully *representative* maternal form typically [took] on the status of a *metaphor*" (Boehmer, *Stories of Women* 29). She is "set up as the redemptive carrier of the nation's cultural tradition and hence the signifier … of the community's integrity" (ibid. 33).

In general, in male-authored postcolonial novels, women were usually secondary and flat characters. While the father, or the son, were fully individualized protagonists, Boehmer argued, the mother was a "generalized/generic" character, "often set in relation to the figure of her nationalist son" (ibid. 29). She might be an "originator or progenitress, a role authorized by her national sons," but she was, nonetheless, "positioned *outside* the cultural script of national self-emergence" (ibid. 29) and

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32 A similar claim could be made about autobiographies of black men, such as Richard Wright, W. E. B. DuBois, and particularly Malcolm X.

almost always exclusively defined by her role as a nurturer. Therefore, as Deepika Bahri maintains, even though "many anticolonial struggles for nationalism … used the figure of a woman to symbolize nation, and exerted themselves to articulate a significant role for women in the nation-building and decolonization process," rarely did these efforts go beyond maternal images of "nurturing and service" ("Feminism in/and Postcolonialism" 199). McClintock has also noted that the woman's relation to the nation was always "indirect, mediated through her social relation to men [woman as mother, woman as wife], her national identity lying in her unpaid services to husband and family" ("No Longer in a Future Heaven" 107). The mother figure could be a mentor, fetish, talisman, but she was never on a par with the much more powerful, progressive and active men. Although as "the metaphor for indigenous culture … religion and custom" (Loomba, *Colonialism* 142), the mother of the nation was "symbolically … ranged above the men, in reality, she [was] kept below them" (Boehmer, *Stories of Women* 33).

Given this scenario, it is understandable that one of the most fundamental questions that nation-and-gender studies strove to answer was why nationalism routinely used women in such an instrumental way? Theorists of nationalism had already argued that the "imagined community" was such a vague and slippery idea that it needed overarching symbols to rally its members behind it. The claim to national identity could be based, of course, on territorial borders, shared language, worldview, and common history (which, we should note, is also "imagined"), but the concept of the nation works best when placed in opposition to other nations, cultures, or versions of history. That is why McClintock states that "[nationalism] both invents and performs social difference" ("No Longer in a Future Heaven" 104). She adds that: "Marches … uprisings … Olympic extravaganzas, mass rallies and military displays, flag waving and costumery" (ibid.) were all part and parcel of national iconographies. Representations of women were also an essential element of this unifying national iconography. Discourses on codes of proper womanhood and practices of acceptable social and sexual conduct did as much as pageantry to outline the boundaries of the nation. As Frantz Fanon pointed out in his groundbreaking essay "Algeria Unveiled," nationalists often see women as the living flesh of the national body. Women are perceived not only as biological reproducers and "bearers" of national identity, but, first and foremost, as symbols/signifiers of national difference. The Algerian war of independence, just like the earlier English "war" to eradicate the Hindu the practice of widow immolation, can be quoted as the most extreme examples of "women serv[ing] to represent the limits of national difference between men" (McClintock, "No Longer in a Future Heaven" 105). In both conflicts, men – western colonizers and native nationalists – fought for control over the bodies and minds of women to define the meaning of national heritage, tradition and citizenship.

Finally, women are not only markers of cultural difference. They are also reproducers of "culture and tradition," transmitting the cherished cultural values and practices by bearing, raising and socializing children in the private domestic domain.

Reproducing the national culture is the second most valuable service that women can render to their nation. This role could occasionally take women beyond the private domain. In their role of keepers of tradition, women could be equally respected and valued as "teachers, writers, playwrights, artists" (Yuval-Davis and Floya Anthias qtd. in McClintock 'No Longer in a Future Heaven' 105). As biological and/or cultural workers, women, in fact, enable the survival of "elaborate bodies of custom, religion, literary and artistic modes of production, and of course, the language" (Yuval-Davis, *Gender and Nation* 23). It is this function of women as the reproducers of cultures that is of paramount interest in this study.

Since nationalism mobilized the cultural power of biological and symbolic mothers in the service of nation-building, nation-and-gender studies interrogated the social institutions of the "family" and "motherhood" in the context of discourses and narratives of citizen-making and culture-making. It argued that the family is not a private, personal realm, distinct from the public domain. On the contrary, these critics maintained that the home is, first and most prominent the place where ideas connected with nationhood and citizenship are defined. According to Boehmer, the family often reflects the organization of power within nation states. Therefore, home – the relationships between adults and children, men and women, and the practices of socializing – construct, naturalize and reproduce a whole worldview, both "ethical and aesthetic" (Yuval-Davis, *Gender and Nation* 43). Consequently, as Boehmer postulated, nation-formation starts in the family, which is itself shaped by the practices of ruling and social organization. That is why the institution of motherhood and the practices of mothering are not free from nationalist ideological manipulation. Nation-and-gender studies often examined contradictory discourses of motherhood and mother-child bonding to analyze how nationalism has established matriliny as a conduit through which cultural values and national heritage are transmitted.

Ania Loomba observed interestingly that "women themselves responded in a variety of ways to these attempts to harness and limit their agency" (*Colonialism* 187). According to Loomba, "sometimes women did depart from the nationalist script and were militant or transgressive," whilst at other times, they willingly subscribed to the nationalist logic that excluded and sidelined all female concerns and the "divisive" feminist rhetoric (ibid.). Most frequently, however, women attempted to mold nationalist dogma, so as to make way for women's emancipation and activism within national structures. For example, "they appropriated the iconography of motherhood" (ibid.) to carve a space for themselves within the emerging masculine nationalist ideology. McClintock's discussion of South African nationalisms also describes different ways in which women have responded to men's endeavors to exploit motherhood for nationalist ends. For example, Afrikaner women went along with the nationalist project of creating the Afrikaner nation from scratch. Boer women were instrumental in the "elaborate labour of regeneration" or, in other words, "an invention of a tradition" that involved "fashioning myriad Boer vernaculars into a single identifiable Afrikaans language" by writing "poems, magazines, newspapers, novels"

("No Longer in a Future Heaven" 106-7). She claimed that Afrikaans was "a language fashioned by women's labours, within the economy of the domestic household," and that Afrikaner women also "deploy[ed] the power of motherhood in the exercise and legitimating of white domination [apartheid]" (ibid. 110). They consented to their confinement in the domestic space, in which their primary role was biological and cultural reproduction.

On the other hand, she says that African nationalism, which was also "a product of conscious reinvention" (ibid. 114) built on the services of female volunteers, and did not generate among black women unanimous support for the idea of passive and domestic "Ma Africa" (ibid. 116). Black women successfully added to the ANC's nationalist repository an array of alternative positions that women could adopt in the nationalist movement. Even if they embraced the trope of the national mother, their rendering of it deconstructed the metaphorical/passive mode of representation in favor of a metonymic/active representation of "the militant mother, the revolutionary and political mother" (ibid. 116). This mother was no longer just a passive symbol of national values but an active participant in the unfolding national project. Some black women who were active in the ANC movement rejected what McClintock calls "glamorizing the profession of motherhood" altogether, warning that "exalting motherhood" was turning black women into "beasts of burden" (ibid. 117).

The case of South African black women shows that black women could make room for themselves in the nationalist imagination. Similarly, in the post-civil-rights period in the United States, black women embraced nationalist rhetoric to write themselves as nationalist daughters "into the male-authored national family script" (Boehmer, *Stories of Women* 15). BWR novelists also endorsed motherhood as the most important platform for female action. They portrayed African American mothers as genuinely empowered activists who used the institution of motherhood to fight for national causes in conjunction with female rights. Hence motherhood in their fiction was presented as a counter-narrative to patriarchal socialization, and as a site of oppositional political activism, social change, and the empowerment of black women. These African American women/mothers may play nurturing roles, but they are not seen as icons "trapped" in the private domestic sphere. On the contrary, they have the energy and awareness to take an active part in nationalist struggles. They practice what Ruth Perry and Martine Watson Brownley called "mothering the mind," instilling in their children cultural values that challenge the status quo and create the "conditions for [their] creativity" (*Mothering the Mind* 3) that are essential for both personal well-being and cultural survival.

African Caribbean narratives of the BWR also emphasized maternity and matrilineage, and Caribbean nations have also often been imagined as mothers, as in other postcolonial literatures. The "culture-bearing" mother, as keeper of the pre-colonial tradition, is a recurrent trope in novels by male and female Caribbean and diasporic writers. The novels of Michelle Cliff and Jamaica Kincaid, which will be analyzed in one of the following chapters, are also based on the symbolism of the "national

family" that expects women to maintain racial and cultural purity. The assumption that these women writers share with their African American peers is that mothers and matrilineal connections sustain language, culture, memory and a collective sense of identity. However, in some other respects, the Caribbean narratives are totally unlike the African American novels that exult in the revolutionary power of motherhood. Kincaid and Cliff complicate such simple forms of matrifocal nationalism that equate the mother with the nation, the motherland, and the unsullied cultural origin. They evoke England, Africa, Antigua or Jamaica as mothers or motherlands at various points, thus undermining the myth of the national mother as an unchanging and continuous frame of reference. Consequently, Caribbean novels often harbor a conspicuous matrophobic slant. They highlight the ambiguities and complications of seeing motherhood as a site of cultural reproduction, and they underline the importance of daughters in setting the history of the national family right. Cliff's and Kincaid's fictions abound in images of "anti-mothers" and diasporic/postcolonial daughters, often autobiographical subjects who are disillusioned with their mothers and the mother country. These daughters are motivated by an urgent desire to redefine their political allegiances and find their bearings in the complex and conflicting cultural environment of a (post)colonial country. Their *bildung* takes them on a quest to re-imagine and re-claim their true African heritage (Cliff), or to re-imagine a free and radical self (Kincaid).

I will argue that Black Women's Renaissance writers, through their "culture-bearing" mothers or revisionist postcolonial daughters, successfully managed to negotiate their place in the nationalist script. Their novels about African history and heritage in the New World were also engaged in the "elaborate labor of regeneration." This labor included not only rebuilding a national genealogy but also recreating a native cosmology and folklore, and celebrating orality, ancestors, and matrilineage. In effect, these writers produced heritage fiction that is characterized by a unique conceptualization of memory, subjectivity, and gender that was empowering for black women (though not for all). Like their male predecessors, these women writers also used the language of black cultural nationalism that was gendered, and they were very judgmental in their appraisal of black women's cultural allegiances, worldviews and roles. In a gesture similar to that of the Black Power Movement's activists, who praised the heroic mothers of black warriors while at the same time sidelining women, BWR fiction in the 1980s propagated an image of heroic black motherhood that entailed the imposition of strictly defined gender roles.

BWR novels of the 1980s invested women with special powers to perpetuate black history and heritage, and to pass on adaptive strategies of survival. They also fiercely condemned black women who did not live up to that ideal. Unlike men, BWR writers were unapologetic about their endorsement of the spiritual and cultural achievements of the slave cultures in which African American traditions had their beginnings, because they saw these achievements as a testament to female perseverance. In this way, BWR works honoured the mission of black cultural nationalism, but at

the same time, they also imbued its agenda with a female outlook and so realized both feminist and nationalist goals. Therefore, in the following chapters I will argue that these writers played a pivotal role in the continuation of the indigenous cultural politics of black nationalism, even though cultural nationalism was not overtly on their agenda.

2 Mapping the Black Women's Renaissance: The Formative 1970s and the Shift from a Black Nationalist to a Black Womanist Aesthetic

2.1 Ninety-seventies' Feminist Social Protest Fiction: Race, Class, Gender, Sexuality and Motherhood

The Black Aesthetic literary program was centered on race; it disregarded gender and other markers of identity that did not fit neatly into a unitary concept of "blackness." As Deborah McDowell explains in "Boundaries: Or Distant Relations and Close Kin," a chapter in her book, *"The Changing Same": Black Women's Literature, Criticism, and Theory,* the founding assumptions of BN were that: "(1) the world is neatly divided into black and white; (2) race is the sole determinant of being and identity, subsuming sexual as well as other forms of difference; (3) identity is pre-existent, coherent and known; and (4) literature has the power to unify and liberate the race" (103). McDowell admits that Black Aesthetic poets, artists and theorists should be credited with the deconstruction of negative stereotypes of black people, which was a very empowering and liberating strategy in the 1960s. However, as McDowell also claims, this strategy of presenting only positive images of blackness eventually became dogmatic and confining, and this approach, unified around an overarching signifier of race, precluded exploration of inherent differences within black communities.

While black communities remained a primary topic of the BWR novels, by contrast with the assumptions of the Black Aesthetic, women writers of the 1970s presented these communities with unblinking realism. They no longer treated blackness as a monolithic category, in which race, rather than sexuality, class or gender, was the main determinant of the self. Even though these novels avoided the theme of black-and-white wars, they showed how African American communities were tragically damaged by white racism. They demonstrated how structural violence, racism, economic deprivation and the internalization of cultural stereotyping impinged on black people's self-actualization, self-esteem and relationships within the family and community. In other words, they showed what Madhu Dubey called the "displaced effect" (*Black Women Novelists* 109) of white racism and how it was transformed into gender oppression. These novels left no doubt that the victimization of black women and their sexual and economic exploitation were a direct result of men transferring onto women the effects of their own brutalization (Hairston, "Works of Rare Beauty" 177).

While BN thinkers talked about the Black Aesthetic as a cultural program that could elevate black people from denigration and oppression, the Second Renaissance writers in the 1970s outdistanced most of their male predecessors in their tough-minded reappraisal of the social problems that plagued African American communi-

ties. Black nationalists focused on what the future of black people in America might be if they lived up to the expectations of the black nationalist political and cultural program. BWR writers, by contrast, seemed too aware of the sordid reality of life for African Americans, particularly women, to waste their time on the idealized projections of the Black Aesthetic, which were vague and removed from reality. The 1970s' novels of BWR writers set forth their bleaker, or simply more realistic, vision of the social conditions that shaped, or rather warped, black people's lives.

In the words of Madhu Dubey, the writers of the BWR introduced a "productive interplay of differences" to "subvert ideological celebration of a unified black community" (*Black Women Novelists* 153). These female authors wrote novels that flew in the face of the BN injunction that black art should correct white claims of black pathology. Conversely, they created characters who moved dangerously close to negative stereotypes of black people. Toni Morrison's *The Bluest Eye*, for example, portrayed a family affected by rape, incest, and madness, which could be seen as an illustration of the notorious Moynihan Report about dysfunctional black families. Likewise, Alice Walker's *The Third Life of Grange Copeland* portrayed black men brutally oppressing black women (most notably, Mem, the mother of the main female protagonist, Ruth, is mercilessly abused by her degraded husband). Gayl Jones's *Corregidora* seemed to reiterate one of the central findings of the Moynihan Report that identified black matriarchy as the most damaging legacy of slavery. *Corregidora* features black matriarchs passing on to their female offspring disturbing memories of slavery and a bitter hatred towards all men. The novel tapped into BCN's critique of matriarchy as a force that comes between black women and men and "obstructs the development of the healthy relationship between black men and women; [as] the women's primary allegiance is to the maintenance of the matriarchy rather than marriage" (Dubey, *Black Women Novelists* 74). Gayl Jones's second novel, *Eva's Man*, focuses on gender and sexual warfare to an even greater extent than *Corregidora*, playing with what Harry Reed termed "the Madonna/bitch theme" ("Toni Morrison" 56). Its eponymous protagonist, Eva, kills and castrates her lover when she realizes he wants to abandon her. Most 1970s' novels, such as Jones's *Corregidora* and Morrison's *The Bluest Eye* and *Sula,* focused on bigoted black communities that found it difficult to come to terms with various singularities of black women. Some novels critiqued the conservatism of the urban community (Morrison's *Sula* and *Song of Solomon,* Jones's *Corregidora,* Alice Walker's *Meridian*), be it political, religious or sexual.

The 1970s' novels also revealed the heterogeneity of black communities by broaching the subject of class divisions. According to Henry Louis Gates Jr., the issue of class had been an ongoing concern for African American writers such as Alain Locke, W.E.B. Du Bois, Jessie Fauset, Nella Larsen, and Ann Petry, all of whom had looked closely at the issue of class consciousness among African Americans. However, as the century progressed, concerns about class were increasingly eclipsed by anger about racism. Then, in the 1970s, as Gates has pointed out, class-conflict again became central. The two decades of the 1970s and 1980s saw an increasing separation of

middle-class professional blacks from working class African Americans. Middle-class blacks lived in different communities and went to different schools and churches than working class and poor blacks. Thus, class reasserted itself also as a topic of literature (Gates, "Introduction" 2018). The theme of class conflict was most pronounced in the 1970s in novels such as *Brown Girl, Brownstones* (Marshall), *Meridian* (Walker), and *Song of Solomon* (Morrison); and later, in the 1980s, in *Tar Baby* (Morrison), *Praisesong for the Widow* (Marshall), and *The Women of Brewster Place* and *Linden Hills* (Gloria Naylor).

Particularly in 1980s' novels, upward class mobility was roundly condemned as a major threat that disrupted the unity of black people that the volkish tradition would painstakingly try to restore. Contrary to what Gates claims, this engagement with class divisions was rather tokenistic and superfluous. As E. Frances White has claimed in "Africa on My Mind," even though the novels showed divergent class interests among African Americans, their focus was not really on class conflict, disparities in status, distribution of wealth, discrimination in the workplace and access to education, but rather on identity politics. For example, *Praisesong for the Widow* ends with Avey's resolution to ensure the continuity of African diasporic practices and rituals by passing them on to her offspring. What remains unspoken is the fact that Avey will return to her middle-class home in the suburbs. By ending the novel before she actually goes home, Marshall obscures class differences between Avey and the islanders who brought about her spiritual transformation. She also glosses over the fact that most Africans Americans could not afford to go on a trip to the Caribbean to reconnect with their African "nations." Another well-known novel that acknowledges class disparities but then glosses over them is Gloria Naylor's *Mama Day*. The novel does not address the apparent class differences between George, a partner in an engineering firm, striving to achieve the American dream, and the working-class Cocoa, who resorts to magic to find a job. Soon, her lack of employment becomes irrelevant when instead of getting a job, she gets a husband and becomes a black professional's wife. The novel does not elaborate on the stark contrast between George's affluence and the impoverishment of the rural community of Willow Springs that he would like to call his home. None of these novels tackles the issues of class privilege and cultural tourism, and such elisions put the BWR within what Cornel West called "liberal capitalist perimeters" ("The Paradox" 22). He states that "despite [their] powerful and progressive critique of American cultural imperialism," BWR writers and Afrocentric critics alike were advocates "of Black petit bourgeoisie" indulging in "self-congratulation and self-justification upon reaching an anxiety-ridden middle class status" (ibid. 32), a point to which I will return later.

The communities that emerged from the black female narratives of the 1970s were, first and foremost, rife with gender conflict and anxiety about the time-honored roles of women as "Obedient Daughter[s]," "Devoted [Wives]," and "Adoring Mother[s]" (Alice Walker, *Meridian* 19). BWR novels of the 1970s debunked almost all these assumptions about perfect black womanhood, "imagin[ing] a different script

for women" (McDowell, *"The Changing Same"* 103). Although these novels retained a didactic and functional character, as far as gender and sexuality were concerned, they represented a backlash against and a corrective to the gender dictates of black cultural nationalism. In this first decade of the BWR, black women writers were in constant dialogue with the tenets of black cultural nationalism, which seriously impacted on the psychological delineation of character in their novels. Whereas for black nationalists the primary goal of a black artist was to portray black "people" (read men) in a positive light, for BWR writers the goal was to present unbiased and full characterizations of black women (Dubey, *Black Women Novelists* 2). Even if these novels engaged with stereotypes from either white or black nationalist discourses (nanny, matriarch, jezebel), sometimes dismantling them (*The Third Life*, *Meridian*, *Sula*), and sometimes reifying them (*Corregidora*, *The Bluest Eye*), they did it with the intention of creating rounded and more idiosyncratic characterizations of women. By creating fully-fledged and complex psychological portraits of female characters, which were well-grounded in contemporary political and social reality, these texts revealed the full and equivocal nature of black feminist subjectivity.

Therefore, as Madhu Dubey states, the BWR narratives of the 1970s challenged the "notion of a whole and unified self as an unrepresentable, imaginary ideal" (*Black Women Novelists* 5), and ushered in more ambiguous renderings of black womanhood, especially when they produced contentious black female protagonists, such as Mrs. Breedlove, Sula, or the "Corregidora women." In these novels female characterization often bordered on caricature, and the writers used the grotesque to target vicious racial, gender and sexual stereotypes. The use of the grotesque mode had already been advocated by BN writers with a view to ridiculing white middle-class cultural models and norms. But BWR writers used it to show the ramifications of gender stereotyping in the mainstream white and black nationalist rhetoric. The 1970s' novels often have "flat, projective models of characterization" (Dubey, *Black Women Novelists* 93) that bring to mind current discourses about black femininity (matriarch, Jezebel etc.). For example, *Eva's Man*, "relentlessly constructs identity in stereotypical terms" (Dubey, *Black Women Novelists* 93). Instead of presenting new black subjectivity, the novel rehearses ad nauseam the old, perverse and grotesque images of black bucks and castrating bitches. The novel presents black men as primitive sexual creatures "limited to animal dynamics," but it also very clearly shows black women's complicity in acting out men's fantasies of female avengers and emasculators. By taking these stereotypes to extremes, *Eva's Man* demonstrated their full and unacknowledged destructive power. Similarly, *The Bluest Eye* shocked readers by conjuring up stereotypical images of self-despising black women who look to white culture for an ideal of beauty. These characters stand for the mainstream view of black identity as a distorted mimicry of black nationalist rhetoric or middle-class white standards. In *Sula*, on the other hand, as Dubey argues, the grotesque is used to delineate sharply the extremes that the characters represent. While Sula stands for newness, individuality, and change, her more traditional friend, Nel, connotes passivity, conformism, and fear of change and

progress. Both characters are grotesque because they cling to diametrically opposed extreme values, with Morrison seeming to suggest that "if they had been one person" she would be truly "marvelous." (Stepto, "Intimate Things in Place" 13). In Dubey's words, the use of the grotesque in all these novels shows "black feminine identity as unfinished and heterogeneous" (*Black Women Novelists* 141).

The novels of the 1970s were more intrepid in their search for what bell hooks has called a radical black female subjectivity ("Revolutionary Black Women" 224) free of the stereotypes and conservative injunctions of black nationalism, even though their authors were at odds about what radicalism really means. In that context, *Sula* is often cited as the prototype of the radical black feminist novel. In two mutually exclusive readings of the novel, Sula is presented as either the embodiment of the newness that the black nationalists called for (but only for men), or of the individualism that black cultural nationalism resoundingly condemned. Either way, Sula, whom bell hooks sees as the closest approximation of radical black womanhood (ibid.), is denounced by Morrison who presents her as a grotesque character (Stepto, "Intimate Things in Place" 13). In this way, Morrison indicates that Sula's radical separation from traditional models of black femininity makes her merely a defiant oddity who does not have any positive impact on her community. But Sula's very uncompromising defiance, as hooks aptly remarks ("Revolutionary Black Women" 224), is what makes her stand out among other black female characters of the BWR. Sula not only represents a radical rejection of the past, the legacy of victimhood and passivity, but also stands for the untrammeled sexuality and vigor that black cultural nationalism ascribed only to men. Sula's promiscuity wreaks havoc on men's vanity by showing them the extent to which she does not care about them. As McDowell has observed, "Sula's female heritage is an unbroken line of 'manloving' women who exist as sexually desiring subjects rather than as objects of male desire" (*"The Changing Same"* 106).

Some black female critics, most notably Barbara Smith, proposed a reading of *Sula* as an early lesbian novel that privileges female bonding over male-female relationships: "[*Sula*] works as a lesbian novel not only because of the passionate friendship between Nel and Sula, but because of Morrison's consistently critical stance toward the heterosexual institutions of male/female relationships, marriage and the family' (Smith, qtd. in Dubey, *Black Women Novelists* 55). Such a stance was representative of the novels that condemned heterosexuality, but nonetheless, generally steered clear of the topic of lesbian relations. Therefore, while some 1970s' novels, such as *Eva's Man*, *Sula* and *Corregidora*, had some hints of homosexual desire, none of them ventured far beyond the heterosexual parameters of black cultural nationalist formulation of blackness. Gloria Joseph explains in "Black Mothers and Daughters" that black women's resistance to lesbianism in the 1970s was a result of their partial capitulation to black cultural nationalist homophobic rhetoric. Black Nationalists often attacked lesbians as "men-haters" who consciously excluded themselves from the movement that wanted black men and women to work together to combat racism. Lesbianism was also seen as a threat to the whole concept of the Black family or the Black commu-

nity or the Black male-female relationship. Therefore, the 1970s can at best be lauded for launching what Gloria Wade-Gayles calls "the tradition of *latent* lesbian fiction" (*No Crystal Stair* 175, emphasis added). In fact, lesbian love as a special kind of female bonding was practically invented as a theme in BWR fiction in the 1980s. While the novels of the 1970s paved the way for an affirmation of lesbianism with their scathing critique of the compulsory heterosexuality that was equated with violence against women, the next decade saw the emergence of the proper lesbian novel with the publication, in 1982, of two famous books: *Zami: A New Spelling of My Name* by Audre Lorde, and *The Color Purple* by Alice Walker.

The 1970s' novels may be reticent on the issue of homoerotic desire but, on the other hand, they are remarkable for their controversial renderings of black motherhood, a topic of great importance in any nationalist discourse. These renderings seemed to have more in common with the white feminist critique of harnessing motherhood in the service of family, capitalist society, and the nation, than with more commonplace endorsements of motherhood by black women. Sula, for example, is pictured as an "unnatural" (and evil) woman who famously proclaims "I don't want to make anybody else. I want to make myself" (Morrison, *Sula* 92). This assertion comes as no surprise to the reader, since in this novel, motherhood, even though it is valued by the black community, is not presented as an experience that is fulfilling for mothers themselves. Doting mothers, who do not have their own lives, such as Helen Wright, Nel's mother, are placed on the same level as deficient mothers who abandon their children or even kill them, such as Eva Peace.

Other 1970s' novels also picture the experience of motherhood as an oppressive burden, a kind of "slavery" rather than "secret joy" (Alice Walker, *Meridian* 69; 51). Walker's *Meridian* goes even further than *Sula* in deconstructing black cultural concept of the heroic black mother of revolutionaries. The novel demystifies mothering by representing it as life-breaking drudgery, and children as devourers of their young mothers' "emerging self" (51). In its bid to reinstate black women themselves as the revolutionaries, rather than just their mothers, the novel seems to reinforce the black cultural nationalist idea that, for a revolutionary, child-raising is a dead weight that impedes the struggle. While Meridian's mother sacrifices herself on the altar of motherhood (and political and religious conservatism), the revolutionary Meridian sees motherhood as incompatible with being a social activist. She abandons her son, has an abortion and eventually has her tubes tied up, to the utter horror of her lover Truman, who represents a typical black nationalist mindset. *Meridian* depicts pregnancy as an undesirable and potentially dangerous trap that makes black women highly vulnerable. Nel's pregnancy in *Sula* is described by Walker as her "fall" (88), and her mother's pregnancies are as sickness accompanied by hair loss that "signals her successive loss of herself in her children" (Dubey, *Black Women Novelists* 130). Mem's pregnancies, in *The Third Life of Grange Copeland*, destroy her health and ultimately cost her life.

Corregidora critiques not only the biological and social essentialism of motherhood; it also puts down the whole black nationalist reproductive ideology. The "Corregidora women," black matriarchs who used to be Corregidora's slaves, and who use procreation to pass on the story of their own abuse, talk of motherhood as something their bodies "wanted," a natural instinct, an irresistible urge. This natural female desire is linked to their pride in black women's capacity to "make generations" of witnesses whose memories are living archives (*Corregidora* 22). They "mythicize their oppressive history, and thus are unable to perceive it as history, or to envision a future untainted by the slavery creed" (Dubey, *Black Women Novelists* 78). But the novel questions this essentialist urge and the reproductive myth by showing motherhood as a social and cultural construct that is highly problematic. Ursa, *Corregidora*'s main protagonist, juxtaposes her mother's narrative with her own observations of young women who were shamed and broken because of their unwanted pregnancies. She doubts whether, if she could have children, she would go along with the custom of passing on to her daughters the harrowing family history about Corregidora. The novel condemns using procreation as a means of achieving political goals, and dramatizes the repressive consequences of a reproductive definition of black woman as a "slavebreeder's way of thinking" (*Corregidora* 22). Ursa's rejection of Corregidora's women's legacy, Meridian's decision to become a motherless and childless revolutionary, and *Meridian's* embedded stories of the childless rebels, Louvinie and Fast Mary, all seem to suggest that there is a forgotten tradition of black women who should be valued for their recalcitrant spirit that puts them on a par with revolutionary black men. Ursa, who is sterile, and other female characters who refuse to have children (like Meridian or Sula) or who kill their children (like Eva Peace) become symbols of a non-reproductive black femininity that refuses to be bound by reproductive determinism.

These 1970s' novels deconstructed black motherhood and exposed difficulties in the mother-daughter dyad. They featured black women who adopted the myth of self-actualization through motherhood and nurturing and then often found themselves in a trap. Moreover, as Dubey points out, *The Third Life of Grange Copeland, The Bluest Eye, Sula* and *Corregidora* "[foregrounded] the mutually antagonistic relationship between parents and children" (*Black Women Novelists* 113), particularly between mothers and daughters. Sula's mother hates Sula, and Sula hates her back. Meridian cuts off all ties with her mother, Ursa chooses a life with her husband Mat, ultimately pledging allegiance to the institution of marriage rather than the matriarchy (*Black Women Novelists* 74). In fact, as Mary Helen Washington argued in her 1975 anthology, *Black-Eyed Susans: Classic Stories by and about Black Women*, the conflict between fictional daughters and their mothers and grandmothers was seen as one of the major themes in black female writing, dating back to such precursors as Zora Neale Hurston's *Their Eyes Were Watching God* (1937), Dorothy West's *The Living is Easy* (1948), and Lorraine Hansberry's *A Raisin in the Sun* (1959). Interestingly, by the 1980s, the theme of intergenerational conflict between black daughters

and their pragmatic and overprotective mothers was salient only in the writings of African Caribbean authors: Audre Lorde's *Zami: A New Spelling of My Name* (1982), Paule Marshall's *Brown Girls, Brownstone* (1981), Jamaica Kincaid's *Annie John* (1985) and *Lucy* (1990), and Michelle Cliff's Claire Savage novels (1984 and 1987).

Yet in spite of the 1970s' focus on the underside of motherhood and the generation gap, the BWR affirmed, in one way or other, the centrality of mothers and matrilineage in African American culture. Some of these novels, most notably *Song of Solomon*, even seemed to anticipate the 1980s' idea that the relationship between mother/grandmother/aunt and child can be the most effective way to cultivate black folk culture. In this way, these narratives played with a fundamental nationalist tenet that sees mothers as keepers of traditions and guardians of heritage. The concept of generational continuity and the role of mothers and maternal figures in its procurement was an understated, but discernible, theme in the BWR fiction of the 1970s. As Dubey remarks, for example, *The Third Life of Grange Copeland* portrays severely strained mother-daughter relationships, but at the same time, it also "displaces the politically transformative potential of the mother-daughter relationship … to the relationship between the girl and her father" (*Black Women Novelists* 114). The eponymous Grange who "mothers" his granddaughter, Ruth, after her mother, Mem, dies, teaches Ruth self-esteem and survival through black cultural history and oral folk history. While other novels overtly reject self-sacrificial black motherhood, they seem, at the same time, to mourn "the standard of motherhood that had gone before" (Alice Walker, *Meridian* 91). Meridian and Ursa, are aware of the yawning gap between their ambivalent experiences of and thoughts about motherhood and their female ancestors' unconditional and absolute endorsement of it. Meridian's thoughts often revolve around slave women's definition of freedom as the ability to "keep their own children" (*Meridian* 91). Meridian thinks that "as far as she knew," she was "the only member" of "an unworthy minority, for which there was no precedent" (ibid.). Both Meridian and Ursa "distance themselves from reproductive ideologies in order to liberate a new black feminine identity free of the oppressive cycle of the past" (Dubey, *Black Women Novelists* 160), but at the same time, they are wracked with guilt by the immensity of their betrayal. Sula, who is not, is unequivocally censured by Morrison (and the critic Barbara Christian) for her disregard for her mother and grandmother, the guarantors of temporal and natural continuity. Thus, these novels can be read, I think, as an expression of the vexed relationship between these protagonists' desire to reject black nationalist reproductive ideologies and their converse belief that "the womb … [is] an important means of political resistance" (Dubey, *Black Women Novelists* 160). It was only later, in the 1980s, that BWR writers finally resolved this contradiction by jumping on the nationalist bandwagon and making motherhood the bedrock of their own culturalist version of black nationalism, as I will argue in the following chapters.

2.2 Forging of Black Womanist Aesthetic

If we look at *Corregidora* and *Eva's Man* by Gayl Jones and the way they tackled the issue of generational continuity, motherhood, black heritage and history, it becomes clear why Jones' reputation fell into decline in the 1980s. It seems that Gayl Jones was the only BWR writer who did not go with the nationalist tide. While *Corregidora* seems, in fact, to have invented the 1980s' trend that saw mothers as carriers of black heritage and history, the novel's unflattering rendition of matrilineage and its refusal to endow it with any redeeming possibilities went against the grain of the volkish tradition that flourished in the 1980s. According to Dubey, *Eva's Man* also hinted at the importance of female bloodlines: "*Eva's Man* implies that only a recovery of ancestral continuity can redeem the senseless temporal cycle that imprisons Eva" (Dubey, *Black Women Novelists* 96). But in my opinion, the logic of the novel does not bear out such a claim. The ancestors' bracelet that Eva receives from her mother's friend Miss Billie, a wise grandmother figure that is a mainstay of the 1980s' volkish tradition, is a symbol for intergenerational continuity that empowers young women by encouraging them to remain "true to one's ancestors"; that is, to maternal figures who are regarded as role models. As Dubey says, the bracelet "seems to symbolize a temporal continuity dependent on reproduction" (*Black Women Novelists* 97), and in this sense, it perpetuates another cultural stereotype: namely, that a woman's body is a medium for "[t]hose people who came before you and those who came after you" (*Corregidora* 22). Though Eva values the bracelet, it does not become for her anything more than a beautiful trinket, contrary to what Dubey suggests. The bracelet, which Eva quickly loses, seems to be as useless as the stereotype-ridden stories about Queen Bees that Eva hears from Miss Billie. One could even argue that, as in the case of Ursa, maternal stories, and the preference for matriliny that they connote, are severely damaging to Eva, as they deform her budding sexual identity. Thus, neither *Corregidora* nor *Eva's Man* show intergenerational female bonding as empowering for young women. There are no edifying stories or role models that the older women in these novels have to pass on to the younger generation; that is, no stories, that are not tied up in knots of stereotypical thinking about gender and sexuality. The story of Eva's namesake, a Gypsy called Medina befriended by her great-grandmother, is the only story in the novel that is not undercut by confining racial and gender stereotypes. As Dubey herself admits, however, "Eva's continuity with Medina does not go beyond the external details of name, appearance and physical mobility" (*Black Women Novelists* 98).

By contrast, if we look at Alice Walker's early novels, it is clear why she entered the circle of the few empowered texts of the canon of African American literature. In my opinion, Walker's 1970s' novels can be seen as transitional texts between the masculine black nationalism of the 1960s and the second decade of the BWR in the 1980s. *The Third Life of Grange Copeland* and *Meridian* were the most political novels of the BWR, dealing directly with such topical issues as feminism, the southern Civil Rights Movement, the Northern Black Power movement, the black aesthetic and the place

of black women in those discourses. Walker's novels represent not only a head-on confrontation with black cultural nationalism, in which Walker took to task the masculine black nationalist construction of community that sidestepped the concerns of black women. They were, first and foremost, very astute attempts to merge black cultural nationalism with feminism. The result of this fusion was womanism, a specific brand of black feminism that was destined to become the dominant ideology for the 1980s' BWR writers. Dubey is right, therefore, when she claims that "[t]he term womanism … may be interpreted as an attempt to integrate black nationalism into feminism, to articulate a distinctively black feminism that shares some of the objectives of black nationalist ideology" (*Black Women Novelists* 107).[33]

Both of Walker's 1970s' novels come to grips with masculine cultural nationalism by introducing unlovable male nationalist characters and "feminizing," or rather "womanizing," them to make them acceptable. Thus, Grange is a typical Black Power Movement fighter who transforms from a degenerate killer into a protective family man. In his former "pre-womanist" life, Grange kills a white pregnant woman and his own abusive and degenerate son; the latter murder is justified by Grange's desire to protect his granddaughter Ruth, whom he refers to as the "womanish gal" (251). In this way, Dubey claims, "the man who kills his own son is also the figurative mother who performs the crucial womanist task of preserving and transmitting the black cultural past to succeeding generations," (*Black Women Novelists* 119). She adds that "[t]hrough the figure of Grange the novel establishes black nationalism as the precondition of its own womanist redefinition of historical change" (*Black Women Novelists* 119). In other words, in the tradition of the *Bildungsroman*, Grange's development into a responsible and caring state of manhood is a prerequisite for Ruth's development into a state of womanist, politically conscious, womanhood. Thus, the novel shifts its focus from the reformed black nationalist man to his womanist granddaughter and heir. In this way, it seems to project the transfer of power, prestige and centrality from black nationalist men to BWR writers. But this new focus on "the womanist gal" should not blind us to the fact that the "refocusing of history around the black woman … subsumes rather than negates the historical vision of black nationalism," as Dubey has put it (*Black Women Novelists* 119).

Likewise, *Meridian* could be seen as a *Künstlerroman* due to its characterization of Truman, a representative of the Black Arts Movement. Described as "courageous and new" (100), Truman is a quintessential black aesthetic artist who glorifies African "superwomen" in his art and sculpts "voluptuous" African Earth mothers (*Meridian*

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33 In Phillips's "Introduction" to her edited collection, *The Womanist Reader: The First Quarter Century of Womanist Thought*, she says that examples of womanist novels, besides Toni Morrison's *The Bluest Eye* and *Song of Solomon* include: Margaret Walker's *Jubilee*; Paule Marshall's *The Chosen Place, the Timeless People* and *Praisesong for the Widow*; and Alice Walker's *The Third Life of Grange Copeland* and *The Color Purple*.

113). He encourages Meridian to "have his beautiful Black babies," who would become "the warriors of the new universe" (*Meridian* 16; 168). According to Dubey, contrary to *The Third Life of Grange Copeland*, which "attempts an integration of black nationalism and womanism, *Meridian* admits no compromise with Black nationalist ideology" (*Black Women Novelists* 126). Notwithstanding this observation, which I only partially agree with, *Meridian* does end on a similar note to *The Third Life of Grange Copeland*, when Truman, like Grange, nurtures Meridian when she is sick, thus stepping into a "maternal" role. These novels, can be linked to Alice Walker's 1985 masterpiece, *The Color Purple*, as they all manifest Walker's apparent desire to "disarm" and "feminize" men who are too masculine (Sadoff, "Black Matrilineage" 24), and to restore women, such as Ruth from *The Third Life of Grange Copeland*, and Meridian, or Celie, Sophia, Shug Avery, and Squeak from *The Color Purple* to more central positions. These womanist narratives seem to suggest that women are the driving force in black communities and that to gain women's approval and admiration, men must become a little bit more like them, by learning to manifest womanist features.

The Third Life of Grange Copeland (1970) and *Meridian* (1976) were the earliest expressions of Walker's philosophy of womanism that grappled with the inherent contradictions of black cultural nationalism and tested the extent to which it could be compatible with black feminism. When Walker published her seminal collection of essays and speeches on the womanist aesthetic in 1983, *In Search of Our Mother's Gardens: Womanist Prose* (written between 1967 and 1983), black cultural nationalism emerged, in my opinion, as a philosophy that was seen as being not only compatible with, but actually beneficial for black feminism. Walker's womanist writing incorporated and transformed the radical elements of black nationalism, turning them into a much more moderate, but equally powerful, theory that exceeded the bounds of the Black Aesthetic ideology and paved the way for the 1980s' volkish tradition, as I will argue later.

Womanism can best be defined as incorporating a black female genealogy and female knowledge that bypasses the patriarchal episteme through female bonding and descent. It is a philosophy that celebrates the same values that were cherished by male black nationalists: namely, black communitarianism, the spirituality of black diasporic cultures, vernacular traditions and, generally speaking, the "ideals of black life" (Ogunyemi, "Womanism" 28). Contrary to male BCN, womanism appreciated ancestry and heritage Layli Phillips, for example, stated that "to be a womanist, one must identify one's cultural roots and experience oneself as a cultural or ethnic being" ("Introduction" *The Womanist Reader* xxxvi). Womanism also countered masculine black nationalism with its desire to "[give] a balanced representation of black womanhood" (Ogunyemi, "Womanism" 28) and to focus on "common" black women as the subject of its discourse. For Walker, womanism was, above all, the special relationship that common black women had with one another and with their mothers

and daughters. Walker and her followers[34] presented womanism as a holistic black philosophical system that was "rooted" in female folk heritage, or, as Walker put it, in black "mothers' gardens." These gardens were not only tangible proofs of the creativity and ingenuity of simple, uneducated and disenfranchised black women. Planted on infertile soil, they epitomized the female folk legacy and black women's struggles to survive in hostile environments. In brief, they were emblems of Black women's collectively shared oppositional knowledge. Womanism asserted the importance of this oppositional knowledge in preserving the heritage and well-being of African American communities and keeping their memory of the past alive.

Dubey claims that Walker's re-conceptualization of maternal legacies in that collection "initiated the feminist appropriation of the mother as a means of legitimizing a feminine revision of history and cultural tradition" (*Black Women Novelists* 114). It was a tour-de-force that showed that Walker had managed to work through her earlier agonizing uncertainty about the relevance of motherhood for "anti-oppresionist movements" (Phillips, "Introduction" *Womanist Reader* xxv). Womanism rehabilitated black mothers as "the most fascinating creations in the world" (Walker, *In Search of Our Mothers' Gardens* 251). As "headragged generals,"[35] they commanded respect and admiration for handing on to their daughters "the creative spark": passion for black folklore, reverence for female bonding and "insights [that] black women gain from their disadvantages and suffering" (Wilson-Tagoe, "Feminism and Womanism" 132). While critics rightly traced the outburst of black female creativity in the 1970s and 80s back to other luminous moments in African American cultural history, such as feminism and the Civil Rights Movement, Walker was adamant in her conviction that for her the most important source of inspiration were common black women, particularly their material and verbal lore. Walker maintained that the enduring legacy that these women passed onto their daughters, including herself, was the belief that the mother-daughter relationship was not only a personal dyad but primarily a special kind of spiritual bonding, a sort of intergenerational link that bestowed on daughters a unique "feminine mystique," and an exclusive *womanist* worldview. Walker's essays, to a greater extent than her novels, were consistent in "deploy[ing] maternal metaphors to authorize a new black feminine paradigm of cultural transmission" (Dubey, *Black Women Novelists* 113), presenting black mothers, and female ancestors in general, as the cornerstone of black female identity and the

34 Later contributions to the womanist philosophy focused on other regions, or were global in their scope. Besides Chiwenye Ogunyemi's "Womanism: The Dynamics of the contemporary Black Female Novel in English," see also Clandora Hudson Weem's *Africana Womanism: Reclaiming Ourselves*, Mary Kolowale's *Womanism and African Consciousness*, and Tuzyline Allan's *Womanist and Feminist Aesthetics: A Comparative Review*.

35 This expression is used by Walker in her poem, "Women."

main source of self-knowledge for *all* black people. This, for her, was the definition of the womanist aesthetic.

2.3 The National Family Plot: From the Father of the Nation to the National Mother

Walker called these common women, who were the pioneers of womanism, foremothers. The term designates black female ancestors, creative black slaves or peasant women, who succeeded in spite of poverty, frequent motherhood, and racial and sexual oppression. A foremother could be a creative genius in quilting, gardening or storytelling. She often had the gift of healing and, occasionally, clairvoyance. She was a religious or spiritual leader, often a visionary. She could offer advice and guidance, teach and protect. Her status as a culture-bearing woman was clear from the outset. As Jacqueline K. Bryant puts it:

> [the foremother] is the life force that nurtures her own culture as she repels the influences of the dominant culture that are all too often realized in thought, word, and behavior. The foremother's worldview acts as a protective shield that aids in narrowing the focus to make one see more clearly. (15)

Though the foremother was surrounded by the dominant culture, she never compromised her own cultural beliefs. She did not have education, but she was wise: "clothed in her right mind," as Bryant put it. She intuitively knew what was right and relied on her "mother's wit" (Bryant 20). Her words had regenerative power; they gave her daughters the strength to endure. Mama Day, in the novel by Gloria Naylor of the same title, Pilate in Morrison's *Song of Solomon*, Aunt Clooney in Paule Marshall's *Praisesong for the Widow*, Momma Henderson in Angelou's *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings*, and Minnie Ransom in *The Salt Eaters* by Toni Cade Bambara are all examples of such archetypal black foremothers. Each of them "fulfills the critical role of preserving cultural identity," and heals the rifts to "[unify] the tribe" (Braxton, "Ancestral Presence" 305); she keeps the memory of the past and the heritage alive.

Without doubt, BWR writers of the 1980s perceived themselves as the heirs of much-admired folk foremothers, and as mothers of the nascent black feminist literary tradition. This tradition gradually started to emerge from the fervent scholarship of black feminist critics, who set out to save from oblivion the literary "foremothers" of the BWR. The most important foremother for all the writers of the BWR was Zora Neale Hurston, whose ethnographic novels were extolled by Alice Walker. Hurston's prose became a paragon for a black heritage writing, and her feminist agenda and her folk aesthetic played a pivotal role in the formation of the volkish tradition. Hurston's 1937 novel, *Their Eyes Were Watching God*, which is considered a foundational text of the womanist aesthetic, narrates the "ripening" of the main character, Janie Crawford,

“from a vibrant, but voiceless, teenage girl into a woman with her finger on the trigger of her own destiny” (National Endowment for the Arts). Set in central and southern Florida in the early 20th century, the novel was initially poorly received on account of its rejection of The Harlem Renaissance’s prescription of racial uplift, which assumed that all black people should aspire to be like the white, educated middle class. In the 1980s, however, the novel achieved cult status as a black feminist manifesto. Almost all BWR writers of the 1980s claimed to write in the tradition established by the great literary foremother, Zora. In this way, Hurston’s exceptional gift of storytelling and her unprecedented and unique experimentation in combining literature with anthropology, in conjunction with Walker’s womanist theories, created a “fashion” for “ethnographic allegories” (Clifford, “On Ethnographic Allegory” 98). It was as if Hurston and Walker “joined hands” to establish, in the BWR fiction of the 1980s, a strong matrilineal tradition that was anchored in Southern black folklore, and privileged women as the keepers of national traditions.

That alliance was, however, contingent on streamlining the work of Hurston, who often contradicted herself, and generally refused to be co-opted by any ideology. This was one of the reasons for her being at odds with other literati of the Harlem Renaissance. Hurston never expressed enthusiasm for black cultural nationalism. On the contrary, in her autobiography, she claimed that there was nothing like “[her] people,” and that blacks are just individuals who do not add up to make a people, a nation, or a particular race, as evidenced in her statement that “there is no such thing as Race Solidarity” (Hurston, *Dust Tracks on the Road* 218). The mature BWN (in the 1980s), on the other hand, insisted on the validity of the nation based on race, and it privileged community over individuality, which was seen as problematic, ambiguous and evil (Sula), and downright unacceptable (Jadine in *Tar Baby*), especially when associated with climbing the social ladder (*Praisesong for the Widow*; *Tar Baby*).

Nonetheless, *Their Eyes Were Watching God*, can be seen as a prototype of the black family romance novel that tweaks the national family plot and dramatizes a transfer of power from black men to women. Janie’s second husband, Jody Starks, can be seen as “the father of the nation.” He is an authoritative figure, who, like Hurston’s father, founds an all-black town, writes laws for it, and rules it as a mayor. In Hurston’s story, he is treated with an irony that comes from the comparison of Jody’s achievements to God’s acts of creation – the bringing of light and the inscription of laws parody the biblical story of creation and foreground Jody’s self-importance and his disproportionate sense of his own “godliness.” His self-aggrandizement is evident in his insistence that his higher status is acknowledged. He demands a “high chair” for himself and his wife, Janie, who has presumably achieved her elevated social status through her husband. As is often the case in the masculine version of the national family plot, Janie needs to pay for her social standing by being submissive and self-effacing. The conflict in the novel comes from Janie’s reluctance to accept this inferior position. The novel illustrates Hurston’s conviction that “her tongue is all de weapon a woman got” when faced with the masculine will-to-power (*Mules and Men* 33). When Jennie

lashes out at her husband in public, she symbolically kills him. The novel implies that through "hyperbolic and metaphoric speech," a black woman "earns her power hitherto reserved for the men" (Sadoff, "Black Matrilineage" 17); a message that must have gone down very well among BWR writers.

Though the conflict between Janie and Jody is played out mostly in terms of gender and sexual rivalry, its social context should not be overlooked. Jody is an important, if not the most important, member of the black community; the founding father and the lawgiver. Thus, the small society at the center of which he is placed can be seen as microcosm of the "black nation," in which men, not women, are assigned all politically relevant roles. Janie is put on a pedestal for being the wife of the "founding father," though her position is more that of her husband's trophy and the metaphorical "national mother," even though she remains childless. This fact may suggest Hurston's desire to keep Janie free from the confines of traditional female roles, and her unwillingness to replace patriarchy with a matriarchal hierarchy. Janie remains, in the words of her friend Pheoby, "her own woman," unfettered by any preconceived gender roles (*Their Eyes* 106).

While the 1970s' novels, like Hurston's writings, were more liberal on the score of idiosyncratic/radical female identities, the onset of the volkish tradition reversed the tendency to portray black women in their full diversity. The womanist subject eulogized by volkish fiction was again "a unified, essential, and whole self" (Dubey, *Black Women Novelists* 4), which harked back to the black aesthetic ideal of strong, community-oriented and community-bound men and women. The fully-developed womanism of the 1980s endorsed most of the tenets of black nationalism, not only its desire to reverse negative stereotyping. It also shared the deep-seated black nationalist belief in the subordination of art to political agenda, and call for didacticism. On the other hand, womanism went beyond the Black Aesthetics' ideology in its aspiration to give black women their rightful place in the nationalist rhetoric, and to acknowledge their unique contribution to creating and maintaining African American exceptionalism. It redeemed black matriarchs, female networks and lesbian relations. A womanist, claimed Alice Walker, is a woman whose primary allegiance is to other women, rather than men. She is "a woman who loves other women sexually and/or non-sexually. Appreciates and prefers women's culture … and women's strength … [and is] committed to survival and wholeness of entire people, male and female" (Walker, *In Search of Our Mothers' Gardens* xi).[36] Already in the 1970s, the bourgeoning of womanism had

36 Many definitions of womanism have been offered since Walker's first enunciation of the term; some conflate womanism with black feminism, whereas others emphasize the distinctiveness of both concepts. For example, the entry in *The Reader's Companion to U.S. Women's History* authored by Gloria Steinem and Diana L. Hayes, treats "womanist and womanism" as "culture-specific and poetic synonyms for *Black feminist* and *Black feminism*" (639). On the other hand, Carol Marsh-Lockett points out in her 1997 definition in *The Oxford Companion to African American Literature* that Walker's concept of womanism is not only antithetical to white feminism, but also, to a certain degree, to black

brought back appreciation for strong, anti-patriarchal female characters in the tradition of Hurston's Janie Crawford, including: Merle in Marshall's *The Chosen Place, The Timeless People*; Pilate and Circe in Morrison's *Song of Solomon*; Sula in Morrison's *Sula*; Meridian in Alice Walker's *Meridian*; and Ruth in Alice Walker's *The Third Life of Grange Copeland*. In the 1980s, however, womanist novels, such as *Mama Day*, *Praisesong for the Widow*, *Tar Baby*, *The Salt Eaters*, *Abeng* and *No Telephone to Heaven*, started to glorify ancestral mothers and picture communal mothering as the main and multivalent practice of black female resistance. Moreover, as Dubey has observed, generational continuity, which was "an emergent impulse visible in *Corregidora* and *Meridian*," came to be seen in the following decade as a "redemptive [possibility]," which, together with the idealization of mothering, circumscribed black female agency (Dubey, *Black Women Novelists* 161).

Naturally, womanism was not exclusively Alice Walker's brainchild; it was rather the collaborative effort of all BWR writers and critics, such as Michele Wallace, Mary Helen Washington, Frances Beale, Barbara Christian, Mari Evans and Eleanor Taylor, to name just a few, all of whom struggled to legitimize the material and literary legacies of black foremothers. But it seems that Walker's "cultural intervention" pushed womanism to the forefront of the black feminist agenda and re-defined the Black Aesthetic as a womanist aesthetic (Broeck, "The Urgency of Petunias" 225). Walker's ideological and artistic trajectory shows that BWR writers' views on key black nationalist ideas pertaining to motherhood, matriliny, memory and heritage crystallized in the late 1970s and early 1980s to shape a black "matrifocal nationalism" (Boehmer, *Stories of Women* 101). It saw "Janies" finally adopting the role of national mothers, matriarchs metamorphosing into keepers of "authentic" black traditions, and the idea of "the reproductive cycle … as a self-perpetuating vicious circle of oppression" transmuting into matriliny as "the only means of preserving the continuity between the past of the black historical and cultural heritage" (Dubey, *Black Women Novelists* 160). While in the 1970s, BWR writers repeated, with a great deal of ambiguity, the black nationalist gesture of constructing a new identity in opposition to the mother, the 1980s witnessed a dramatic revalorization of motherhood, mothering and feminine folk heritage. Womanist novels of the 1980s, such as *Mama Day*, *Praisesong for the Widow*, *Abeng* and *No Telephone to Heaven* are also distinguished by their celebratory embrace of the folk as the foundation of a newly-discovered black female authority.

The 1980s' novels also reflect a departure from "social science fiction" (Albert Murray, qtd. in Wall, *Changing Our Own Words* 9); that is, fiction that treats literature as a "mimetic representation of sociology" (Wall, ibid.). BWR fiction of the 1980s moves from the model of realist, or naturalist social protest literature, which was

feminism. See also Patricia Hill Collins, "What's in a Name? Womanism, Black Feminism and Beyond." *The Black Scholar*, vol. 26 no 1, Winter/Spring 1996, pp. 9-17.

supposed to provide unambiguous and straightforward criticism of reality, towards formal experimentation, as evidenced in Morrison's more complex use of the gothic, Kincaid's modernism, and Cliff's non-realistic/postmodern techniques. In the 1980s, the BWR infused realist writing with magical, mythical and surreal elements borrowed from the black folklore tradition. In this way, these writers, inspired by the strong womanist current, shifted the center of gravity of the Second Renaissance to the heartland of Black Atlantic cultures in the New World.

I call this common geographic homespace, after Immanuel Wallerstein, the extended Caribbean. It encompasses a stretch of a geographic space that stretches from northeastern Brazil to Maryland, with the Caribbean archipelago at its center. It is the place of initial displacement of Africans and the place where slavery developed in its harshest form. But the extended Caribbean is also a mythical place, to which many authors of the black diaspora returned in order to turn the tide of History and reconnect with their peoples' ancestral African past. Next to the northern ghetto and ancient Africa, which were the "frames of reference" for black nationalists and Afrocentrists respectively, the extended Caribbean became, for BWR writers, another place with huge mythical and regenerative potential.

This shift in geographical focus, accompanied by a preference for non-realistic modes of writing, was fundamental, because it allowed the writers of the 1980s to express what they deemed to be "eternal" and "essential" truths about Black Atlantic cultures. It is important to note that even although some 1970s' novels, most notably *Song of Solomon*, which I will discuss later, hinted at the existence of such transcendental truths, most of the novelists in the 1970s did not seem to believe that they had access to them. Therefore, as Dubey argues, in the concluding chapter of her monograph, it was only in the 1980s that BWR fiction "engaged in salvaging the values of the community, the oral heritage, and of the historical past in ways that redefine[d] the black nationalist constructions of these terms" and "position[ed] the Dessa Roses, the Sethes, and the Mama Days as the 'mothers' of Black political and cultural resistance" (*Black Women Novelists* 161). This passing of African American history and heritage through the feminine line, which was such a vexed issue in the fiction of the 1970s, emerged, in the 1980s, as a major means of black female self-empowerment. For the first time, African American women writers saw themselves as embodiments of a national ethos, and as national daughters who were as important to the national survival as "the sons of the soil" (Boehmer, *Stories of Women* 14). Women, with their power to "create generations" and pass on to them the "eternal" values of black (nationalist) identity, placed themselves at the heart of the nationalist-womanist project.

One novel that is conspicuously absent from Dubey's otherwise brilliant study about the BWR and nationalism in the 1970s is *Song of Solomon*, a womanist novel that in many ways reiterates the concerns of Dubey's monograph. *Song of Solomon* also focuses on class and gender diversity within black communities and shows divisions between Southern and Northern black cultures. It engages with discourse

about black matriarchy and motherhood, and questions the efficacy of extreme militant black nationalism. This novel, like other narratives discussed by Dubey, such as *The Third Life of Grange Copeland, Sula, Eva's Man* and *Corregidora*, is a form of *Bildungsroman* that traces the social and political awakening of its male protagonist, Milkman, whose quest for money eventually turns into a quest for roots and spiritual integrity. The novel foreshadows the valorization of Southern folklore that occurred in the 1980s as Milkman's quest takes him South, to the extended Caribbean, where he discovers the history of his family and his "tribe" and immerses himself in its "authentic" black indigenous culture. Thus, the novel fits into the paradigm of the "intergenerational impulse" that Dubey rightly sees as an emerging feature of the 1980s' BWR novels. In short, *Song of Solomon* has all the elements that attracted Dubey's attention in other 1970s' novels, and yet it is not even fleetingly mentioned in her monograph. In many respects, *Song of Solomon* was an avant-garde novel that outdistanced most of Morrison's contemporaries by a few years in its celebration of female folk heritage, the power of black vernacular and mythical patterns.

This gap in Dubey's study had already been filled by Harry Reed's inspiring article, "Toni Morrison, *Song of Solomon* and Black Cultural Nationalism," which was actually written ten years earlier, and was the first publication on the BWR and cultural nationalism. Strangely, none of the later studies on the BWR and cultural nationalism acknowledged Reed's pioneering observations. In this article, Reed claims that in *Song of Solomon*, Morrison is "working on the broadest possible imaginative nationalist canvas" (52), and that the novel is "a major contribution to nationalist thought" (52). He also describes it as a "Pan-African" novel (Reed 53), incorporating motifs from African cultures, such as flying, which implies a spatial and temporal connection between Africa and America, as well as between the past and the present. Reed sees Morrison's "Africanism" and her endorsement of cultural nationalism as the greatest achievement of her fiction. To his mind, it bears witness to the fact that "BCN [black cultural nationalism] … [is] the most important foundation of black survival" (Reed 51). The article lavishes praise on Morrison and other writers of the Black Women's Renaissance for hammering this simple truth into the political consciousness of post-civil-rights black America.

Interestingly, Reed lauds *Song of Solomon's* black female characters as being both metaphors and metonymies of black cultural nationalism. On the one hand, he sees the novel's maternal figures, such as the wise Pilate, the ancient Circe, and even the "small" Ruth, as prototypes of "nationalist archetypes" (Reed 52), saying that "[t]heir personae incorporate bits of Ancient Africa, New World Slavery, Southern Reconstruction and the present" (Reed 53). On the other hand, however, he invests in these women the power of "regenerating the community from within" (ibid.). Pilate, in particular, grows in his essay to mythical proportions as an "old timey" and an "embodiment of black wisdom, which gives Pilate an equilibrium" that none of other female characters possesses (57). Pilate does not yet have the level of self-awareness of the 1980s' wise grandmothers; nevertheless "her unconscious Africanism is demonst-

rated through her identification with black culture, the aura of magic, and sense of deep wisdom," (Reed 53). Though she cannot work magic or heal her broken-hearted granddaughter, she does herald the triumphant advance of the 1980s' conjure women. Pilate, who does not have a navel, a fact that seems to suggest that she was not human-born, can be considered as the Ur-mother, or the first mother, for these later maternal figures. Reed describes the effect of her lack of a navel as follows: "Pilate who never mothered anybody, was helpful to everybody, but who also was believed to have the power to step out of her skin, set a bush on fire from 50 yards, and turn a man into a ripe rutabaga – all on account of the fact that she had no navel" (94). All the female characters in *Song of Solomon*, as Reed aptly comments, "appear as the carriers of the old way. Men on the other hand tend to move away from the ancient wisdom: they run, make money, and challenge whites in both real and symbolic confrontations" (62). And while men lose themselves in these misguided pursuits, they miss the point that the only way for black people to make headway is, as Reed puts it, by "validat[ing] black culture and reaffirm[ing] its adaptive survival power, its creativity amidst oppression, its life-affirming qualities, as well as ancient wisdom and humanity and its capacity for survival" (63). According to Reed, black women are uniquely equipped to preserve and pass on "the wisdom of ages," and he says that "Morrison implies [that black people] are all poorer for [their] inability to understand, to accept, and to utilize the old ways" (57).

In Reed's opinion, what makes this novel "ripe with a cultural nationalist thrust" (51), is its thematic focus on the search for roots, family and identity, and the pursuit of growth, autonomy and commitment, as well as Morrison's unshaken belief in the regenerative potential of traditional folk cultures. As Milkman travels through "the oral oriented culture" of the American South (Reed 60), he learns the "collective wisdom" of Southern communities and "comes to appreciate the dynamic of black life stretching back over generations" (ibid. 61). What also seems important is that *Song of Solomon* has an emblematic dimension, which is so characteristic of national allegories, because, as Reed argues, it is a novel about both "the transformation within the individual and within the race" (53).

What anchors this novel in the 1970s' political climate is Morrison's concern not to present matriarchy as a viable alternative to "normal" black family. For example, in "Rootedness," she seems to endorse black nationalist criticism of matriarchs like Pilate by criticizing all-female households, often approved by black female critics, as a dangerous pathology, stating that "the disability we must be on guard against for the future [is] the female who reproduces the female who reproduces the female" (344). Moreover, Morrison seems to bow to black nationalist ideology by making the national family plot revolve around a man – the son of the nation. Milkman is at the center of the quest for roots, and he is surrounded by less important female helpers who unconditionally love, support and guide him, and forgive him all his betrayals and mistakes.

This fact has led Trudier Harris to criticize *Song of Solomon* and other novels by Morrison, such as *Sula, Tar Baby* and *Beloved*, for being unashamedly anti-feminist. Harris underlines that fact that *Song of Solomon* was published when black nationalism was still strong, and consequently all women were expected to be feminine and secondary to masculine aspirations and actions. This leads Harris to conclude that in Morrison's fiction, there was an inherently male-centered perspective: "females are of value in direct proportion to their assistance in male objectives; more often than not, they suppress their desires, indeed sacrifice their lives and/or futures to assist males" (*Fiction and Folklore* 187). The same perspective, contends Harris, compelled Morison to "kill" Sula, who, as bell hooks has also observed, was too masculine, independent and radical to stay alive. The same impulse, according to Harris, made Morrison condemn other female characters in her fiction, such as Jadine, for example, who was put down for her Eurocentric selfishness in *Tar Baby*, or Sethe, who was punished by the ghost of the baby in *Beloved*.

Harris makes a particularly convincing case for her claim that women in Morrison's fiction were victimized by what she calls "traditional folkloristic patterns" (*Fiction and Folklore* 114), which coincide with what I describe as the volkish tradition. She observes that the characterization of Pilate is a "blending of secular and sacred traditions, natural and supernatural concerns" (*ibid.*) but says that one would be wrong to assume that this endows Pilate with any real power. *Song of Solomon* traces Milkman's empowerment through his immersion in the folk culture of the South. There he learns manhood, commitment and generosity, and finally becomes one of the flying Africans, thanks to Pilate, the nurturing mother who makes the return to the South possible and pays for it with her life. All the women in the novel sacrifice themselves for Milkman: his sisters and his cousin and lover Hagar. All of them are rejected by Milkman as his own desires take precedence over those of women in his family. Hagar is "a sexual outlet in the way that his sisters are maids – convenient and exploitable" (Harris, *Fiction and Folklore* 110). Harris suggests that when Hagar tries to place "duty squarely in the middle of their relationship," he instantly tries to "think of a way out," and "Hagar presents her body as one of the bridges over which Milkman Dead walks into his own humanity and manhood" (*Fiction and Folklore* 113). According to Harris, Morrison practically destroys Pilate's family, since Hagar and Pilate both end up dead so that this one man can reach maturity.

In 1981, the year that ushered in the second decade of the BWR, Morrison published another novel, *Tar Baby*, which featured a *Bildungsroman*-type education of a son of the soil, aptly named Son, who, in one of the best-known lines from the novel rhetorically asks his Sorbonne-educated lover, Jadine, "whose culture she is bearing." *Tar Baby* can also be read through the lens of psychological feminism to illuminate Jadine's need for independence and her cultivation of an individualistic identity. Or it can be read through the black folkloric figure of the tar baby, a female trickster attempting to deceive the positive hero embodied by the animal character, Br'er Rabbit, from the Uncle Remus stories (1880). In that second reading, Jadine is depicted as a

tar baby trying to trap Son, the son of the soil, in the American myth of social mobility and materialism. Jadine is a modern, liberated woman who considers herself a citizen of the world. But Morrison wants to make the point that a vital part of a black woman's identity is her loyalty to her nation, to "the tribe." The cosmopolitan Jadine is therefore presented as a person whose sense of self has been eroded by dislocation and acculturation to western values. Morrison confronts Jadine's sense of herself with other black characters' views of her. These are mostly females whose identities are "authentic," stable, and firmly rooted in African American folklore, characteristics which Jadine does not find appealing at all. These "truly black" women, black mothers, grandmothers and sisters, to whom Morrison's novel is dedicated, have more personal integrity, moral fiber and authority than Jadine, and they successfully disrupt her image of herself.

Much of the action of the novel focuses on their attempts to bring Jadine back into the fold by teaching her what genuine black female identity should look like. For example, the "swamp women," who appear as trees in a scene in which Jadine is trying to get out of a mythical part of the jungle, try to re-claim Jadine as their daughter. The trees are described as having female and maternal identities, while she is "a runaway child restored to them but fighting to get away from them, *their exceptional femaleness*" (*Tar Baby*, 155, emphasis added). Although "they were first delighted when they saw her, the girl's desperate struggle to be something different than they were" makes them "quiet," "arrogant" and "mindful of their value" (ibid. 266).

Then there are the "night women," who also want to teach Jadine a lesson about what "exceptional femaleness" means. In a room, which reminds her of "a cave, a grave, the dark womb of the earth" (ibid. 225), Jadine is again put in the position of a prodigal daughter confronted by foster mothers, who are angry and demanding her attention. She sees the night women as "the mamas who seduced [her black lover Son] and were trying to lay claim on her" (ibid. 157). From the African woman in yellow, who spits at the "inauthentic" Jadine in a supermarket, to the women in the trees and the night women, all of the black women in the novel question Jadine's womanhood. Jadine's re-education ends in failure, and as a consequence she is condemned as a woman who, in the words of Thérèse, another "substitute" mother in *Tar Baby*, has "forgotten her ancient properties" (ibid. 263). Morrison obviously favors Son over Jadine, who is depicted as a social-climber – snobbish, demanding and white-oriented. Jadine is dismissed as a traitor to her "tribe" because she wants to "make it" in the white world. Son, by contrast, symbolizes the resistant black culture that tenaciously refuses to submit to the domination of white civilization and tries to rescue Jadine from its clutches. He fails because, as readers are told, Jadine is a "Yalla," and "it's hard for them [yellow women] not to be white people, most never make it. Yallas don't come to being black natural-like. They have to choose and most don't choose it" (ibid. 266).

Thus Morrison, who intelligently presents arguments in favor of Jadine's worldview, nonetheless, passes a harsh judgment on her. She does so by contrasting

Jadine's worldview with that of Son, the African woman, the swamp and night women and other black characters from "authentic" folk backgrounds, whose identities are securely rooted in their communities' cosmology. In the words of Harris:

> Jadine's talents are undercut by the negative response written into the text in evaluation her actions. Her efforts to help Son might be annoying, but finally they are more acceptable than her bid to be an independent, self-determining woman. Or we might say that the *tone* of her assistance is too "masculine," too much on a level of male/female equality than Son's fragile ego can take ... (*Fiction and Folklore* 188).

Jadine is despised, spat on and manipulated just because she wants to be someone other than an obedient daughter and eventually a "culture bearing" mother. Consequently, as Harris asserts, Morrison's novels "seem to continue the use and abuse of black women's characters" by making them victims of the volkish tradition that is "generally devalued by males" (*Fiction and Folklore* 188). She accusingly asks: "Is there any female character in Morrison's work who can fulfill herself and not be destroyed or not be judged for doing so? Must all women be subsumed under some community standard, or ostracized if they do not adhere to such standards?" (*Fiction and Folklore* 189).

Accusing Morrison of misogynist intentions seems too harsh a judgment since it is clear to me that Morrison's fiction of the 1970s and 80s tried to strike a balance between her appreciation of the wise foremothers and her concern not to alienate the national sons. Morrison clearly cared about the sons of the nation (as Baby Suggs suggests in *Beloved* when she says: "A man is nothing but a man, ... [b]ut a son? Well now, that's *somebody*" 23), and she wanted black men to fit into her national scheme, or "to inhabit the nation practiced by women," as Thorsson asserted, speaking about *Mama Day* (*Women's Work* 126).[37] That balancing act is not so conspicuous in the fiction of other writers of the BWR, who, in the 1980s, seemed to have awakened to the fact that it is the womanist daughter who should be recognized as the driving force of the black nationalist project. Whilst in the 1970s' novels, female characters often accepted their secondary position vis-à-vis men, in the 1980s' fiction of the BWR, a matrilineal perspective supersedes the patrilineal one, and feminine folk iconography becomes a dynamic source of the womanist novel that empowers women.

One vivid example of that iconography can be found in a parable recounted by Hurston in her collection *Mules and Men* (33-8). Its female protagonist, Mathilda,

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37 Thorsson argues that the fact that George narrates part of the novel (alternating with Cocoa in a call-and-response pattern) "indicat[es] the importance of men in fashioning the African American nation. Their job is not to found and defend a nation but to inhabit the nation practiced by women" (*Women's Work* 126). It is disconcerting, though, that George does not survive his visit to Willow Springs. He dreams about Willow Spring becoming his "nation," but he becomes part of it only after he dies.

maintains that God made man and woman equal in strength, but the man wanted to rule and persuaded God to make him stronger. To compensate for that, God gave women the keys to the kitchen, the bedroom and the cradle, while the devil taught her how to use them. Thus, the woman gained control over access to food, sex and reproduction, which ultimately gave her more power than man. Only after the man "submit[s] hisself to de woman," Mathilda says, will the woman open the door. The heroines of the 1970s were, by and large, docile and hardworking, they suffered from poverty, racism and sexism, but they tried to come to terms with their men. In the 1980s, by contrast, they seemed to have learned how to use the keys that God had given them. This stark reversal in the gendering of privileges made black women, particularly mothers, beneficiaries of the traditional folkloric belief systems, which at the same somewhat devalued black men. The expression of gender identities through the prism of folk heritage in the 1980s' novels of the BWR changed the construction of black masculinity and femininity in a way that reinforced the position of maternal figures in the national imaginary. This literary move had far-reaching political and cultural implications for how black men and women and their social roles were perceived in reality (L. Smith, "Heritage, Gender and Identity" 159).

3 Matrifocal Nationalism, Afrocentric Womanism[38] and the Fear of Disinheritance

3.1 Matrtifocal "Literary Ethnography": The National Mother as a Womanist Theologian

In the words of Gloria Wade-Gayles, the BWR novels of the 1980s "recite black matrilineage" ("The Truths of Our Mothers' Lives" 8). Contrary to the 1970s, when black motherhood had been subject to relentless scrutiny, the 1980s' novels were "packed full of female achievement" (Ogunyemi, "Womanism" 29) that was the effect of "motherwork" (Collins, *Black Feminist Thought*, 2000). These novels lavished praise on black mothers and foremothers for their resistance to "zombification"[39] by the dominant western culture, and evoked a womanist ideology that sprang from African dreams, myths, histories and memories – what Toni Morrison called the "discredited knowledge" of black people. A large part of this knowledge existed beyond the jurisdiction of paternalism; its sharing and passing was the business of black women who were spiritually "moored" in the traditions of the extended Caribbean. In other words, as Zala Chandler has put it, these women kept and cherished "the spirit of sisterhood, the spirit of peoplehood, the spirit of tradition, and the spirit of change, African spirit" ("Voices beyond the Veil" 342). BWR novels of the 1980s firmly placed motherhood and matriliny at the center of communal and national life; they used what Elleke Boehmer called a strategic matrifocal nationalism to forge unity and provide continuity between ancestral and modern times (*Stories of Women* 101).

In *Granny Midwives and Black Women Writers: Double-Dutched Reading*, Valerie Lee, argues that the heroic fictional mothers and grandmothers in the prose of the second decade of the BWR were a reincarnation of the folk "granny and her cultural matrix" (2). She maintains that the granny was a prototype for the "womanist theologians" of the Renaissance (18), stating that:

> historical grannies were women who, without a formal pulpit, preached a gospel of womanist ethics and theology and… black women writers build on that tradition by imbuing their fictional grannies and women healers with a spirituality, a sense of mission rooted in traditional black religion … (79)

38 Valerie Lee uses this term to connect womanists and Afrocentrists in one "history of intellectual thought" (*Granny Midwives* 94).

39 Zombification is Erna Brodber's term for forced colonial acculturation (Encyclopedia). Simone A. James Alexander uses the term to describe the kinds of mother-daughter relationships in Caribbean literature that are stigmatized by colonialism. (*Mother Imagery*)

She suggests that by "mythologizing of the midwife/woman healer" (4), the BWR's "cultural romances" (19) turned the charismatic maternal figure into "an evolving cultural icon" (2), and transformed "the granny's 'text' into narrative myth" (4).

Pilate, a fertility doctor, midwife and conjurer in Morrison's *Song of Solomon*, was, in Lee's opinion, "the earliest representative example of the fusion and tension between the conjuring activities of the historical granny and the magic of literary imagination" (102). She was, in the words of Lee, "the first fully developed portrait of the type of midwife with extraordinary powers" (129). As Harry Reed has pointed out, Pilate was the personification of "the wisdom of ages," what he calls "the old ways" ("Toni Morrison" 57). Joanne Braxton commented that she "embodie[d] the heroism, self-sacrifice, and the supernatural attributes of her historical and mythical counterparts" ("Ancestral Presence" 307). As a woman who has no navel and who "borned herself" (*Song of Solomon* 244), Pilate is a half-mythical mother. She is like "some ancient goddess one foot pointing east and one west, suggesting in the directions her connection to both life and death," as Dorothy Lee has noted (*"Song of Solomon"* 65).[40] Wilentz, on the other hand, emphasizes Pilate's links to Africa, saying that the air around her house "could have come straight from a marketplace in Accra" ("Civilizations Underneath" 72). She also said that Pilate is like a "West African marker woman" who would be at home in any Nigerian village, with her practice of chewing, her scent of ginger and ritual cures (65).

Valerie Lee claims that Gloria Naylor's *Mama Day*, "written a decade later [than *Song of Solomon*], is the strongest example of a whole community of conjurers and healers" (129). She says that the novel features "an elderly black midwife, several conjuring women, sacred places and an ethnobotanical grove" (ibid. 129) and "brings together character, landscape, cultural rituals, and an African-based epistemology" (120). Miranda, the main protagonist, known to everybody as Mama Day, is an archetypal mother *par excellence*. She draws her unique female knowledge from the African-born Sapphira Wade, the "ancient mother of pure black" (*Mama Day* 48), who could use the heat of lightning to kindle her medicine pot. Only women make up the trunk of Mama Day's family tree, started by the legendary conjure woman, Sapphira. This all-female lineage assumes the proportions of a myth of national genesis. In the words of Valerie Lee, it constitutes "a womanist epistemology," according to which "they, as women, are the ones who wield power as blacks," and "pride themselves on their African ancestry. In their Kwanzaa-like Candlelight ritual, they face east toward Africa and acknowledge the 'Great Mother', the conjure woman who shook hands with God" (*Granny Midwives* 134).

Although many of the literary grannies, such as Miranda Day, were not biological mothers, their communal mothering was far more important than the experience of

40 Likewise, Circe, another maternal figure who guides Milkman, seems to be a goddess, as her very name implies. She had been alive for generations and so transcends time.

motherhood itself. These womanist theologians “reject[ed] breeding in favor of mothering as a multivalent practice” (Thorsson, *Women’s Work* 49). The BWR abounds in such “maternal archetype[s]” (Braxton, “Ancestral Presence” 303), who provided guidance, nurture and protection for the younger generation. They are experts at survival and teach their people “the paths of life that she and all Negroes gone before had found, and found to be safe ones” (Angelou, qtd. in Braxton 302-3). They often “[assume] the mythical proportions of the archetypal outraged mother” (Braxton, “Ancestral Presence” 304-5) in order to protect their children and their “tribe.” They turn to the “discredited knowledge” of conjuring and “[pay] homage to an African past, while providing a present-day idiom for magic, power, and ancient wisdom within a pan-African context” (Valerie Lee 13). As heirs to the timeless ancestors praised in the famous essay by Toni Morrison, “Rootedness: The Ancestor as Foundation,” they carry the wisdom of old times, and insist that their offspring should “rely upon the spirit and the bones of the knowledge of those who came before …[them], ancestors” (Chandler, “Voices beyond the Veil” 342).

There are multiple examples of BWR fiction in which black maternal figures “[embody] the ‘timeless’ quality of the ancestor figure” (Braxton, writing about Momma Henderson in Maya Angelou’s *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings*, “Ancestral Presence” 302). Miss Lissie from Walker’s 1989 novel, *The Temple of My Familiar*, gets her supernatural powers from having been reincarnated in different times. She is portrayed as a bearer of “racial memory” (Dieke, “Toward a Monistic Realism” 508). Lissie’s name means “the one who remembers everything” (*The Temple* 52). She is described as “a lot of women” and a “traveler … follow[ing] …the ancient and pre-ancient paths” (*The Temple* 38; 366). Thérèse, the half-mythical maternal guide in Morrison’s *Tar Baby*, who is 80 but still has milk in her breasts, “is not only characterized as a visionary, she is also the archetypal earth mother by virtue of her ‘magic breasts’” (Sandra Pouchet Pauqet, qtd. in Valerie Lee 76). Although she is blind, at the novel’s end she has “enough insight to point the way to and through cultural myths” (ibid. 74), and to guide Son safely back to his fellow horsemen in the wild part of the Isle des Chevaliers. Finally, Minnie Ransom in *The Salt Eaters* is “a fabled healer of the district” (*The Salt Eaters* 1) who receives her gift after a dramatic spiritual awakening at which she derives power from the *loa* ancestors. She is “known to calm fretful babies with a smile or a pinch of the thigh, known to cool out nervous wives who bled all the time and couldn’t stand still, known to dissolve hard lumps in the body that the doctors at the county hospital called cancers” (*The Salt Eaters* 113).

In this matrtifocal “literary ethnography” (Valerie Lee 10), conjuring becomes a special kind of female knowledge and, as Athena Vrettos has noted, “a metaphor for spiritual power” (qtd. in Valerie Lee 16), whose aim is to heal historic/ancestral and more contemporary wounds (ibid. 2). For example, in Alice Walker’s story, “The Revenge of Hannah Kemhuff,” Tante Rosie, a community root worker and conjure woman, casts a spell on the white social worker who maltreated Hannah, and in this way helps to rebuild Hannah’s flagging self-esteem. In Bambara’s *The Salt Eaters*,

Minnie Ransom heals Velma by "taking her on a spiritual journey revisiting the past and integrating politics and history" (Valerie Lee 77-8). In healing and cleansing rituals bordering on magic, women often nurse other women back to health. These rituals, argues Gates, are similar to practices derived from African and syncretic Caribbean religions (*Reading Black* 357). In Naylor's *The Women of Brewster Place*, Mattie bathes the numb, grief-stricken Ciel, who has lost her child, bringing her from death into life as she reawakens her senses in a ritual of shared womanhood which is similar to Rosalee's bathing of Avey Johnson in Marshall's *Praisesong for the Widow*. Such novels, according to Valerie Lee, "affirm the history of resistance; and … offer a counter discursive practice that problematizes notions of health, healing and wholeness" (3). They not only stress the centrality of women and their specialized ancestral knowledge for the well-being of contemporary African American communities; they also present ethnographic literature on conjuring and healing as "a discourse to explain some of the phenomena of African American literature" and culture (ibid. 13-4). [41]

The success of BWR writers was also presented as the result of motherwork, coming "from childhood laced with hand-made perfection, the tradition of their 'Mamas'" who helped the daughters-writers "to see and be the continuing connections of all the days of Black people – yesterday, today and tomorrow" (Chandler, "Voices beyond the Veil" 342). On numerous occasions, Alice Walker spoke and wrote about the compelling need to assume the voice of her mother to articulate her own experiences: "Through years of listening to my mother's stories of her life, I have absorbed not only the stories themselves, but something of the manner in which she spoke, something of the urgency that involves the knowledge that her stories – like her life – must be recorded" (*In Search of Our Mothers' Gardens* 240). But Walker was not the only writer who hailed her mother as the person who gave her insights into "racial memory" and handed down the "the creative spark" (Wilson-Tagoe, "Feminism" 132). Paule Marshall also admitted that her mother and her mother's friends had been her main source of inspiration, and the agents of a "spiritual return" to Africa; a return "absolutely necessary for the reintegration of that which was lost…" ("Return of a Native Daughter" 53). In "Meditations on Language and the Self: A Conversation with Paule Marshall," Marshall explains that these women were "mother poets," who "never had the opportunity to be recognized published poets. They were invisible as poets and women … on four counts: they were black, women, immigrants and working-class. They had all these strikes against them" (286). Still, according to Marshall, in spite of all these obstacles, the mother poets:

41 More examples of analysis of texts on conjuring can be found in: Houston Baker, "Conjure and the Space of Black Woman's Creativity," in his *Workings of the Spirit: Poetics of Afro-American Women's Writing*; Marjorie Pryse and Hortense Spillers, eds., *Conjuring: Black Women, Fiction and Literary Tradition*; and Trudier Harris, Fiction *and Folklore*.

> had taken a language imposed upon them, and infused it with their own incisive rhythms and syntax, brought to bear upon it the few African words and sounds that had been retained. In a word transformed it, made it their own. I was impressed without being able to define it, by the seemingly effortless way they had mastered the form of storytelling …. They were carrying a tradition as ancient as Africa, [a] centuries old oral mode by which the culture and history, the wisdom of the race had been transmitted. (“Shaping the World of My Art” 103)

The kitchen was the female space from which the mother poets “ran the world,” to use Jamaica Kincaid’s expression.[42] As in Ntozake Shange’s *Sassafrass, Cypress & Indigo*, the kitchen, a metonymy of home, was universally presented not only as the base of female power, but also as a place where the private and the political converged. Marshall, for example, reminisced about how her mother and her friends spent hours there discussing Marcus Garvey’s Back-to-Africa movement:

> Their embracing of the movement, their support of Garvey suggested something to me when I thought about it years later, which has been very important to my writing. Not only did it say that they had a political perspective, but they also saw themselves in terms of the larger world of darker people. (Broeck 197)

Pinckney notes that although women’s concerns did not use to be considered to be a part of the political domain and were thought to belong to the realm of “the kitchen range [that] could not adequately represent the struggle” for black emancipation, “it turned out that the concerns of the kitchen were big enough to encompass the lore of struggle and survival” (“Black Victims, Black Villains” 18). With their “free-wheeling talk together with the sometimes bawdy jokes and the laughter which often swept the kitchen,” Marshall said that mother poets “declared that they had retained a strong sense of their special and unique Black Identity” (“An Interview with Mary Helen Washington” 164). They laid the foundations for the matrifocal womanist worldview that came to light with such force in the 1980s when they passed their unique sense of black identity on to their daughters.

It is not surprising that, as Gloria Joseph claimed, “The daughters showed tremendous respect, concern and love for their mothers … an undeniable respect and admiration for their mothers’ accomplishments and struggles …” (“Black Mothers and Daughters” 96). This reverence has been explained by the fact that the experience of slavery, poverty and racial-and-gender discrimination shaped African American practices of mothering in distinct ways: “[t]he reason for this seems to be located in the black daughters’ familiarity with the circumstances within which their mothers existed and raised their children and an empathy caused by understanding these situations” (ibid. 94). Consequently, as bell hooks argued in *Yearning: Race, Gender, and Culture Politics* (1990), homeplace, presided over by mothers, grandmothers and

42 Kincaid said: “If I actually ran the world, I’d do it from the kitchen” (qtd. in Ruth Behar, *Translated Woman* 300).

aunts, has always been for African Americans a "site of resistance." It has been a place where women weave the social fabric of their communities, forge ethnic and gender consciousness, and cherish cultural memories vital for the cultural reproduction of the community.

Even in the 1970s, when motherhood became temporarily unpopular among black feminists, their works betrayed a niggling doubt about the motherhood-as-oppression thesis, as I argued earlier. In the 1980s, BWR narratives highlighted once again the activism and efficacy of black mothers, and reaffirmed the continuing relevance of the homeplace and the role of mothering for black women. In consequence, they reinstated maternal figures – mothers, grandmothers and community mothers (or bloodmothers and othermothers as Patricia Hill Collins has named them in her essay "The Meaning of Motherhood") – as powerful role models. Sonia Sanchez, who was associated with the Black Arts movement, explained in her 1990 interview with Zala Chandler, that elder black women commanded respect because they "transmit[ted] knowledge [and] … wisdom." She admitted that: "[she] wanted to be like them because … [she] saw and heard power there" (Chandler 354). According to Sanchez, in contrast to white women, who saw empowerment in having a career, for black women like herself, emancipation meant something totally different: "I [didn't] see myself as being empowered because of a certain job or status. I [saw] myself as being empowered because of my grandmother and people like her" (ibid.). It is gaining admittance to this womanist community of bloodmothers and othermothers, who apparently felt and thought alike, that in Sanchez's opinion, gave her authority and a voice: "I [didn't] speak alone anymore. I [didn't] speak singularly for myself. I [spoke] for many, many women, who though physically dead, remain[ed] spiritually alive through me" (ibid.).

3.2 White Feminist and African American Scholarship on Motherhood

This reversal in the treatment of the theme of black motherhood, which led to the recuperation of black histories and folk heritage through matrilineal lines, was facilitated by the mother-centered focus of much twentieth-century critical work in various disciplines across the humanities, and particularly by the development of the field of motherhood studies that came into being with the second wave of feminism.[43]

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43 See for example: Mari Langer's *Motherhood and Sexuality*; Diane E. Eyer's *Mother-Infant Bonding: A Scientific Fiction* (a critique of bonding theory in psychology and obstetrics); Linda W. Rosenzweig's *The Anchor of My Life: Middle Class American Mothers and Daughters, 1880-1920* (a social history study); Suzana Danuta Walter's *Lives Together, Worlds Apart: Mothers and Daughters in Popular Culture*; E. Ann Kaplan's *Motherhood and Representation: The Mother in Popular Culture and Melodrama*;

Like nation-and-gender studies, motherhood studies was based on interdisciplinary social, psychological and cultural research. Motherhood studies, in fact, paved the way for much of the nation-and-gender scholarship by making symbolic matrifocality inextricable from contemporary feminist and nationalist critiques.

According to Elaine Tuttle Hansen, white feminist thinking about maternity can be presented as "a drama in three acts" (*Mother without Child* 5). The first act was the "repudiation" of motherhood by second-wave feminists, such as Simone de Beauvoir, Shulamith Firestone, Kate Millett, and Betty Friedan. The second act was "recuperation," that is, reclamation and revision of the meaning of maternity. This began in the mid-1970s, and was associated with Adrienne Rich, Nancy Chodorow, Dorothy Dinnerstein and Sara Ruddick in America; Mary O'Brien and Juliet Mitchell in Great Britain; and Luce Irigaray, Hélène Cixous and Julia Kristeva in France. The third act, which is ongoing, is concerned with extending and challenging earlier thought. According to Hansen, it is increasingly characterized by a sense of impasse, which she explains thus: "Feminists have demanded and gained new attention for the previously ignored problems of motherhood, but they have not arrived at consensus about how to redefine the concept or adjust the system'" (*Mother without Child* 6).

The most conspicuous change in white feminist thought on motherhood was triggered by the poststructuralist disclosure of the constructed nature of gender. This insight reshaped the way motherhood was conceptualized, with the result that feminists no longer talked about "motherhood," replacing the concept with that of "mothering." While motherhood was seen as connoting biological determinism and the traditional western view of the mother as passive, mothering highlighted the active and culturally constructed nature of maternity (Jeremiah, "Motherhood"). This shift was anticipated by some years in Adrienne Rich's seminal 1976 study, *Of Woman Born: Motherhood as Experience and Institution,* in which she argued that mothering can be empowering for women. Rich believed that mothers can opt out of the oppressive patriarchal tradition of motherhood and become "outlaws from the institution of motherhood" (195) by engaging in the subversive practice of mothering. She was, in fact, the first feminist scholar to introduce the distinction between motherhood and mothering (or "outlaw" motherhood). Rich claimed that whereas motherhood can be an oppressive patriarchal institution which keeps women under male control, mothering or "outlaw" motherhood can be a counter-narrative to patriarchal socialization. She maintained that mothering can therefore be a site of political activism, social

Matrifocal women's fiction is the subject of Marianne Hirsch's *The Mother/Daughter Plot: Narrative, Psychoanalysis, Feminism*; Mary Helen Washington's, "I Sign My Mother's Name" in Ruth Perry and Martine Watson Brownly, eds., *Mothering the Mind: Twelve Studies of Writers and their Silent Partners*; Mickey Pearlman's *Mother Puzzles: Daughters and Mothers in Contemporary American Literature*; Barbara Charlesworth Gelpi's *Shelly's Goddess: Maternity, Language, Subjectivity.* In literary criticism, see Cathy Davidson and Esther Broner, *The Lost Tradition: Mothers and Daughters in Literature*.

change and empowerment for women. As Fiona Green noted, despite this revalorization of mothering in white feminist thinking in the 1980s and 1990s, "still largely missing … [was] a discussion of Rich's monumental contention that even when restrained by patriarchy, motherhood can be a site of empowerment and political activism" ("Feminist Mothers" 31). By contrast, African American fiction and literary and feminist critique of that period resonated with the idea of subversive, "outlaw" motherhood. As Adrienne Rich was articulating her groundbreaking views, BWR writers and critics seemed to be independently arriving at the same conclusion. This conclusion, in the words of Patrice DiQuinzio, was that "mothering is an important site at which the individualist ideological formation is elaborated and imposed, but it is also the site at which this ideological formation can be contested and reworked" (*The Impossibility of Motherhood* xv).

Very few white motherhood critics in the early 1980s included black women of color in their analyses; those who did drew attention to the fact that looking at the black mother-daughter relationship through the prism of the dominant psychoanalytic theories of female socialization and individuation could not fully account for the intricacies of that relationship. As Rich explained, culture and history are instrumental in shaping intergenerational female relations: "the affirmation of the mother-daughter bond is powerfully expressed, not primarily in terms of a dyad but as a facet of a culture of women and a group history that is not merely personal" (*Of Woman* xxviii). Nancy Chodorow, a leading feminist psychoanalyst, also admitted that her theory of the socialization and individuation of daughters by their mothers had little use beyond the culture-specific context of the white middle class. In 1981, she claimed that if she were to write a new version of *The Reproduction of Mothering*, a key text in motherhood studies, she would "examine the link between what seems exclusively gender related and the construction of other aspects of society, politics and culture" (qtd. in Schultermandl, *Transnational Matrilineage* 38). Natalie M. Rosinsky, a contributor to Cathy Davidson and E. M. Broner's *The Lost Tradition: Mothers and Daughters in Literature*, wrote in her 1980 essay, "Mothers and Daughters: Another Minority Group," that:

> [members] of racial, ethnic, sexual and economic minority groups, in particular, have delineated their apprehension of the social forces which intervene between mother and daughter. Perhaps because the added oppression of minority group members exacerbates this often painful relationship, these writers seem particularly aware of its tragic destructiveness. (280)

That is why in African American cultures, as in other ethnic groups, "daughter[s] and mother[s] come to some kind of reconciliation, a recognition of the fact that they are not natural enemies but rather fellow victims" (289). Rosinsky concludes by saying that while "[it] is disheartening to see the pain inflicted upon many women; it is encouraging to realize that individual women can transcend this mutilation to discover the deeper rapport that – along with the suffering – unites them with their mothers" (290).

In 1989, in *The Mother/Daughter Plot: Narrative, Psychoanalysis, Feminism*, Marianne Hirsch praised black women writers for creating family romances which focused on young women trying to forge links across generations. According to Hirsch, African American female narratives, such as Toni Morrison's *Sula* and *Beloved* and Alice Walker's "Everyday Use" are edifying examples of "stories of female development" that are "written in the voice of mothers as well as in that of daughters" (161).

African American scholarship on mothering started with womanism and Alice Walker's belief that motherhood is the pillar of communal life, and so crucial to the physical and cultural survival of black communities. Womanist narratives and literary criticism stripped the concept of black mothering of its psychological dimension and "filled" it with ethnic content by arguing that mothering is, first and foremost, a cultural practice, and as such is one of the most important African cultural legacies that define African Americans as a people (Phillips, "Introduction" *The Womanist Reader* xxix). Womanists saw black mothers in a purely cultural context, as carriers and transmitters of ethnicity, who, in the words of Phillips, were:

> storehouses of human knowledge that contain such systemic and life-enhancing elements as ancestry, history, memory, geography, cosmology, epistemology, worldview, metaphysics, ethics, aesthetics, logic, psychology, spirituality, traditions, rituals, art, literatures, architecture, food, medicine, science, and language. (xxxvi)

Womanism revalued black mothers as a bulwark against dehumanizing domination and oppression, and a source of life-affirming folk traditions. It rejected the image of castrating black matriarchs and of daughters as passive objects of maternal socialization, and projected a new vision of resilient black womanhood rooted in an exclusive black feminine culture. This was a counter-movement that de-centered the white feminist discussion on womanhood and motherhood, and introduced plurality into the formerly homogenous field of motherhood studies. On the one hand, womanism shed light on different models of mothering and different processes of socialization of black women. But, on the other, as I wish to argue, it replaced the gender essentialism of white motherhood studies with its own brand of ethnic essentialism.

Womanism, which wanted to call attention to "the African presence in the Americas" (Carol Marsh-Lockett, "Womanism" 785), explained black practices of mothering through recourse to African traditions, which were also idealized. The African practice of mothering was depicted as a service that mothers provided for society; it was "a set of behaviors based on caretaking, management, nurturance, education, spiritual mediation, and dispute resolution" (Phillips, "Introduction" *The Womanist Reader* xxix). In the late 1980s, this idea was picked up and developed by the sociologist Patricia Hill Collins, whereby black motherhood studies entered into its second Afrocentric stage. In her famous 1990 study, *Black Feminist Thought: Knowledge, Consciousness, and the Politics of Empowerment*, Collins praised Alice Walker and other womanists for "reciting black matrilineage":

> As Alice Walker (and many others) have so eloquently articulated, "the search for our mother's gardens" is central to the reconstruction of a tradition long repressed by the powers of dominant white culture and thus central not simply to the daughter's understanding of herself in a strictly psychological sense, but to the understanding of history and the vibrant female desires that often are the lone voices of resistance in the wilderness of racism and oppression. (174)

Collins's own Afrocentric work went one step further in freeing black motherhood from universalizing Eurocentric claims about "normal" families and proper womanhood. *Black Feminist Thought* challenged both white feminist and male black nationalist perspectives on black motherhood, and promoted African-derived scholarship on mothering. Collins proposed to look at black motherhood through the lens of "black women's specialized knowledge," (251), namely, their Afrocentric epistemology.[44] Afrocentric philosophy emphasizes the fact that in African and, by extension, African-derived diasporic communities, motherhood has always been valued as the bedrock of family, community and society. In African societies, fertility and motherhood are sources of power and esteem for women, and mothering is never an isolated, privatized, devalued form of labor that confers on women a secondary status (Collins, "The Meaning of Motherhood" 45). Unlike women in Euro-American societies, African women are "structurally central to [their] families" (ibid.) According to Collins, this means that African and African American motherhood is therefore neither inherently oppressive nor diminutive of women's position. She says that:

> [m]otherhood 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. (*Black Feminist Thought* 118)

Like many other examples of womanist prose and literary criticism, Collins's study also eulogized the good work of bloodmothers, othermothers and "woman-centered 'mothering' networks" that practiced a form of "outlaw" motherhood, as Adrienne Rich put it, in order "to confront oppressive conditions" (Collins, "The Meaning of Motherhood" 45). These networks, Collins argues, pass on to young black women invaluable knowledge about "how to survive in interlocking structures of race, class

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44 Afrocentrism (also Afrocentricity) is an ideological approach to culture, philosophy, and history, which is mostly limited to the US and dedicated to the history of Black people. It is a response to global Eurocentric/Orientalist attitudes to African people. It revisits their history with an African cultural and ideological focus. Afrocentricity deals primarily with self-determination and African agency. Afrocentrism evolved out of the work of African American intellectuals in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, but flowered into its modern form due to the activism of African American intellectuals during the Civil Rights Movement and led to the development of African American Studies programs in universities. Afrocentrism, as a distinct academic ideology, reached its peak in the 1980s and 1990s. For more information, see *Africana: The Encyclopedia of the African and African-American Experience*, Volume 1., by Henry Louis Gates and Kwame Anthony Appiah, eds., especially p. 111; and Molefi Asante's *Afrocentricity: The Theory of Social Change*.

and gender oppression" and help "daughters go farther than mothers themselves were allowed to go" (ibid. 54). In other words, bloodmothers and othermothers practice what Callins calls "socialization for survival," insofar as they support young women in transcending the boundaries that had impeded their own self-actualization. She defines socialization for survival as passing on the skills "to survive the sexual politics of intersecting oppressions while rejecting and transcending these same power relations" (*Black Feminist Thought* 184).

3.3 Black Matrilineal Romances by African American and African Caribbean Immigrant Female Writers

Like Walker and other womanists, Collins only cursorily explored tensions and conflicts in the mother-daughter relationship, and presented an overwhelmingly idyllic picture of intergenerational relations. She claims that daughters are full of empathy and understanding for their bloodmothers and othermothers despite shortcomings in their mothering and their not-infrequent failures. Collins admitted that Black mothers can be fiercely overprotective disciplinarians, too tired of daily routines to show their female offspring much affection. Still, they "raise daughters who are self-reliant and assertive" (Wade-Gayles qtd. in Collins, "The Meaning of Motherhood" 54), and who revere and emulate their mothers. In this way, Collins reiterated Sonia Sanchez's assertion (in Chandler 354) that although in white societies girls initially identify with their mothers, they ultimately end up rejecting them because "identifying with adult women as mothers means identifying with persons deemed inferior" (ibid. 53). In African American societies, by contrast, that identification is fairly easy, as Collins suggests in the following statement:

> [i]n contrast to the isolation of middle-class white mother/daughter dyads, Black woman-centered extended family networks foster an early identification with a much wider range of models of Black womanhood which can lead to a greater sense of empowerment in young black girls. (Ibid. 54)

As Collins has argued, the primary goal of black daughters is, therefore, not to individuate to become something other than their mothers, but to become *like* their mothers in order to live up to the hopes and expectations vested in them by the older women.

In the 1980s and 90s, Collins also engaged in matrtifocal literary criticism, as in the articles and chapters I cited above. She did not shy from analyzing conflicts between fiercely overprotective mothers and their daughters in BWR fiction, such as: Marshall's *Brown Girl, Brownstones*; Walker's "Everyday Use" and *Meridian*; Naylor's *The Women of Brewster Place*; and Morrison's *Beloved* (*Black Feminist Thought* 174-177). However, her readings downplayed the psychological conflict in these novels, which, in her opinion, "never lapses into the psychological whining that marked so many similar tales of struggle" (ibid. 179). Unlike these other (presumably white)

texts, black feminist narratives, according to Collins, celebrate "mother/daughter reconciliation … arrived at through a …political history that locates their 'sameness' in a shared world of struggle and femaleness" (ibid. 177). Even though "mother/daughter discord" may indeed be "visceral and central" in these texts (ibid. 179), it is eventually resolved by the wise black mother who retains her aura of righteousness. Although Collins's scholarship was informed by nation-and-gender critique of masculinist nationalist thinking, which idealized women for their fertility (women reproduce the nation-state's population), mothering (they pass on national culture), and because they symbolize the nation (ibid. 230); she also put the black mother on a pedestal in her own theories and literary readings. Collins's black mothers embody an emancipatory vision of mothering that challenges the status quo. Their mothering practices are presented as a counter-narrative to patriarchal socialization, and as a site of oppositional feminist knowledge. Like African American writers, whose fiction she used to support her own theorization of black motherhood, Collins saw matrilineage just as Barbara Christian had seen it; as being "symbolic of creativity and continuity" (Christian, qtd. in Collins, "The Meaning of Motherhood" 45).

At this point, it is worth noting that while all the maternal romances by BWR writers "mitigate against a purely psychological interpretation" (Walters, *Lives Together* 164), not all of them see motherhood as "symbolic of creativity and continuity." There is a marked difference in how African American and African Caribbean narratives tackle the dynamics of the mother-daughter relationship. Whereas African American romances eulogize "outlaw" motherhood (or motherwork), and paint a harmonious and conciliatory picture of mother-daughter discord, the African Caribbean ones consistently present the relationship as "an important site at which the individualist ideological formation is elaborated … imposed, … contested and reworked" (DiQuinzio, *The Impossibility of Motherhood* xv). This divergent treatment of black motherhood and the mother-daughter dyad shows that the African Caribbean and African American women writers did not share the same views on cultural nationalism. In general, most African Caribbean writers saw their relationship to their black Caribbean identity as problematic, and expressed their anxiety about it through the theme of the daughter's struggles with her mother. As regards depictions of motherhood, therefore, the work of African Caribbean women writers, including those who were part of the BWR, seems to occupy the middle ground between the two extremes of womanist and white feminist discourses, and the works of Lorde, Marshall, Kincaid and Cliff re-appropriate in equal measure aspects of both psychoanalytical feminism and black matrtifocal nationalism.

The maternal romances by Caribbean writers based in the US (Cliff, Kincaid) and raised in the families of Caribbean immigrants (Lorde, Marshall) also saw motherhood as essential to preserving culture; however, contrary to African American texts, these authors more persistently focused on psychological conflicts and cultural ruptures between black mothers and daughters. In effect, these women writers produced what Rody has called "powerful psychocultural narrative[s]" (*The Daughter's Return* 122),

which, particularly in the case of Cliff and Kincaid, have been read both through the lens of feminist psychoanalysis and as allegories of decolonization. In other words, the mother-daughter allegory was read in psychological terms as theorized by Freud, Lacan, Kristeva and Chodorow, and with the aid of the trope of the Caribbean Mother who stands for the daughter's "vexed condition of Caribbeanness itself" (ibid. 108). This vexed condition has been encapsulated by Susheila Nasta in the term "motherland," which describes the multiple meanings that the trope of the Caribbean Mother contains. In Nasta's anthology, entitled *Motherlands*, Ann Morris and Margaret Dunn argue that:

> For the Caribbean woman the notion of motherland is particularly complex, encompassing in its connotations her island home and its unique culture as well as the body of tropes, talismans, and female bonding that is a woman's heritage through her own and her mothers. The land and one's mother are, then, co-joined. ("The Bloodstream of Our Inheritance" 219)

In the syncretic postcolonial traditions (also in evidence in Africa and Asia), "motherland" cannot be an unequivocal "frame of reference" or an "echo of genesis," to quote Glissant out of context (*Caribbean Discourse* 79). Nasta contends that the concept of motherland has therefore become "a potent symbolic force" designating various "ideological formations" (*Motherlands* 11).

One of these formations is Caribbean masculine nationalism, grounded in the negritude trope of "mother Africa," which equated the fertile maternal body with land and nation. Caribbean nationalisms, which appropriated the mother into a masculine plot of national genesis, had a considerable maternal fixation. The work of C. L. R. James, H. G. de Lisser, Roger Mais, Samuel Selvon, Kamau Brathwaite, Earl Lovelace and George Lamming "gave birth" to many contradictory clichés about Caribbean mothers. In the literature of the times of nationalist ascendancy, female characters were either fetishized as self-sacrificing mothers or condemned as prostitutes and shrews. If the nation was imagined as a mother giving birth to a language, a culture and a collective memory, the male texts presented female characters as strong, self-reliant and nurturing mothers. These fictional mothers were particularly important for the "sons of the nation," who needed their mothers to find their "nam" – the essence of native culture (Kamau Brathwaite, "Mother Poem" qtd. in Goldberg, *Tempest in the Caribbean* 89). If the focus was not on the archetypal mother-nation, female characters were often pictured as insufficiently nurturing and loving mothers. These deficient mothers were often accused of complicity with the colonial culture and depicted either as eager slave breeders or mulattoes desiring whiteness through sexual relations with white men (Fanon, *Black Skin, White Masks*).

This love-hate relationship between the mother-as-land and her children was also in evidence in the literary "blossoming" of Caribbean women. Its intensity can be exemplified by this quote from Michelle Cliff's autobiographical essay, "Love in the Third World," in which she addresses her motherland, Jamaica:

> I wonder if I will ever return … And this is something I will admit only to you. I am afraid my place is at your side… I am afraid my place is in the hills. This is a killing ambivalence. I bear in mind that you with all your cruelties are the source of me, and like even the most angry mother draw me back. (103)

Cliff is, by no means, the only West Indian female author trying to come to terms with that "killing ambivalence." According to Rody, in Caribbean feminist fiction, "the maternal imaginary … has been notably contradictory, [with] strong and nurturing mothers coexisting with dead and dying, inhibiting and compromised ones" (*The Daughter's Return* 120). Thus, Caribbean narratives abound in depictions of anti-mothers, like the aberrant and murderous Xuela in Kincaid's *The Autobiography of My Mother*; overbearing and destructive mothers, as in Kincaid's *Annie John* and *Lucy*, Lorde's *Zami*, and Marshall's *Brown Girl, Brownstones*; and the cold and treacherous mothers in Cliff's novels.

Most BWR novels whose plots are at least partially set in the Caribbean, such as Cliff's and Kincaid's, position mothers and daughters in overt, unresolved and bitter psycho-cultural conflict. Unlike African American narratives, in which mothers are usually figures of ancestral wisdom and cultural continuity, Kincaid's and Cliff's novels present the uprooted Caribbean mother as "the mother-of-forgetting" (Rody, *The Daughter's Return* 109), who is responsible for erasing indigenous collective memories. Rody claims that in contrast to "the black American mother who can become the face of history; the Caribbean island-mother … regains her role from the colonists" (ibid. 211). Both Cliff and Kincaid dramatize the attempts of their postcolonial daughters, Clare, Annie and Lucy, to free themselves from their mothers' colonial mindset. These daughters see their mothers not only as the cultural other and colonizer, who encourages the daughters' dissociation from their native cultures, but also as enforcers of normative patriarchal mores. Consequently, the daughters often experience what Adrienne Rich called "matrophobia" (236); that is, a fear of becoming like one's mother. Their deepest wish is to separate themselves from their mothers and become unlike them. This fear is compounded by the daughters' uneasiness about being trapped in inherently racist and upwardly-mobile communities. The island, be it Jamaica (in Cliff) or Antigua (in Kincaid), is not the beloved motherland: on the contrary, it is a disenchanting place rampant with "cruelties": poverty, violence, female disempowerment and skewed "pigmentocratic" social relations (Cliff qtd. in Hornung 87). It is seen as a beautiful but "cruel mother" who condemns her female and/or dark-skinned children to historical amnesia due to her awe for all things white. Consequently, the Caribbean trope of motherlessness, be it real or chosen by self-imposed separation from the mother/land, signifies an intractable breach of the mother-daughter dyad and the irreversible destruction of the maternal heritage.

3.3.1 Jamaica Kincaid's Contestation of the Mother(land)

In Kincaid's *At the Bottom of the River*, *Annie John* and *Lucy*, the mother-daughter relationship is influenced by both the socio-political context of the still colonized Antigua and the psychological conflict between a socializing mother and a daughter on the verge of puberty. Annie's mother is a lower-middle-class Anglophile who forces on her daughter a conformist colonial identity, feminine moral ideals and bourgeois norms, in the hope that Annie will become a replica of an English lady. The major goal that the mother sets for her daughter is social success, which she understands as upward class mobility, an ambition that can be realized exclusively through marriage to a respectable man. In order to be able to achieve an advantageous marriage, the girl must obey colonial codes: she must pour scorn on those who are already beneath her in the social hierarchy; she must show reverent respect for those who are above her; she must cherish her sexual purity; resist her natural impulse to "become a slut"; avoid "sluttish" behavior; and she must have impeccable manners. European norms, including Christianity, Sunday school and piano lessons are essential for the daughter's upbringing, whereas African Caribbean customs and the culture of the uneducated and the dispossessed should be avoided, as they would reduce the daughter's respectability.

In *At the Bottom of the River* and *Annie John*, the mother is censured for her mimicry of white ways, for her emulation of the mores of white colonial élites, and for being an accomplice in the process of her daughter's uprooting. The tensions between the mother and the daughter are linked to the tensions between the colonizer and the colonized, and in this way the relationship between the conforming mother and the resisting daughter can be seen as being "metonymic of the colonial condition" (Ledent, "Voyages into Otherness" 59), an interpretation which Kincaid herself encouraged. In her interview with Vorda, Kincaid said: "I've come to see that I've worked through the relationship of the mother and the girl to a relationship between Europe and the place I'm from, which is to say the relationship between the powerful and the powerless. The girl is powerless and the mother is powerful" ("I Come from a Place" 86). This relationship between mothering and the motherland has been recognized as the overarching theme of Kincaid's fiction. Ferguson writes that although the relations between Kincaid's female characters and their mothers "are crucially formative," they are also "always mediated by intimations of life as colonized subjects" so that "[c]ultural location becomes paramount" in Kincaid's art (*Jamaica Kincaid* 1). According to Paravisini-Gebert, "[t]here is a clear correlation established throughout Kincaid's work between motherhood and the colonial metropolis as motherland" (*Jamaica Kincaid* 27). She argues that "Annie's struggles to separate from the mother are a mirror of the island's movement from colonialism. It is not a triumphant process, much is lost and many struggles end in defeat, but it none-the-less leaves Annie – and perhaps Antigua – poised to define herself on their own terms" (31). For de Abruna, in Kincaid's novels, "the alienation from the mother becomes a metaphor for the young

woman's alienation from an island culture that has been completely dominated by the imperialist power of England" (qtd. in Bouson, *Jamaica Kincaid* 4).

Annie John chronicles Annie's trajectory from a doting daughter to an angry young woman, who breaks away from her domineering mother and the motherland to complete her process of individuation away from her mother's colonial and patriarchal grip. *Lucy*, a sort of sequel to *Annie John*, represents "at a transcendental level ... Antigua of 1967, a territory freeing itself from the colonizer, already tentatively entering an early postcolonial phase," and at the same time reveals "the duplicity of the colonizing economy," the adoptive motherland, the USA (Ferguson, *Jamaica Kincaid* 131). Lucy, Annie's "double," living as an au-pair in the United States, is a black female sexual traveler who, through her assertion of her entitlement to her own body, achieves a modern diasporic identity. Her hedonistic attitude to sex – at her pleasure and exclusively for her pleasure – and her strong embrace of the identity of a "slut," emphasizes her resistance to, and rebellion against, her Caribbean past, and emphatically underscores the un-romantic, loveless quality of her sexual adventures. Each sexual encounter becomes for Lucy a scene of conquest, "for issues of power and control predominate in every relationship" (O'Callaghan, "Compulsory Heterosexuality" 295). Lucy transgresses traditional Caribbean gender roles and liberates herself from the traditional scripting of West Indian femininity.

Lucy is as intransigent as Annie in her categorical rejection of her pretentious mother and the confining motherland, even though she is occasionally overwhelmed by unbearable longing for both. For Annie and Lucy, leaving the home island is tantamount to escaping both the patriarchal and the colonial yoke that binds them to the parochial and narrow-minded mother(land). Kincaid's heroines are unique in their tough-minded appraisal of the mothers' collusion with patriarchal and colonial powers, but also in their single-minded insistence on being "their own women," to paraphrase Pheobe from Hurston's *Their Eyes Were Watching God*. Fiercely independent and uncompromising, Annie and Lucy – Kincaid's alter-egos – can be regarded, I think, as the radical black subjectivities that bell hooks has called for in "Revolutionary Black Women: Making Ourselves a Subject."

Kincaid herself is, in fact, a radical autobiographical subject who reinvented herself through creative writing. By fictionalizing her own life, Kincaid, a colonized daughter, deliberately and unapologetically usurped the power that western men had claimed for themselves. She wrote a new chapter in the western history of autobiography, the genre that according to McClintock, is "most closely associated with the idea of the potency of self-identity, metonymically expressed in the signature" (*Imperial Leather* 313). The western male autobiography, McClintock contended, was "the emblem of a unique, unrepeatable and autonomous identity, created at a stroke of the metaphorical pen," and was a chronicle of "the unfolding heroics of a single mind" (ibid.). This expression – "the unfolding heroics of a single mind" – describes Kincaid and her female protagonists very well. Annie, Lucy and Xuela reject point-blank patriarchal, colonial and national interpellations and embrace the ideology of

selfhood that had been invented by the western tradition at the expense of people like Kincaid herself. In McClintock's opinion, therefore, while most "female autobiographies typically present the self as *identity through relation*, whereby disclosure of the self emerges through identification with some other, who may be a person, family, or community" (or, I would add, nation), Kincaid's matrifocal and matrophobic fiction represents black female identity not "as coming to being through community," which is represented by the mother, but rather "as the individual heroics of the self" (ibid. 314). Unlike other postcolonial female autobiographical writing, which is "less individualistic, more relational and group based" (Boehmer, *Stories of Women* 68), Kincaid's narratives have "masculine connotations of boldness, enterprise, single-mindedness, the pioneering spirit," and like male autobiographies, they end with an "achievement of vocation" (ibid. 71; 68) This vocation is, as I will contend in the next chapter, the achievement of authorship and western cultural literacy. It comes, then, as no surprise that Kincaid has been considered a pariah of the BWR. In the words of Catherine A. John, "Kincaid's position is self-admittedly a defeated one, in which she claims to speak for herself rather than 'the tribe.' Her statements don't speak to the spirit of survival that has characterized African diaspora cultures as a whole," and her radical and anti-essentialist narratives of individual and creative singularity are deemed fit only for what Catherine A. John called the "vulgar critique espoused by Gilroy" (*Clear Word* 6; 8).

3.3.2 Michelle Cliff's Clare Savage Novels and Endorsement of the Caribbean Motherland

While Kincaid's diasporic daughters are free, radical subjects, Cliff's protagonist, Clare Savage, follows more closely in the footsteps of the heroines of African American female narratives. She embarks on a quest to achieve reconnection with the compromised Caribbean mother-of-forgetting (Rody, *The Daughter's Return* 119), who with all her "cruelties" remains the only "source" of a meaningful African Caribbean and female identity. Cliff's efforts at reconciliation are dramatized in *Abeng* and its sequel, *No Telephone to Heaven*. According to Simon Gikandi, Clare, the protagonist of both novels, is "a schizophrenic and divided subject" torn between the conflicting worlds of her racially-mixed family, which can be seen as a microcosm of Jamaica's colonized society (*Writing in Limbo* 244). *Abeng* is set in the 1950s on the eve of emancipation, when Clare is twelve years old and on the verge of womanhood. *No Telephone to Heaven* traces Clare's development through the post-independence period, during which she is mostly displaced in various motherlands. First, she sets off from Jamaica to an adoptive mother country, the United States, then goes to the imperial motherland, England, and finally returns to her true motherland, Jamaica, where she embraces her African heritage and dies as a revolutionary.

Clare's quest for identity has been read as an allegory of decolonization. All the characters in the novel are first and foremost products of colonial society while Clare is the supreme symbol of so-called "mulatto angst"; that is, an anxiety experienced by colored people and created by "the suspension of the white and black traditions that have socially determined them, but [which] they cannot wholly embrace" (Gikandi, *Writing in Limbo* 238). Clare is suspended between the warring worldviews of her racially-mixed parents. At one end of the spectrum is Clare's pretentious white-skinned father, Boy, who sees himself as a descendant of slave-owners and preaches the ideology of "white supremacy." At the other, is Clare's darker mother, Kitty, who sees herself as a descendant of slaves. She cherishes her black lineage and represents Clare's matrilineal legacy, which is denigrated by Kitty's overtly racist husband. Kitty epitomizes all the paradoxes inherent in the African Caribbean society. Her marriage with Boy is rather unconvincingly presented as an attempt to contain colonialism within her own home, and though she loves the Jamaican black peasant culture, she assumes that Clare will pass as white. That is why she does not even try to deliver to Clare her share of the black maternal heritage, thus contributing to the rupture of the African Caribbean matrilineal line.

Clare, who has inherited her father's looks and her mother's affection for the Jamaican rural culture, is an allegorical figure *par excellence*; she is a postcolonial daughter trying to reconnect, against all the odds, with the blackness that she has been taught to "bleach out" (Cliff, "Clare Savage" 264-265). Clare's allegorical quest takes her from the values of her father's "inauthentic whiteness" to her mother's more "authentic blackness and femaleness" (Edmondson, "The Black Mother" 79), which Cliff and her narrators obviously favor. Thus, Clare's quest is inscribed in terms of female bonding and a maternal allegory, which in this particular instance exposes the crippling impact of the passive and unloving mother on the daughter's burgeoning political and national consciousness.

To explain Kitty's defection and betrayal, Cliff's narrators recount the mythical history of the island. They introduce a number of maternal figures: grandmothers and mythical mothers who occupy different ideological positions, indicated by their relation to maternity. The most prominent of them are two mythical sisters who are positioned as the foremothers of the Jamaican nation. The omniscient narrator of *Abeng* informs the reader that: "in the beginning there had been two sisters, Nanny and Sekesu. Sekesu remained a slave. Some say this was the difference between sisters. It was believed that all the island's children descended from one or the other" (18). Nanny, a half-mythical and half-historical figure, was a leader of the Maroons, runaway slaves living in the inaccessible Jamaican mountains. In Cliff's novels she is often evoked as the quintessentially African griot: she is a childless Ashanti warrior and sorceress from the Gold Coast of Africa, and symbolic mother of that part of the nation that puts up heroic resistance against colonial oppression. Sekesu, on the other hand, stands for bondage, defeat and resignation. She is a passive victim of slavery, who gives in to the colonial culture that sees black women as breeders of slaves.

Cliff's morally righteous, all-knowing narrators make it clear which of these two mothers Jamaica's children should love and respect. The narrators dismiss Sekesu and her female descendants as vessels for the reproduction of colonial degradation, who compromise their maternal duties through their failure to transmit the genuine black, African-derived female history and culture. Like Pocahontas, who is briefly mentioned in *No Telephone to Heaven*, they are depicted as women who have perpetrated through motherhood what Cliff's narrators see as treason. Thus, Sekesu's name, like Pocahontas's, is a synonym for traitor, "a consort of the enemy, a woman who let herself be used, intellectually, sexually against her people" (Birkle, "Colonial Mother" 72). By contrast, the novels condone "the adamantine refusal of slave women to reproduce" through abortion, contraception and infanticide (Cliff, *No Telephone to Heaven* 93). The women engaged in such acts of resistance are pictured as heroic reincarnations of the formidable Nanny. The slave woman Mma Alli is one of these fetishized icons. She is "a strange woman with a right breast that had never grown. She said she was a one-breasted warrior woman and represented a tradition which was older than the one that enslaved [Africans]" (Cliff, *Abeng* 34). Mma Alli refuses to surrender to any form of power, including patriarchy, so she "refuses the womb, with all it signifies, like heterosexuality and motherhood" (Hoving, *In Praise* 265). Her lesbianism and refusal of motherhood are hailed as a form of revolt against slavery and colonialism.

Cliff situates her fiction between the radicalism and matrophobia of Kincaid and the reverence of African American writers for their African roots and cultural-nationalist foremothers. Cliff's Clare Savage novels try to reconcile a valorisation of female lineage with the "killing ambivalence" about "the institution of motherhood," which in times of colonialism and slavery was implicated in "the successful perpetuation of colonizing forces" (Birkle, "Colonial Mother" 74). In effect, *Abeng* and *No Telephone to Heaven*, seem to rest upon an unresolved contradiction: on the one hand, an affirmation of matriliny, which is typical of female authors of African descent; and on the other, a less typical elision of motherhood (less typical, at least, in the novels of the 1980s). Whereas matrilineage is seen as potentially beneficial, due to the links it provides between generations, motherhood is rejected as being a source of women's vulnerability, subjection and degeneration.

Cliff tries to come to terms with her ambivalence about Caribbean matrilineage by juxtaposing two models of womanhood: "the invisible image of black woman as collaborator underwrites the visible image of the black woman warrior" (Edmondson, "The Black Mother" 83). By making Clare a revolutionary, like the great nationalist Nanny, Cliff hopes to achieve a reconciliation with the Caribbean motherland. However, Clare's death at the end of *No Telephone to Heaven* – she is killed while trying to sabotage the shooting of an American film that trivializes the story of the revered Nanny – seems unintentionally to suggest that the model of resistance that relies on maternal militancy is no longer entirely viable. Cliff is at pains to convince the reader that Clare's narrative has an optimistic ending – she dies in the struggle

over “a reading of the history of Maroons” and in order to prevent “a commodification of black bodies and a homogenizing of black identities and histories of resistance” (Moynagh, “The Ethical Turn” 123). But many critics have found this interpretation unpalatable. Toland-Dix, for example, argues that the ending seems downright fatalistic because “the only way Clare can connect with her black matrilineage is by joining her bones with … [her foremothers’] bodies in the Jamaican soil. Only when color is no longer distinguishable does it become irrelevant” (“Re-negotiating” 35).

Cliff seems to share with womanists many positive assumptions about “culture-bearing women,” but she is more pessimistic about the potential outcomes of matrifocal cultural nationalism. Like Kincaid, Cliff recounts in her overtly autobiographical novels her difficulties in her relationship with her own mother (Edmondson, “The Black Mother” 78), which serve as a metonymy of the postcolonial reckoning with the motherland. In *Claiming an Identity They Taught Me to Despise*, Cliff admits her deep resentment towards her mother: “My mother did not nurse me, but my decision not to suckle her is not vengeful. She asks too much of me. She has no knowledge of my breast, my clitoris, my intelligence” (62). In contrast to Kincaid, however, Cliff is unable to break the bond with the mother whom she sees as her main connection to the motherland, Jamaica. Like Alice Walker, therefore, Cliff reiterates in her fiction the idea that the political and cultural alliances that bind black mothers and daughters are more important than the personal and psychological conflicts that separate them. She endeavors to shift the focus away from mother-daughter discord to what Bettina Knapp calls the “ectypal”: that is, the existential and archetypal “structure of reality” (*The Prometheus Syndrome* 2). In this way, like African American womanist novelists, Cliff participates in an elaborate, woman-centered process of myth-recovering and myth making.

3.3.3 Mother/Daughter Dyad in the Works of Audre Lorde and Paule Marshall

In the works of Audre Lorde and Paule Marshall, who belonged to the earlier generation of American-based, Caribbean, female writers, mother-daughter relationships are not so extreme or tortuous. Immigrant Caribbean mothers are usually presented as tough, resilient and hard-working women who are “grappling with American capitalism while holding on to their Afro-Caribbean heritage” (Boyce Davies, “Writing Home” 71). Although “there is little idealization of these women at all by these daughter writers,” the immigrant Caribbean mother “often remains heroic” (ibid.). Lorde and Marshall tackle more openly than African American women writers the psychological theme of devouring mothers whose love becomes so suffocating that the daughters cannot mature into adulthood. Steeped in African American and immigrant Caribbean culture, these narratives vacillate between the celebratory womanist endorsement of matrifocal cultural nationalism and the extremely negative, “matrophobic” construction of matrilineage in the Caribbean tradition. While these texts

frequently condemn mothers for internalizing white middle-class ideals of domesticity, respectability and the American dream, they also retain the possibility of recuperating the African Caribbean maternal heritage, a possibility which is often enacted through cultural tourism to the extended Caribbean in the form of "trips [that] follow diasporic itineraries" (Thorsson, *Women's Work* 77). Their narratives celebrate the act of spiritual homecoming and the achievement of wholeness through immersion in the cultures of the West Indies that are made legible by the voices of the "mother poets." In other words, even though the mother poets may be too engrossed in making homes and money in the North, they still manage to pass on to their daughters the basic grammar of Caribbean tribal literacy.

Marshall's early 1959 novel, *Brown Girl, Brownstones*, revolves around the cultural and psychological conflict between the Barbadian mother, Silla, and her daughter Selina. Like other class-conscious mothers in the later fiction of Kincaid and Cliff, Silla is intent on upward mobility and assimilation, as symbolized by her ownership of a brownstone in New York. Social-climbing entails multiple sacrifices, which Silla accepts without much difficulty, relinquishing her motherland, Barbados, and giving up on her marriage to Deighton, who prefers poverty-stricken but serene Barbados to drab, racist and materialist New York. Like Clare, Selina is trapped in the struggles between her parents: the unscrupulous materialism of Silla and the impractical sentimentality of Deighton. Of the two, Silla naturally turns out to be the more unscrupulous and cunning. Silla is a powerful and no-nonsense woman, reminiscent of other "angry mothers" in womanist novels. Her callousness makes Selina rebel and break away, but Selina just as quickly makes up with her mother after she is confronted, for the first time, with white prejudice and discrimination. As Gloria Wade-Gayles explains:

> The cold, harsh world of racism beyond the community of brownstones gives Selina a larger view of her mother. She does not accept Silla's materialistic values, but she understands the mother's desire for control and power. Silla held the reins tightly because she knew first hand the vulnerability of being Black, female and Barbadian in white America. She has been suffocatingly overprotective and domineering because she wanted a different reality for Selina. ("The Truths of Our Mothers' Lives" 10)

Selina comes to appreciate the strength of her mother and other Bajan women even though she remains critical of their relentless drive for money and status. By the novel's end, the two women agree to differ and go their own ways. Selina makes the decision to become independent of her mother, while acknowledging that part of herself is truly her mother's child. Marshall does not idealize or condemn Silla, nor does she gloss over the depth of the mother-daughter conflict. Like the Bajan community, which despises all who "aint got nothing and aint looking to get nothing" (*Brown Girl, Brownstones* 24), Silla is a flawed but not unredeemable character, and Selina does not judge her as harshly as Kincaid's or Cliff's protagonists judge their

mothers. Neither does she idealize her mother in the way that fictional African American daughters do.

As a “crossover” writer, therefore, Marshall conflates the African American and Caribbean imaginaries – the trope of the Caribbean motherland and the trope of cultural immersion – in her bid to “[portray] diasporic consciousness as a useful mind-set for African Americans consolidating their nation apart within the United States” (Thorsson, *Women’s Work* 88-9). In effect, the motherland trope is deprived of the semantic ambiguity that is so conspicuous in the fiction of Kincaid, Cliff and other Caribbean women writers. In Marshall’s narratives of immersion, the idea of the motherland becomes synonymous with an island rich in maternal black cultures, which, like the folk South of the United States, is a central site of identification. When in the novel’s resolution Selina sets out to Barbados, she anticipates Avey Johnson’s journey of reconnection in *Praisesong for the Widow*; Merle’s return to the fictitious island of Bournehills in *The Chosen Place, The Timeless People*; and Ursa Mackenzie’s return to Triunion in *Daughters*. This theme of reverse migration and immersion into the “folk storehouse” of the extended Caribbean (Brown, “Negro Folk Expression” 60), “places Marshall,” according to Thorsson, “squarely in a tradition of late 20th century African American’s women fiction that validates a return to the American South as a restorative, romantic homecoming to a Southern space often configured in agricultural terms” (*Women’s Work* 94).

In spite of their unflattering treatment of mothers, Marshall’s and Cliff’s novels are remarkable for their investment in the womanist philosophy, according to which, selfhood “is not defined negatively as separateness from others, nor is it defined narrowly by the individual dyad” (Washington, “I Sign My Mother’s Name” 158-59). Likewise, Audre Lorde’s “biomythography,” *Zami: A New Spelling of My Name*, combines Lorde’s autobiography with the staples of Caribbean tribal literacy; dreams, myths and collective histories “transcribed” through “the community of women” (McClintock, *Imperial Leather* 315). According to McClintock, *Zami* is “not so much a perfect record of the past as a fabulated strategy for community survival,” and suggests that “the life of the future [is] born from the collective refashioning of the past” (ibid.).

At the same time, however, *Zami* engages in more complex problematics than the texts of African American women, because it presents the mother as both a wellspring of culture and devourer of Lorde’s burgeoning subjectivity. Formidable and invincible, the mother is full of contradictions: like Silla, she is a social-climber, but she is more firmly rooted in the Caribbean heritage than Silla. She is an Obeah-worshipper, who had “insight” (John, *Clear Word* 168), a herbalist, and storyteller, habitually distrusting white people. She is also a “fierce disciplinarian” in whose home “individuality is inconceivable” (ibid.). In *Zami*, there is no intimacy or reconciliation with the aloof and autocratic mother, who is striving to control every aspect of Lorde’s life, a fact that does not, however, diminish Lorde’s desire to get access to “the spirit of sisterhood, the spirit of peoplehood, [and] the spirit of tradition…” that the mother embodies (Chandler, “Voices beyond the Veil” 342).

Lorde also arrived at an understanding of her Caribbean maternal ancestry through retracing historical routes of her family's past, which compelled her to rethink her lesbianism. Zami, the name she adopted, is "a Carriacou name for women who work together as friends and lovers" (John, *Clear Word* 165). Embracing that name, which was meant to be an insult implying deviant sexuality, became a sign of Lorde's allegiance to both a womanist vision of black female cultures, cosmologies and spirituality, and to the "submerged conceptual and physical reality of Caribbean life" (John, *Clear Word* 175). As her understanding of the female and the Caribbean aspects of her identity became inseparable, it became clear that it was the politics of lesbianism, rather than mother-daughter bonding, that helped Lorde to reconnect with the Zami women who were "warriors." So by means of this detour, which could be seen as similar to the trajectory of Cliff's Clare Savage, *Zami* affirms matriliny without bowing to the ideals of the culturally pure, black national mother and the cohesive ethno-national community. Lorde sees collectivity as a kind of "internal coalition" among subjectivities which are nonetheless marked by "ineradicable difference" (Anna Wilson, qtd. in John, *Clear Word* 174). In *Zami*, Lorde insists that:

> Being women together was not enough. We were different. Being Black together was not enough. We were different. Being Black women together was not enough. We were different. Being black dykes together was not enough. We were different … we could not afford to settle for one easy definition, one narrow individuation of self. (226)

Lorde describes her relation to her racial identity in such a way as to "problematize blackness as a wholly natural or self-evident category" (John, *Clear Word* 171), and to depose motherhood as the only birthing ground for a cultural nation.

3.4 Maternal Legacies: From Mother/Daughter Dyad to Mother/Daughter Bonding

BWR fiction of the 1980s was, in general, highly matrifocal: the subject of female inheritance from their own and other mothers is at the center of these writers' attention, and the relationship between mother and daughter, aunt and niece, or guardian and child is a recurring motif. All BWR authors dismantled the metaphor-metonymy binary that cast women as passive symbols of land/nation, and repositioned them as active agents in full control of their own, and occasionally their people's destinies. But there were also notable differences. While most African American narratives make mothers the driving force behind national regeneration, the African Caribbean narratives demythologize the illusion of the pure and immaculate mother(land). African American narratives focus on mothers who are bearers of authentic cultures and historical memories. By contrast, African Caribbean novels are focalized around daughters and their search for "ancestry, Pan Africanism, and trips to a mythical home" (Thorsson, *Women's Work* 77). African Caribbean writers depict mothering as

a "restrictive and debilitating" practice (Fido, "Finding a Way to Tell It" 322). They render mother-daughter bonds in their full psychological and cultural complexity and with an honesty that was inconceivable in the African American female prose of the womanist decade (1980s). The process of a girl's psychological individuation, which is often described in the language of feminist psychoanalysis, is combined with an account of the daughter's resistance to "zombification," and other inimical "ideological formations" (DiQuinzio, *The Impossibility of Motherhood* xv). Particularly in the prose of Cliff and Kincaid, we find what Rody has described as "the skeptical, non-triumphalist mode characteristic of postcolonial narrative" (*The Daughter's Return* 122) and a refusal of happy endings and panegyrics on "how wonderfully … [black women] have managed to overcome oppression" (hooks, "Revolutionary Black Women" 232).

A close reading of the work of Alice Walker shows how difficult it was for womanist writers to achieve the "triumphalist mode." Walker provides a classic example of the predicament faced by many BWR writers, as described by Frances E. White in the following words: "How dare we admit the psychological battles that need to be fought with the very women who taught us how to survive this racist and sexist world? We would feel like ungrateful traitors" ("Listening to the Voices of Black Feminism" 21). As I argued in the previous chapter, the celebration of the black mother that we find in Walker's essays is at odds with her early fiction, where motherhood was presented as a "scourge." Walker's essays expressed most fully her view that "the maternal principle" (Dubey, *Black Women Novelists* 114) – motherhood, matriliny and the reproductive cycle – are a central component of cultural essence. But Walker's novels betray the depth of her own inner struggles. Dianne F. Sadoff argues in her brilliant article, "Black Matrilineage: The Case of Alice Walker and Zora Neale Hurston," that Walker's writings bear hidden traces of her internal wrangling with confines and exigencies of motherhood and the value of maternal legacies. She says. for example, that *Meridian* "subverts [the] celebration [of matrifocality] on the margins of her own fictional texts" (22).

This claim can be illustrated by the fact that Meridian's attempts to become a substitute mother for a pregnant homeless girl with learning difficulties, referred to as the "wild child," is at variance with her earlier decision to abandon her own son; and Miriam's impulse to idealize her foremothers, including heroic slave women, is at odds with her dislike of her own mother's conservatism, piousness and middle-class pretensions. Besides *Meridian*, Walker's short stories, such as "Everyday Use" and "To Hell with Dying," also focus on the difficulties of the mother-daughter dyad, and are punctuated by "bittersweet" encounters that often leave mothers and daughters deeply estranged. In Walker's 1982 novel, *The Color Purple*, as in *The Third Life of Grange Copeland*, mothers die early or they are displaced. In *The Color Purple*, the maternal functions are displaced onto sisters. Sadoff notes that "Nettie raises Celie's children in Africa, where in a political subplot, African daughters, like their American counterparts, must combat male violence against women (clitoridectomy, lack

of education and work) and so depend on idealized but ineffectual female support networks among mothers and daughters" (Sadoff, "Black Matrilineage" 25). Therefore, as Sadoff also rightly observes, Walker's writing, particularly her non-fiction, is a form of politicized discourse in which "the black woman writer will overtly idealize foremothers while disguising anxiety and covertly appropriating concealed rebellious thematic material" (ibid. 18)

Sadoff also points out that novels such as *The Color Purple* prove that Walker deliberately "confuses motherhood with sisterhood" (ibid. 12). She writes that Walker's "conflation of the female generations" is evident in assertions such as the following: "[w]e are together, my child and I. Mother and child, yes, but sisters really, against whatever denies us all that we are" (Walker, qtd. in Sadoff, "Black Matrilineage" 12). On the one hand, Sadoff says, this statement describes "the necessary political and cultural alliance of black women across generations" (ibid.). Similarly, Davidson and Broner point out Walker's early recognition that black mothers and daughters "are not natural enemies but rather fellow victims" (*The Lost Tradition* 289). On the other hand, however, Walker also idealizes the mother-daughter bond by treating the relationship between mother and daughter, which is unequal by nature, as a relationship between sisters, and thus equals. This erasure of the filial relationship makes it possible for Walker to avoid any direct engagement with her maternal figures and all the contentious issues connected with the mothers' role of "fitting [daughters] into the sexual politics of black womanhood" (Collins, *Black Feminist Thought* 183). It also allows her to avoid engaging with the daughters' resistance to socialization. In effect, Walker sidestepped the whole issue by shifting the focus from the psychological plane of the mother-daughter dyad to the cultural plane of mother-daughter bonding. This move was later bitterly criticized by Third Wave feminists, including Walker's own daughter, Rebecca. The Third Wavers focused again on personal identity and brought to the forefront the issue of generational conflict between the mother and daughter, who was, after all, to paraphrase Astrid Henry "Not [Her] Mother's Sister" (*Not My Mother's Sister*).

As Sadoff has observed, race and class oppression not only intensified the black woman's need to reach "some kind of reconciliation" with her mother, but also propelled her "to discover an untroubled matrilineal heritage" ("Black Matrilineage" 5). It is this need, she argues, that made Walker and other writers of the BWR, want to find (or found) a matrilineal tradition, a female predecessor and a model. Sadoff suggests that Walker's desire to create "an intergenerational and contemporary cultural tradition," meant that she "virtually invent[ed] Hurston before she define[d] herself as indebted to Hurston's example" (ibid. 7). She describes how Walker hailed herself as Hurston's "metaphorical daughter" and an heir to the womanist tradition, saying that:

> [t]his deep need for a predecessor and her knowledge of black culture – in this case voodoo – makes Walker idealize Hurston as a model: *Mules and Men* is 'perfect'. As though to emphasize Hurston as an ideal, Walker underscores that she does '*not exaggerate*' the folktales' effect on

> their audience, that '*no book is more important*' to her than *Eyes*. Hurston becomes not only predecessor but originator; her work archetypal. (ibid. 8)

Just as Walker's substitution of the mother-daughter dyad with the mother-daughter bond served to hide the power struggle that is part and parcel of the process of female individuation, so Walker's overzealous affirmation of Hurston's legacy laid her open to criticism. Sadoff claims that "[t]his idealized but necessary celebration," "masks [Walker's] anxiety about cultural disinheritance" (ibid. 12). It not only betrays Walker's fear of her own cultural marginality (ibid. 7), but also her ambivalence about the continuing effects of social subordination of slavery, sexual exploitation, forced loss of children, economic marginalization and lack of education that affected so many generations of black women. Walker's insistent affirmation of her foremother's perfection makes her downplay this aspect of her disinheritance, whilst at the same time relentlessly romanticizing the past and folk heritage.

The essentialising strategy of matrifocal nationalism could be said to have become the roadmap for the womanist BWR writer in the 1980s. Sadoff attributes this to the fact that each writer felt that "[s]he must create a tradition that restores to her people their 'forgotten' culture, and so she seeks her motherly precursors without apparent ambivalence or anxiety, with a necessity to survive and even with idealization" (ibid. 11). Most BWR novels realized this mission to a greater or lesser degree. Sadoff concludes that such womanist novels as *Song of Solomon, Mama Day, The Salt Eaters, Praisesong for the Widow* and *Betsy Brown* unabashedly affirmed "anxiety-free matrilineage" (ibid. 23). These matrtifocal romances are best read as highly politicized discourses, in which both the practices and representations of mothering are geared towards combating oppression and underpinning the coherence of African Americans as part of a distinctive and unique, social, political and cultural entity. In many womanist texts, such as Walker's, this anxiety is inscribed in a deep layer of her texts and can be retrieved, as Sadoff's work has demonstrated, by using theories of psycho-criticism, or Bloom's and Gilbert and Gubar's theoretical work on the anxiety of influence.[45] I think that in other 1980s' novels, such as *Abeng* and *No Telephone to Heaven, Annie John* and *Lucy, Zami* and *Brown Girl, Brownstones*, and even, one might argue, *Beloved*, what Sadoff describes as "the scourge of motherhood" (ibid. 25) is more openly tackled, though eventually, with the exception of Kincaid, maternity is endorsed as the crucible of black feminine power and cultural nationalism.

BWR literary criticism of the 1980s' largely endorsed Walker's theories about the role played by mothers in ensuring black cultural and political survival, and celebrated the strength of the mother-daughter bond. Numerous womanist studies jumped

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45 See: Bloom Harold. *The Anxiety of Influence: A Theory of Poetry* (1973) and Sandra M. Gilbert and Susan Gubar, *The Madwoman in the Attic: The Woman Writer and the Nineteenth-Century* (1979).

on the bandwagon of strategic essentialism by linking mothering with tradition, resistance, and survival.[46] According to Barbara Christian, in BWR fiction "remembering and … re-imagining centers on motherhood, on mothering and being mothered. … It is through the memory of their mothers, their reflections on that precarious role, and whether they themselves were able to be mothered, that Sethe and Dessa Rose delve into themselves as subjects" ("'Somebody Forgot to Tell Somebody Something'" 338). Braxton put this differently when she said that womanist critics argued that black mothers "remain sources of consciousness and personal strength: models of independence, self-reliance, perseverance, and self-determination" ("Afra-American Culture" xxv). These critics implied that only through the experience of mothering and being mothered can black women gain a sense of self and a secure place in the "tribe." They not only denied a place in the African American "nation" to motherless or childless women (like Jadine), they also insisted that membership of the "nation" depended on embracing the maternal legacy of victimization and, as bell hooks has argued, "promot[ing] monolithic notions of black female experience" based on suffering ("Revolutionary Black Women" 232). Maxine Thompson, for example, asks "How many races of women were exposed to four hundred years of captivity…" ("The Power of Mother Daughter Relationships"). Similarly, Phillips suggests that since black women were "[w]hisked … to the brink of psychological annihilation and back," ("Introduction" 39), womanists "are poised to be leaders for the rest of humanity at a time when humanity is approaching a crisis point in its own survival" (ibid. xl).

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46 See: Houston Baker, "Conjure and the Space of Black Woman's Creativity" in his *Workings of the Spirit: The Poetics of Afro-American Women's Writing*; Marjorie Pryse and Hortense Spillers, eds., *Conjuring: Black Women, Fiction and Literary Tradition;* Gloria Hull, Barbara Christian, Patricia Bell Scott, and Barbara Smith eds., *All the Women Are White, All the Blacks Are Men, but Some of Us Are Brave*; Gloria Joseph and Jill Lewis's *Common Differences: Conflicts in Black and White Feminist Perspectives*; and Gloria Joseph's "Black Mothers and Daughters: Traditional and New Perspectives." Culture specific mother-daughter anthologies include Patricia Bell-Scott, *Double Stitch: Black Women Write on Mothers and Daughters*; Fay Moskowitz, *Her Face in the Mirror: Jewish Women on Mothers and Daughters*; Elizabeth Brown-Guillory, *Women of Color: Mother-Daughter Relationships in Twentieth Century Literature*; Ruth McDonald Boyer and Narcissus Duffy Gayton, *Apache Mothers and Daughters: Four Generations of a Family*; Cherrie Moraga & Gloria Anzaldua, *This Bridge Called My Back: Writing of Radical Women of Color*; D. Soyini Madison, *The Woman That I Am: The Literature and Culture of Contemporary Women of Color;* Esmeralda Santiago and Joie Davidow, *Las Mamis: Favorite Latino's Authors Remember Their Mothers*; Ruth Perry and Martine Watson Brownley, *Mothering the Mind: Twelve Studies of Writers and Their Silent Partners;* Hill, Shirley A., "African American Mothers: Victimized, Vilified, and Valoried."

4 *Kulturnation*: The Black Women's Renaissance, Folk Heritage and the Essential Black Female Matrix

4.1 Discursive Practice of Heritage and Nation-building

Heritage is a key concept in any discussion of nationhood. As Yuval-Davis has argued, "the symbolic heritage provided by language and/or religion and/or other customs and traditions is constructed as the 'essence' of 'the nation' (*Kulturnation*)" (*Gender and Nation* 21). The confluence of heritage and nation has been well documented by Lowenthal (*The Heritage Crusade and the Spoils of History* 1998), Winter (*Post-Conflict Heritage, Postcolonial Tourism: Culture, Politics and Development at Angkor* 2007), Anheier and Isar (*Heritage, Memory and Identity* 2011), Watson (2013), and Stuart Hall, who argued in "Whose Heritage? Un-settling the Heritage, Re-imaging the Post-Nation" (2005), that:

> [w]e should think of The Heritage as a discursive practice. It is one of the ways in which the nation slowly constructs for itself a sort of collective social memory. Just as individuals and families construct their identities by "storying" the various random incidents and contingent turning points of their lives into a single, coherent, narrative, so nations construct identities by selectively binding their chosen high points and memorable achievements into an unfolding "national story." This story is what is called "Tradition." (23)

To understand heritage as a discursive practice is to treat it as a process whereby present-day collective identities are created (Hall, "Whose Heritage?"; Harvey, "Heritage Pasts and Heritage Presents"; L. Smith, *Uses of Heritage*). National/ethnic identities are quintessential forms of cultural narratives (Yuval-Davis 43), whose construction depends on "the insertion of the present into the miasma of tradition" (Higson, *English Heritage* 50).

This understanding of heritage is relatively new. It came into being in the 1980s, when the BWR also reached its apogee, under the influence of poststructuralism. At that time, heritage scholarship was transformed from what Rodney Harrison (borrowing from Arjun Appadurai) labelled a "predatory" way of thinking about heritage (*Heritage* 22), into "a *post*-post-structural, or more-than-representational, labyrinth of individuated, affective, experiential and embodied themes" (Waterton and Watson, *The Palgrave Handbook* 1). The predatory way of thinking assumed that "management of particular cultural heritage … require[s] the elimination or removal of other memories or forms of recollection" (Harrison, *Heritage* 22). It also laments that "[h]eritage is what we inherit and what we must hold dear" (Gnecco, "Heritage" 265); and "a physical thing left over from the past" (Moody, "Heritage" 113). Conversely, the "*post*-poststructural" way of thinking proposed that heritage is "an actively constructed understanding, a discourse about the past which is ever in fluctuation" (ibid.). This paradigm shift deprived heritage of its "quasi-mystical condition" and the "sym-

bolic centrality that everyone has to recognize and revere" (Gnecco, "Heritage" 263). Instead, research was re-focused onto critical analysis that highlighted how heritage discourse "order[s] its representations around hegemonic socio-cultural themes, including national identity, social cohesion and the power-relational values of dominant groups" (Waterton and Watson, *The Palgrave Handbook* 9). In other words, in the 1980s, scholars started to concern themselves with the question of how meaning is constructed in heritage narratives. As a result of this shift in critical attention, "heritage was revealed to be a selective process, thereby prompting a focus upon issues of power, identity and control" (ibid. 6).[47]

Smith's *Uses of Heritage* has played a pivotal role in the development of this critique, which debunked myths about the inherent value of heritage, and revealed it as a subjective ideological discourse and a cultural process or performance that is not so much about the past as about the present. Other studies, such as those by Harvey ("Heritage Pasts and Heritage Presents" 2001); Byrne ("Heritage as Social Action" 2008); Smith and Waterton, (*Heritage, Communities and Archaeology* 2009); and Harrison (*Heritage: Critical Approaches* 2013), emphasized the "dissonant" nature of heritage "whereby constructions of the past are valorized, negotiated or contested, and instrumentalized in the present for future goals" (Giblin, "Critical Approaches" 317). This dissonance is not only the result of negotiation within one tradition or nation; it can also be the effect of tensions between different and competing heritage discourses. For example, the dominant "'authorized heritage discourse' [the so-called AHD], undergirded by dynamics of inclusion and exclusion [and] policed by institutional heritage discourses" can clash with other – minority, indigenous or diasporic – heritage discourses that contest and destabilize it at the grassroots level ("Heritage" 273).

Unfortunately, these subversive discourses, which "[position] alternative conceptions of time, past, ancestors and life" (Gnecco 263), often duplicate the essentialism of the dominant (postmodern, Euro-American) culture, whilst retaining their own brand of vernacular essentialism. The geographer David Lowenthal reminds us that "[f]olk models," in particular, "cast heritage as traditional, unchanging cultural practices that have been handed down since time immemorial" (*The Past Is a Foreign Country* 10). Similarly, Reed states that they evoke a nostalgia for the rural past "a simpler, better time" ("Of Routes and Roots" 382). Folk heritage, which relates to myths of common origin that may or may not be historically valid, and to myths of common destiny (Yuval-Davis, *Gender and Nation* 43), projects a conservative view

47 Another definition of heritage sees it as "a version of the past received through objects and display, representations and engagements, spectacular locations and events, memories and commemorations, and the preparation of places for cultural purposes and consumption" (Waterton and Watson, *The Palgrave Handbook* 1). This definition has not lost its relevance: it suggests, that "heritage" is a very broad term that finds usage in many different disciplines and contexts, and can be "a form of inauthentic history displayed in space"; or else it can designate "a process of tourism expansion and postmodern patterns of consumption" (Nuala C. Johnson, "Heritage and Geography" 163).

of history and tradition. Meskell suggests that its "intense political heritage rhetoric" often seeks to compensate for a "negative heritage" of marginalization, dispossession and discrimination with by recourse to a romanticized and idealized rural past ("Negative Heritage" 557). Folk heritage usually privileges memory and orality because, as Gilroy has observed, memory work can act as a form of counter-history, disrupting, complicating and contesting dominant racialized (and, I would add, gendered) cultural politics.

4.2 "The Black Middle-class Hoopla": Heritage, Cultural Nationalism and Class

BWR fiction of the 1980s surged to prominence on the wave of a memory boom, which, as Jesús Martín-Barbero has claimed, could be seen as a heritage boom (Gnecco, "Heritage" 270). It was a highly politicized discursive practice that aimed to construct an "alternative" or "parallel" ethnic heritage, in which "cultural forms were mobilized for ideological purposes" (Nuala C. Johnson 164). BWR heritage fiction (i.e. novels tapping into the black folklore) was steered by the cultural activity of the period, including such movements as Afrocentrism and womanism, but first and foremost, it was a response to the political exigencies of the times. These included the racial politics of President Ronald Reagan (1981-89), whose administration attacked welfare and affirmative action programs, and refused to enforce antidiscrimination laws. The BWR and Afrocentrism could be also seen as a reaction to the problem of the so-called black "underclass" that came into being as a result of the development of the crack cocaine economy.[48] The decline of black communities in big urban centers was often attributed to the loss of cultural roots and identity, and led to much talk about a crisis of inheritance or a threat of disinheritance among African Americans. It was these developments, and the feelings of insecurity that they sparked, that led to the re-emergence of black cultural nationalism and a renewed interest in black tradition and folklore. African heritage became a pillar of the Afrocentrism that called for a rejection of drug culture, and the adoption of conservative black family values and an African-derived sense of identity. The heritage writing of the Afra American Renaissance, rooted in the folklore of the extended Caribbean, was part and parcel of this volatile political climate and the wide-spread debate about the crisis of African

48 The image of a largely black underclass, which was dependent on welfare, prone to criminality, had too many children, and at too young age, was enhanced by books such as Charles A. Murray's *Losing Ground* (1984), and William Julius Wilson's *The Truly Disadvantaged* (1987) and by mass media. In 1977, *Time* magazine's cover read: "A Minority within a Minority: The Underclass," and on January 25, 1986, CBS news showed a highly-regarded documentary "The Vanishing Black Family – Crisis in Black America" (1986) by Bill Moyers.

American culture and the problem of the black underclass. The heritage writing of the BWR sought in the folk past a corrective and antidote to black people's low "self-esteem," a problem which, next to racism, was perceived as the root cause of the social ills that plagued African American communities at the end of the 20th century (Austin, *Achieving Blackness* 138).

Algernon Austin states that Afrocentrists in particular thought that "the social problems facing blacks in the late 20th century stemmed from a lack of proper values," and, therefore, contrary to the "Black Power leftist critique of the political economy of capitalism" in the 1960s and 70's, they did not advocate "African Socialism" (ibid. 130). He argues that Afrocentrism was driven by the black middle class who deliberately diverted attention from social inequalities to heritage and cultural matters:

> [t]he academics, intellectuals, and educators who produced Afrocentric scholarship and ran Afrocentric educational initiatives were all middle class. The black middle class was more likely to have the financial resources and the cultural knowledge to practice Afrocentrism best. They were likely to be most knowledgeable about authentic African names, authentic African textiles, and authentic African art. Kwanzaa's[49] increased popularity was the result of the actions of middle-class women. It was the black middle and upper class who could afford to take the expensive trips to Africa. And the Black middle class was overrepresented at the Million Man and Million Woman marches. In the Afrocentric era, the middle classes showed that it is incorrect to think of black nationalism as only a lower-middle class phenomenon. (Ibid. 170)

While BWR writers did not participate in what Cornel West termed "the black middle-class hoopla" of the Africanist era and its unproblematic glorification of African states and civilizations ("The Paradox" 32), their recourse to African American heritage constitutes another side of that black nationalist revival. It also seems to have been inspired by the same middle-class concerns: uneasiness about the state of African American communities and the writers' uncertainty about their own relations to the black masses they wished to represent. The status of the BWR within black communities had been undermined not only by decades of stereotyping of black women and the black nationalist backlash against their writing in the 1970s, but also, I think, by these middle-class writers' own growing sense of alienation from their roots – their working-class or peasant background.

A good example of a writer who was trying to come to terms with this ambivalence is Alice Walker, a Southerner who moved North, assimilated and became middle-class. Walker believed that the experience of migration North had fragmented and split her people, but that the reverse journey South could repair that rift. Like her protagonist, Meridian, who went South to search for "the people" (*Meridian* 31), Walker took trips back South because she believed in "the symbolic equation of South

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49 Kwanzaa is an African American and Pan-African holiday which celebrates family, community and culture.

and community” (Dubey, *Black Women Novelists* 139). She also wanted to be perceived as a Southern writer because, as Dubey says, “what the Southern writer inherits as a natural right is a sense of community” (*Black Women Novelists* 139). According to Sadoff, therefore, Walker “[sought] her rural, southern heritage with an idealism that temper[ed] and compensate[ed] for her own lost past. But she [found] as well cultural disinheritance, symptomized by black cooperation in the neglect of African American literature and black women’s writing” (“Black Matrilineage” 14). To compensate for that rupture, Walker not only idealizes the idea of matriliny itself, but also the writer she considered her “foremother,” Zora Neale Hurston. Walker reads Hurston’s *Mules and Men* to the members of her family who “rapidly forget … their southern cultural inheritance,” in order to “[give] them back all the stories they had forgotten or of which they had grown ashamed of (told us years ago by our parents and grandparents)” (Sadoff 6). Readers of *In Search of Our Mother’s Gardens* are told that Walker’s relatives react with a joy that is difficult to contain:

> No matter how they try to remain cool toward all Zora revealed, in the end they could not hold back the smile, the laughter, the joy, over who she was showing them to be: descendants of an inventive, joyous, courageous and outrageous people: loving drama, appreciating wit, and, most of all, relishing the pleasure of each other’s loquacious and bodacious company. (85)

This compels Walker to fight for the memory of Zora, and to restore her to her well-deserved place in the canon of African American letters (ibid. 85, 87). But in accomplishing that mission, Walker ignores the fact that because of Hurston’s Northern education and the “spy-glass of Anthropology” (Hurston, *Mules and Men* 1) that distanced her from the object of her research, Hurston was a “folklorist” but not a genuine Southerner. Walker, therefore, intentionally disregards what Sadoff calls “the scars of disguise and concealment” (18) in Hurston’s prose that many of Hurston’s critics have pointed out.[50] Walker’s adulatory account of Hurston’s life and work ignores what Sadoff has described as “Hurston’s much criticized and problematic eccentricity, her posturing and evasions” (ibid.).

In *The Jamaican People 1880–1902: Race, Class and Social Control*, Patrick Bryan explains, using the example of Caribbean national cultures, how such middle-class alienation inevitably leads to a revalorization of folk heritage. He claims that in the West Indies, as elsewhere in the colonial and postcolonial world, admittance to the middle class depended on the successful acquisition of Victorian manners and morals, and the rejection of what Toni Morrison called, in *The Bluest Eye*, the “funkiness” of native black cultures. According to Bryan, this shift in cultural allegiance produced in black intellectuals an anxiety about their own cultural authenticity. The black middle class recognized that the rural working class, which identified with suppressed and

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50 See for example Robert E. Hemenway’s *Zora Neale Hurston: A Literary Biography*.

vilified African-based customs, represented an oppositional ideology that offered a genuine alternative to white mainstream culture. That is why, according to Edmondson (*Making Men,* 60), so many African American and Caribbean immigrant novels, written by well-educated middle-class authors, are concerned with returning to the peasant societies of the extended Caribbean.

The return signifies a re-valuing of unsullied black folk origins and cultures, which are then seen as constituting "a prelapsarian image of the nation" (Edmondson, *Making Men* 60). These cultures become a point of departure from which the nation's historical progress is imagined and a platform from which a critique of western modernity is launched. In other words, as Edmondson puts it, "the imagined community of the nation must reside in that portion of it [that was] least influenced by colonialism: the folk, or peasantry" (ibid. 62). Claiming allegiance with the folk, as the source of the authentic cultural essence of the nation, is a common tactic used by nationalists to mobilize the masses to achieve common political goals. Therefore, while nationalism is "an urban movement," argues Edmondson, "it identifies with the rural areas as a source of authenticity, finding in the folk heritage the attitudes, beliefs, customs and language to create a sense of national unity among people who have other loyalties" (Bruce King, qtd. in Edmondson, *Making Men* 62). However, this should not blind us to the fact that conflicts of interest between different in-groups within a nation continue to persist, and that the nationalist middle class is, in fact, the group that is most susceptible to the western values that it critiques and strives to reject. As Edmondson remarks, "it is the very promulgators of this return to authenticity who are themselves the intellectuals most likely 'to be influenced by foreign ideas'" (ibid.).

This idea has been developed by Paul Gilroy, who argued in *The Black Atlantic: Modernity and Double Consciousness* that looking to folk heritage for national self-legitimization is indeed the result of western influence. His study demonstrates how Afrocentric thinking about race, culture and heritage in the 1980s was influenced by Enlightenment ideas and Romantic concepts of "race," "people" and "nation." Gilroy provocatively contended that the intellectual heritage of Euro-American modernity determined the manner in which African American elites understood nationality. Despite their frequent critiques of modernity, declarations about its state of crisis and professions of its eclipse, claimed Gilroy, the black middle class of the 1980s continued to theorize about the process of identity formation in concepts taken from the white tradition that they overtly discarded. He stated that they often emphasized ancestry or roots as the foundation for identity, instead of thinking of identity as an ongoing quest in both spatial and spiritual terms. In Gilroy's own words, "modern black political culture has always been more interested in the relationship of identity to roots and rootedness than in seeing identity as a process of movement and mediation that is more appropriately approached via the homonym routes" (*The Black Atlantic* 19). This quest for roots, or stable and presumably authentic forms of subjectivity and identification, has been the main strategy for "nation" building and racial

uplift ever since the post-emancipation period. In *The Black Atlantic*, Gilroy argues that the Euro-American tradition of thinking about identity and nation taught African American artists, writers and theoreticians to accept a modern western concept of identity as something grounded in roots, folk heritage, racial and ethnic authenticity.

Timothy Brennan also argued, in "The National Longing for Form," that the concept of "folk character" originated in English Romanticism, which utilized the idea of the peasantry for political expediency. What is more, Brennan observed, the rise of nationalism and the elevation of folklore to the status of authentic national culture was accompanied by, and actually achieved through the rise of the novel as a medium through which the middle classes spread their nationalist ideas (48). Consequently, one might argue, applying Anthony Appiah's comment about the Nigerian penchant for "village novels" to the case of BWR heritage writing, that "fewer things ... [were] less native than nativism in its current forms" (Appiah, "Out of Africa" 145-6).[51]

4.3 The "Spacetime of Heritage" and Black Women's Renaissance Narratives of Immersion

BWR novels of the 1980s also witnessed a proliferation of "village novels," as championed most notably by Toni Morrison, who argued that since black people are "generally viewed as victims, wards, and pathologies in urban settings [rather than] participants," they don't feel that they belong to the city in the same way as white people, even the "poorest white factory worker or white welfare recipient" ("City Limits, Village Values" 37). While Morrison conceded that the city was not always an uninviting place for black people, she suggested that what made it on the whole into a place of alienation for them was the absence of a black ancestral presence. It is for this reason, she claimed, that "the city has huge limits and the village profound values" ("City Limits, Village Values" 29). The village, cut off from civilization, modernization and the encroachment of capitalist values, is the place where the "advising, benevolent, protective, wise Black ancestor is imagined as surviving" (ibid. 38)

The multiple articulations of the pastoral/volkish/village novel that emerged from the BWR in the 1980s, which was grounded in ancestry and roots and seen as being conducive to the survival of black essence, reflected and refracted the ideas of both Africanists and womanists. Catherine A. John, in *Clear Word and Third Sight: Folk Grounding and Diaspora Consciousness in Afro Caribbean Writing*, states that "all great art is derived from the folk" and informed by "the very old truth-speaking tradi-

51 See a similar critique by Wendy Griswold in "The Writing on the Mud Wall: Nigerian Novels and the Imaginary Village," where she claims that the "village novel" is a form that arose from the specific historical circumstances of global cultural production, and reflected the political and economic realities and interests of the cultural elites.

tions from the ancient mother-culture: the fables, the parables …” (7). This assertion aptly summarizes the spirit of the BWR heritage fiction that elevated the status of both debased folk cultures and their “keepers”; namely, simple peasant women. Narratives such as *Mama Day*, *Praisesong for the Widow, Abeng* and *No Telephone to Heaven* feature indomitable old women, who are the principal agents of a mythical and reinvented primordial motherland. They are what Stratton called, in another context, “emblem[s] of communalism but also of active resistance to exploitation and oppression” (Stratton, *Contemporary African Literature* 49). By comparison with the 1970s’ stereotypical grandmother figure, such as Momma Henderson in Maya Angelou’s *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings*, who had recognizable physical and psychological traits, the community and blood mothers of the 1980s are folkloric figures with ties to ancestry, roots and nature.

As I have argued in the previous chapter, female folk characters, such as Aunt Cuney in Marshall’s *Praisesong for the Widow*, Gloria Naylor’s Mama Day, and Miss Mattie in the Clare Savage novels, are “midwives of the ‘national’ soul,” to misquote McClintock (*Imperial Leather* 303). As venerable blood-or-other mothers, these women preserve the essence of the African American way of life and pass on distinctly black and feminine cultures. Privy to this maternal legacy, the daughters are appropriately armed to negotiate their identity in relation to their respective motherlands (America, Jamaica or England). The mothers’ reverence for their native culture/motherland is not always so obvious and easy, however, particularly for daughters and granddaughters who occasionally give in to other competing worldviews and cosmologies, such as these associated with Euro-American culture. For these prodigal daughters, the female elders act as “rural agents of change,” to misquote Stratton again (*Contemporary African Literature* 49). Hailed by their communities as healers and conjure women, they bring the younger women back to the tribal fold and restore their connections to what Annis Pratt has called the “green world” (*Archetypal Patterns* 75).

It is interesting to note that for BWR writers the setting for that idealized green matriarchal world is always, as I have argued earlier, the extended Caribbean, a home-site connected to African cultural practices and aesthetic traditions. The extended Caribbean signifies slave societies that developed on the basis of cotton, sugar, or coffee plantations, where “the agrosocial system of slavery developed in its fullest and most harsh form” (Lewis, *Main Currents* 2). Similarly, Harris has described the extended Caribbean as “the land of blood and death, of slavery, of countless generations of Africans tied to brutal and unrewarding labor, of intangible instead of tangible wealth” (*Fiction and Folklore* 96). It is a mythical territory, famous for its magic, and for the conjuring traditions of Vodou, Obeah, or Santeria that were described and popularized by “the genius of the South,” the great foremother Zora, whose 1937 novel, *Their Eyes Were Watching God* “articulate[d] the recovery of Caribbean culture” (Willis, *Specifying* 48). For BWR writers, whom Toni Cade Bambara tellingly calls “Sisters of the South,” the extended Caribbean is a place where the myth of the nation

finds its territory and its boundary in the form of iconic culture-bearing women and the “archetypal imagery of common folk” (Braxton, “Ancestral Presence” 314).

This privileging of the extended Caribbean as the site of an authentic black culture bears out Cosgrove and Daniels’s thesis that heritage writing has both a temporal/historical and a spatial/geographical dimension (1-10); what David Crouch called the “spacetime of heritage” (“Affect, Heritage, Feeling” 185). In other words, heritage is articulated both as an exemplary historical narrative (which I will discuss in the following chapter) and as a traditional landscape.[52] As Higson argues in *English Heritage*:

> When heritage culture is mobilized on a national scale (“our shared national heritage”), it is in this spatio-temporal grid that the nation emerges as a unique, organic, meaningful community. The discourse of heritage ensures that the national community is bound temporally, by traditional historical narratives, and spatially, by a geographical vision of the nation. (50)

In the BWR novels of the 1980s, the idea of the nation was inseparable from that of the traditional Southern landscape. This traditional setting was treated as the place of origin and a key point of reference; in brief, a homeland, or, more precisely, motherland, which was usually looked upon with yearning and nostalgia. For example, Denise Heinze has pointed out that in Morrison’s fiction, all the “communities that have more successfully retained ethnicity and a measure of independence are located in the South” (*The Dilemma* 108). She cites “Shalimar, Virginia, Pilate’s Virginian Island Colony, Eloe, Florida” as examples of these communities, (ibid.), and one might also add to this list also the wild part of the Isle des Chevaliers (*Tar Baby*). These are all rural communities situated in the extended Caribbean, which, in spite of oppression, hardship and poverty, have more integrity than northern black communities. Whereas northern communities, such as Lorain in *The Bluest Eye*, are more susceptible to the ideology of the American dream, such as consumerism, western ideals of success and beauty, the South is depicted as a place of spiritual fulfillment and magic, where “authentic” black communities can still be found.

Indeed, the concept of “community” itself gained traction in the 1960s and 70s, when it was practically reinvented as a positive term to describe “what was always there, only we [African Americans] called it the ‘neighborhood’” (Stepto, “Intimate Things in Place” 10-11). In the 1980s, it was further valorized by the heritage debate, along with its attendant tropes of participation, dissonance and identity.[53] The 1980s novels depicted folk communities from the South as central sites of ethic/national identification. Carriacou, (*Praisesong for the Widow*), Shalimar (*Song of Solomon*) and

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52 See: Stephen Daniels’s *Fields of Vision: Landscape Imagery and National Identity in England and the United States*.

53 See Harrison, “The Politics of the Past.”

Willow Springs (*Mama Day*) are semi-mythical collectivities, not located on any map. They are idealized venues, "isolated communit[ies] with air that is pure, even primal, [they have] maintained an Afro-centric view point" (Rody, *The Daughter's Return* 60). Drawing on Benedict Anderson, Thorsson argues that "removing" these localities from the map reverses the colonizing process that routinely began with "mapping, followed by census and finally building a museum," the aim of which, according to Anderson, was "to drain sacredness from the ritual objects and practices" (Thorsson, *Women's Work* 95). Unmapped and undocumented islands and neighborhoods "resist [such] a theft of meaning" (ibid.). Writing about *Mama Day*, Thorsson states that these mythical collectivities exist outside colonial history and dominant power structures; not incorporated in any nation-state, they constitute "a nation unmoored from governmental institutions and political structures, rooted instead in social relations and local daily practices" (ibid. 116). As such, they have an amorphous polity which is "not so much about nationhood as about peoplehood, not so much about structures as about solidarities" (Hahn 473, qtd. in Thorsson 116). Even though they do not replicate nation states, however, Thorsson cautions that they "[rely] on the logic of nationhood." In the words of Gloria Naylor, they are a "microcosm for building a nation'" (Smith and Naylor, "An Interview" 1435).

Naylor's narrative in *Mama Day* is preceded by her own map of Willow Springs and the main characters' family tree, which are, in the words of Daphne Lamothe, "tropes conventionally used to signify a cultural nation" ("Gloria Naylor's *Mama Day*" 159). Willow Springs is like a miniature of a nation (Bonetti, "An Interview with Gloria Naylor" 45), with its own history (or rather herstory), as indicated by the family tree and a bill of sale detailing the purchase of a female slave suspected of using witchcraft, which suggest that this history was shaped by "a peculiar past that springs from that peculiar institution of slavery" (Bellinelli, "A Conversation" 107). The miniature nation exists outside official historiography and experiences time as eternity and stillness, as the collective narrative voice of *Mama Day* says. In Willow Springs there are no clocks or calendars, which are described as the "crude ways to order our realty" (ibid. 158); instead nature, crops and seasons impose order on life. Thus, Willow Springs' time is cyclical rather than linear. "It is a place where so much is cyclical that even the live oaks in the graveyard sand in a circle" (ibid. 139), says George, a "foreign" visitor on that island that is "ripe for myths" (ibid. 218). For George, an orphaned and uprooted New Yorker, Willow Springs becomes "a redemptive place" (Ashford, "Gloria Naylor" 77) and a spiritual base "where people who have lost their way might come back to themselves," to quote bell hooks out of context (*Yearning* 225). Still, the island remains illegible (and even lethal) to George and other westernized outsiders, like the locally-born but brainwashed ethnographer, who returns to the island to collect local folklore through the "spying glass" of anthropology.

Travel within the spatio-temporal grid of heritage is, as Robert Stepto has shown in *From Behind the Veil: A Study of Afro-American Narrative*, a recurrent motif in African American literature. Narratives of immersion in the space-time of black heri-

tage are all about the difficult art of making the South intelligible for assimilated and educated blacks, such as Alice Walker. The immersion narrative, according to Stepto, is about re-learning the grammar of "tribal literacy"; it "is a response to the loss of cultural identity entailed by the ascent [moving North]. The protagonist of the immersion narrative finds sustenance by a return to cultural roots, represented by the South, the family and folk community… [and] … by African American musical traditions or historical discovery" (Lynn Scott 36). Immersion is achieved, then, by a reversal of the trip North that African Americans took with the aid of the Underground Railroad during slavery, and independently during the Great Migration. It is a return to the point of departure in order to recapture the essence of black culture, to overcome a sense of alienation, and to regain membership of the "tribe."[54]

Unlike earlier African American narratives, which could have properties of both immersion and ascent simultaneously, the BWR rendering of the trope is much less complex. In the 1980s' novels, in which the "repatriation" to the village is at the heart of the plot, the extended Caribbean is invariably presented as the source of cultural essence, the location of "authentic" blackness, and a ritual landscape. Contrary to Du Bois's *The Souls of the Black Folk* (1903), which Stepto cites as an example of the unsolvable dilemma of double consciousness that cannot be resolved by either ascent or immersion (qtd. by Heinze, *The Dilemma* 108), the BWR figuring of this metaphysical geography clearly tips the balance away from the idea of a hybrid form of African and American identity and towards that of a folk African form. BWR narratives of the 1980s were the exact opposite of the narratives of ascent, in which the main character (often a man) progresses from the country to the city. Whereas for the male protagonists of ascent narratives, the city is, to misquote Boehmer, "a site of achievement of modern nationalist self-awareness" (*Stories of Women* 68), as, for example, in the 1960's BN discourses that pictured the Northern ghetto as a crucible for a new masculine identity, for the female protagonists of Afra American novels, the South is the place for spiritual redemption and regeneration.[55]

Morrison's *Song of Solomon* was a prototype of the national allegory of immersion and rebirth. Like most postcolonial national allegories written by men, it features a male hero, Milkman Dead, as the son of the nation. Unlike George in *Mama Day* (1988), who fails to acquire tribal literacy and dies, Milkman undergoes a successful re-education and is admitted by his tribe. Morrison's *Tar Baby* juxtaposes the personal integrity of the son of the nation, Son, who remains well-versed in tribal lite-

54 According to McDowell, there are also narratives of hibernation, in which the quest takes the male protagonist "underground." It is a "descent into the 'underworld' and is primarily political and social in its implications. Ralph Ellison's *Invisible Man*, Imamu Baraka's *The System of Dante's Hell,* and Richard Wright's 'The Man Who Lived Underground' exemplify that quest" (McDowell, *"The Changing Same"* 14).

55 See, for example, Alice Walker's "The Black Writer and the Southern Experience," which describes narratives of reverse migration to romanticized southern folkways.

racy, with Jadine’s inability and unwillingness to learn the basics. This novel, more than any other 1980s narrative, shows that the idea of ascent was anathema for the womanist writer. Whereas black female quests to the South were usually presented as “personal and psychological” journeys from “victimization to consciousness,” as McDowell has noted (*“The Changing Same”* 14), Jadine’s abortive quest is, as I argued in the previous chapter, a traumatizing experience that undermines her self-esteem and deepens her sense of isolation. Jadine is not susceptible to the romantic, pastoral and exhilarating vision of the South, which Alice Walker describes as “feeling the soil between the toes, smelling the dust thrown up by the rain, loving the earth so much that one longs to taste it and sometimes does” (“The Black Writer” 21). She has no appreciation for the sentiments and worldviews of common, often illiterate, black folk, and sees black Southern culture merely as a “stock of particularisms” (Fanon, qtd. in McDowell, *“The Changing Same”* 114), which she blames for having made Son so impractical and uncompromising. She also rejects a vision of black womanhood that equates women with the organic and the natural and treats them as a reservoir of intuitive collective knowledge. Jadine is resoundingly condemned for rejecting this vision, and thereby serves as a proof of the idea that when heritage turns “predatory,” that is when it eliminates other experiences to honor one true culture inherited from the past, “[a]ll too often the doors of tradition are slammed in women’s faces” (McClintock, “‘No Longer in a Future Heaven’” 122).

Marshall’s *Praisesong for the Widow*, on the other hand, is a perfect example of the archetypal journey of initiation into “tribal literacy,” in which “an unapologetic bourgeoise” Avey (Marshall, *Triangular Road* 147), “travels, both literally and figuratively, toward African American cultural nationalism” (Thorsson, *Women’s Work* 86) and metamorphoses into an “articulate kinswoman.” Avey, the titular widow, is marooned on Grenada after she cut her cruise short following a nightmare about her late relative, Great Aunt Cuney. Her name, Avey, is short for Avatara, a Sanscrit name for a reincarnation of a deity whose mission is to confront the evil of the world. The name was given to her by her foremother, Gran, the heir of legendary Ibos, “pure-born Africans” (*Praisesong* 37), who walked on water back to Africa having rejected New World enslavement. The unwritten oral story of their magical, biblical-like departure is kept alive and passed on by women in Avey’s family, but Avey betrays this maternal ancestral heritage by investing in another myth, that of the American dream of material gain and social uplift, which leads to the dissolution of both her marriage and her identity.

When Avey is persuaded to take a boat trip to the smaller nearby island of Carriacou, her journey of immersion is about to begin. The Carriacou Excursion is an annual ritual of remembrance of the old African “nations,” or, rather, “a few names of what they [locals] called nations which they could no longer even pronounce properly, the fragments of a dozen or so songs, the shadowy forms of long-ago dances and rum kegs for drums” (*Praisesong* 240). Avey is to learn that these “subliminal memories … over the years had proven more durable and trustworthy than the history

with its trauma and pain from which they had come. After centuries of forgetfulness or even denial, they refused to go away" (ibid. 245). As a result of her immersion, Avey starts to appreciate these feeble memories, "[t]he bare bones. The burned-out ends," that the Carriacou people "clung to … with a tenacity she suddenly loved in them and longed for in herself" (ibid. 240). She vows to share that ancestral wisdom with "those young, bright, fiercely articulate" young people in the North, who are in need of tribal literacy because without it they are "unaware, unprotected, lacking memory" (ibid. 255). As an "articulate kinswoman," Avey becomes a skilled and active user of her cultural resources, who can draw on traditional cultural repositories in search of the tools, capacities and strategies with which to respond to the political and social expediencies of her environment.

During the excursion, Avey's mind is made to "swing like a pendulum gone amok" (ibid. 323). Her boat trip to Carriacou is reminiscent of the Middle Passage; it is an ordeal after which she is purged and reborn. She receives spiritual healing from women named Ancestress and Mother, who personify Avey's symbolic mothers and the mother-island.[56] They prepare her for reunion with her tribe and relieve her of the trauma of unbelonging. Avey's re-learning of tribal literacy involves paying homage to the "Long-time People" (ancestors), the Caribbean and the motherland, and appeasing Aunt Cuney and begging her forgiveness for not honoring the Ibos or spreading the gospel of the Ibo Landing. Finally, it means recalling and performing her "nation" dance and participating in other Creole dances and "sorrow songs" that evoke slavery, the loss of life and heritage, and yearning for an impossible reconnection with Africa and the pre-slavery past (ibid. 244). These rituals make Avey whole again; she becomes Avatara, one of "ancient spirits who bridge the geographic and cultural diaspora…. These are deities who Avey will eventually come to honor through her choice to become a teller and to pass on her ancestors' story" (Holloway, *Moorings and Metaphors* 134).

Some critics have argued that *Praisesong for the Widow* presents a model of diasporic, rather than national consciousness. Eugenia Collier, for example, wrote that *Praisesong* "links the Black individual with Black people worldwide, showing a vast multitude of people sharing a common past and, by necessity, a common future, in which the individual is made whole only by awareness and acceptance of this massive community" ("The Closing of the Circle" 296). Thorsson claimed that the novel "dismantles the stereotype of Africa as a timeless monolith" (*Women's Work* 93), as the people "practice" their nation by participating in dance rituals that are from different African "nations," such as Cromanti, Iboand Manding, for example. Finally, Abena

56 Missy Dehn Kubitschek argues that even Lebert Joseph is feminised in the novel. He is an incarnation of Legba, a dual-gendered African God of nurturing, protecting and ensuring continuity. "Even Lebert becomes female during the dance. Clearly female forces serve as midwives for Avey's rebirth into her true self, Avatara" (Kubitschek, qtd. in Thorsson, *Women's Work* 10-4).

Busia, in “What Is Your Nation? Reconnecting Africa and Her Diaspora through Paule Marshall’s *Praisesong for the Widow*,” observed that the novel portrayed black people as twice displaced, from Africa and the extended Caribbean, and as spiritually unmoored and scattered around the world: “Marshall articulates the scattering of the African peoples as a trauma – a trauma that is constantly repeated anew in the lives of her children” (196-7) as with each new displacement, relocation or exodus (from Africa, from the Caribbean, from the USA) their alienation and uprooting become more profound and deeper. In spite of that broader historical and diasporic perspective, Thorsson has asserted, “Marshall portrays diasporic consciousness as a useful mind-set … consolidating … [an African American] nation apart within the United States” (88-9). This nation is determined by the shared history and culture of the black diaspora, and by transnational travel, which makes it possible for African Americans to “articulate the nation in opposition to the nation state” (ibid. 89).

However, many novels present the quest for tribal literacy without the characters embarking on real journeys of immersion. They treat what might be termed “Southerness” as an ethos that African Americans have in common by virtue of their participation in a set of cultural practices, or a state of mind that is cultivated through “small rites” (*Praisesong* 137), such as reciting African American poetry, listening to blues and Jazz, and dancing. These narratives seem to suggest that a sense of national consciousness does not have to be created exclusively through immersion in the ancestral landscape. These novels construct an idea of the nation that is based on “a spiritual principle” (Renan, “What is a Nation?” 19). This makes black tribal literacy “portable,” to misquote Thorsson (*Women’s Work* 111). Paule Marshall, Alice Walker and Gloria Naylor, in particular, are excellent examples of this portable cultural nationalism that is carried by “culture bearing” black women. According to Bonetti, Naylor was born in New York but was raised on the “codes of behavior,” the speech, the accent, the worldview and “the sense of family” of her parents, who were migrants from the South (“An Interview with Gloria Naylor” 42). In effect, she retained her tribal literacy and was able to produce quintessentially volkish narratives, like *Mama Day*, which are permeated with nostalgia for the South and peopled with peasants tracing their roots several generations back. As Thorsson has suggested, womanist texts preached the ethos of cultural nationalism through various rituals in which culture-bearing women practiced their “portable” cultural nationalism, what Bambara has called the “inner nation” (*The Salt Eaters* 118). Cooking, for example, in Ntozake Shange’s *Sassafrass, Cypress & Indigo*, is just such a ritual. It is a female and ethnic skill that expresses Southern tradition, historical connections, and what Thorsson has called “the vast unknown lineage” (*Women’s Work* 99), which connects back to “the slaves who were ourselves,” as Shange puts it in *Sassafrass, Cypress & Indigo* (224). Recipes are expressive not just of black female creativity and artistry but also, first and foremost, of tribal literacy. Other “repertoire[s] of knowledge” (Clark, “Archiving Epistemologies” 156) through which BWR writers fashioned portable heritage in their novels, included such diverse modes of creative

expression as making dolls, weaving, dancing, conjuring, healing and, of course, mothering. These traditionally female occupations used resources that symbolized maternal legacy and lore, and emphasized the fact that the "inner nation" is a matrilineal tradition.

The national allegories written by most African Caribbean women writers have a different attitude to the space-time of heritage, and their plots fit into a different paradigm. Since these authors, as Curdella Forbes has observed, "exist behaviorally and psychologically on a continuum between nationalities and/or ethnicities" (*From Nation to Diaspora* 229), they also show great interest in ancestral folk heritage and the Caribbean landscape. The trope of the journey is also common in books written by Caribbean immigrant writers, which often present different legs of the character's allegorical wanderings, and symbolic "stations" in Africa, England, the West Indies or the United States. On the other hand, however, their trajectories rarely fit neatly into the ascent/immersion paradigm (with the exception of Marshall's *Praisesong for the Widow* and Kincaid's novels, which I discuss later). Instead, the novels chronicle multiple journeys and feature lots of cyclical departures and arrivals. In this way they commemorate routes rather than roots and expose the displaced historicity of the African Caribbean. For example, Marshall's 1968 novel, *The Chosen Place, The Timeless People,* which was published before her classic narrative of immersion, *Praisesong for the Widow*, had its female protagonist "land" on all three motherlands – Europe, Africa and the Caribbean. As Ogunyemi puts it, "Merle, carrying her national burden of leading Bournehills up a road to progress, recoups her energy after her bouts of insanity [in the colonial motherland] and strengthens herself spiritually for the future political struggle by undertaking a pilgrimage to East Africa" (30). Eventually, "recovers her sanity to play her part in an agricultural commune" of her Caribbean homeland (Ogunyemi 30).

While Marshall's and Lorde's narratives inscribed their characters' negotiations of African Caribbean female and exilic subjectivity within the tradition of African American writing that could be categorized as a "literature of reconnection" (Fido, "Textures of Third World Reality" 42), Kincaid's and Cliff's allegorical novels picture the Caribbean motherland as what Lemuel. A. Johnson has called "the (com)promised land" ("A-beng" 126), where the "womanchild" is doomed to a lot of suffering (ibid. 127). As I have contended in the previous chapter, Cliff and Kincaid are directly engaged in postcolonial and anti-hegemonic criticism of the motherland(s), and their imaginative re-workings of mother/daughter tensions can be read as *bildungsromane* that are "metonymic of the colonial condition" (Ledent, "Voyages into Otherness" 59). As Curry has noted, Cliff's and Kincaid's narratives feature daughter-mother(land) relationships that are "uniformly allegorical of colonizer/colonized relationships" (qtd. in Bouson, *Jamaica Kincaid* 4). They concentrate on both the psychic development of the girl-child (her acquisition of appropriate gender roles) and the daughter's resistance to the mother, and also, by implication, on the colonial culture and the mother country. Consequently, there are no "mothers' gardens" or "folk storehouses"

that these Caribbean daughters could easily tap into in order to confront the truncated or “bleached out” aspects of their African selves.

While Cliff’s narratives do actually endeavor to follow the same impulse as the African American literature of reconnection, her novels, particularly *No Telephone to Heaven*, can hardly be considered as successful narratives of immersion. Although Clare loves the countryside and her black grandmother, Miss Mattie, in whose house she goes through all the formative experiences of her life, she never gets to access the “inner nation” or to acquire African Caribbean tribal literacy because of her light skin. In St. Elizabeth, Clare often feels “locked off” (*No Telephone* 154); she is not allowed to participate in the rituals of her grandmother’s church or socialize with country women. She gradually becomes more and more aware of the unbridgeable gap that separates her from her only playmate, Zoe, who, unlike Clare, is a daughter of a poor, dark-skinned peasant woman. At the end of the novel, the reader is told that Clare, now a revolutionary, reclaims “her grandmother’s land” and restores “ties [that] had been broken” (ibid. 91; 103), and has thus become “an articulate kinswoman.” But her journey of immersion into the ancestral landscape ends tragically with Clare being literally “burned into the landscape” by a barrage of bullets coming from the Jamaican military (Cliff, “Caliban’s Daughter” 45). In this way, as Toland-Dix argues, the damage done to Clare, “who has been rejected, abandoned and dismissed by the matrilineage by which she so longs to be acknowledged” (“Re-negotiating” 21), seems to be irreparable. Her efforts to immerse herself in the space-time of her African Caribbean heritage are futile: “She does not reclaim the spiritual power that had led Miss Mattie to create her own church and become a spiritual force of her community” (ibid. 24). Her death, one might even argue, represents Jamaica being overwhelmed by neo-colonial forces.

Kincaid’s Lucy does not become an “articulate kinswoman” either, nor does she want to become one. Her journey, quite untypically, is one of ascent, and at the end of it, Lucy consciously chooses to remain an articulate survivor. The novel, which could be described as a *Künstlerroman* about Kincaid’s own path to becoming a writer, tellingly ends with Lucy starting a memoir, the first sentence of which expresses the pain of her self-inflected exile: “I wish I could love somebody so much I could die from it” (*Lucy* 163-164). Loneliness and alienation are the price Lucy pays for her hard-won independence. “I was alone in the world,” she claims. “It was not a small accomplishment and I thought I would die doing it. I was not happy, but that seemed too much to ask for” (ibid. 161). Lucy escapes the colonizing mother(land) to become a transcultural traveler and a teller of radical stories, albeit one whose integrity is won at the expense of “the awful emptiness inside” (ibid. 8). She stands alone, rejecting all the comforting certainties offered by the *Kulturnation* of unique black communities bound by vernacular cultural practices expressed through the black idiom.

Annie, Lucy’s younger self, still gratefully receives support from the green matriarchal world of the mother-island. Her maternal grandmother, Ma Chess, a foil for Annie’s mother and her genteel aspirations, is Kincaid’s take on the trope of the

wise grandmother; she is "a model of African based female power, that of the Obeah woman" (Simmons, *Jamaica Kincaid* 31-32). She embodies the vibrant energy of the native culture, resisting both colonial and patriarchal domination. Ma Chess links Annie to the island's pre-Columbian past and African cultural practices in order to nurse her back to health after her feud with her mother results in a severe nervous breakdown. But Lucy is determined to move out of the "Kumbla" of the "folk storehouse" and the island itself. According to the Jamaican writer, Erna Brodber, the "Kumbla" or "calabash" – a container used to protect precious objects – signifies both a protective and a confining space (Walcott 334). Coming out of "the Kumbla" describes the process of moving out of confinement into visibility and articulation, which is Lucy's ultimate goal. This signifies that Lucy (representing Kincaid herself) does not need the tribe and its reassurance to be an independent whole. As a diasporic/migrant woman writer, and an expert at "cosmopolitan rootlessness" (Boehmer, *Stories of Women* 226), Kincaid and her fictional alter-egos use their freedom to reinvent a new Black Atlantic and feminist epistemology.

4.4 Black Conjure Women as "Midwives of the 'National' Soul"

In African Caribbean folk narratives, wise older women are also "the site of identification," to use the expression coined by African Canadian poet Dionne Brand. They are, too, "midwives of the 'national' soul" (McClintock, *Colonial Leather* 303) and repositories of spiritual beliefs and practices that are instrumental in keeping their unique, organic, black communities alive. Cliff elaborates on her use of the trope of the powerful grandmother in her essay "Clare Savage as a Crossroad Character," stating that "the powerful aspect of the grandmother originates in Nanny." She adds:

> at her most powerful, the grandmother is the source of knowledge, magic ancestors, stories, healing practices and food. She assists at rites of passage, protects and teaches. She is an inheritor of African belief systems, African languages. She may be informed with ashe,[57] the power to make things happen, the justice. (267)

The half-historical, half-mythical Nanny was a Maroon leader and an Obeah woman, who could allegedly catch bullets with her buttocks. She is the heroic national mother of the better, non-conforming and culturally resistant part of Jamaican society. According to Braxton, Nanny and Momma Henderson (in Maya Angelou's *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings*) "are versions of the same Afra American archetype, both are products of myth making and reflect the people's need for heroes who embody cultural

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57 A Yoruba word meaning power, command, and authority.

values necessary for the survival of the group. Both figures transcend the generations to become ‘timeless people’” (“Ancestral Presence” 304).

But the community mothers and griots of Caribbean women writers are not as powerful as their womanist counterparts in African American women’s fiction, such as *Mama Day*, *The Salt Eaters* and *Praisesong for the Widow*. By and large, Cliff’s narratives lament the denigration of the once formidable Obeah women in modern Jamaica. In *No Telephone to Heaven*, their loss of prestige is symbolized by their social ostracism and ultimately their tragic death when the asylum in which they are kept is deliberately set on fire.[58] As Braxton argues, therefore, although the wise grandmother is a universal figure of resistance who is found in the folklore and fiction of all communities of the black diaspora, the African American and African Caribbean grandmothers are not endowed with the same degree of authority. The Clare Savage novels show that the Jamaican community mothers are not without blame, since their fall from power was at least partially of their own making. Even though Nanny does find worthy heirs in such heroic figures as Mma Alli, Inez and eventually Clare herself, one cannot help but notice that while the novels eulogize Nanny, Mma Alli and Inez, at the same time they also censure the failings and faults of contemporary blood-and-other mothers who have rejected the legacy of the indomitable spirit of Obeah women of the past.

For example, Clare’s maternal grandmother, Miss Mattie, retains some vestiges of the powers held by the powerful Obeah women of the past, and is revered by her rural community as a repository of an ancient African worldview. Thanks to her, St. Elizabeth, where she lives and where Clare spends her holidays, is a female environment saturated with an indigenous African culture, in which women, not men, are political and spiritual leaders. Cliff shows Miss Mattie as a cornerstone of the community and heir to Nanny’s spirituality. Miss Mattie establishes and presides over her own church and allows some of the poor landless proletariat to squat on her estate. She is described as a “sorceress” who, through charitable acts that are reminiscent of Nanny’s feats, performs for the poor “the miracle of loaves and fishes” (Cliff, *No Telephone* 5).

However, Miss Mattie’s sagacity is undermined by Cliff’s desire to show that even this green maternal world is vulnerable to colonial pressures, most notably western notions of colorism, materialism and social hierarchy. Like the rest of Jamaican society, the rural community of St. Elizabeth is divided according to race, class and ownership of private property. Miss Mattie’s family, the Freemans, are lucky to be

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58 A similar motif appears in Edwidge Danticat’s writing which reclaims the folkloric figure of the female vampire “soucouyant” as a paragon of agency for women of the African diaspora. Soucouyant wise women are persecuted and burned by Duvalier’s regime. See Penier “Engendering the National History of Haiti in Edwidge Danticat’s *Krik? Krak.*”; and “The Formation of Migratory Subjects in Edwidge Danticat’s *Krik? Krak!*”; “The Black Atlantic Zombie: National Schisms and Utopian Diasporas in Edwidge Danticat’s *The Dew Breaker*.”

lower-middle-class landowners, even though they are black, and they willingly adopt the colonial hierarchies of class and possession. Among the women who attend Miss Mattie's church are those who, like her, are farm owners. Their social status is indicated by the jewelry that they wear and by the fact that they are admitted to Miss Mattie's house. At the bottom of the social ladder are the poor, unadorned women, who are recipients of Miss Mattie's bounty but are never allowed to enter her house. Furthermore, though Miss Mattie does not completely assimilate into the dominant colonial culture, she conforms to it by passing on to her offspring a selective knowledge of the past. Kitty does not learn from Miss Mattie about Mma Alli or Nanny; the whitish Clare is completely "locked off" from her maternal heritage. Therefore, Miss Mattie's charismatic public appearance is at variance with her classism, her willful historical amnesia, and her striking and inexplicable emotional rigidity towards her own children and grandchildren. Miss Mattie is as anti-maternal and un-nurturing as many other fictional Caribbean mothers.

Regardless of these differences, what connects African American and immigrant Caribbean BWR writers is that their narratives feature a similar "myth-symbol complex." According to Anthony Smith, who coined the term "myth-symbol complex" is an ensemble of pre-modern symbols, myths, values and traditions that connect modern nations to pre-modern "ethnie," the French word meaning ethnic groups. Examples of the myth-symbol complex in this context include tales such as those recorded by Hurston of the devil outsmarting God, blacks outsmarting Ole Massa, and animals allegorizing the black condition; and Marshall's Caribbean songs, wise sayings and dances that link the protagonists with African traditions, religions and beliefs (*Praisesong for the Widow*). Rituals of weaving, culinary and medicinal recipes, and herbal lore in Shange's *Sassafrass, Cypress & Indigo* are also part and parcel of the black "myth-symbol complex," as is a children's rhyme that offers Milkman a key to the pre-modern past in Morrison's *Song of Solomon*. Conjure women and flying Africans, rituals of laying on of hands, healing, rootworking, ancestor worship, and midwifery, together with vernacular practices of storytelling, riddles, jokes, rhymes, musical motifs and call-and-response, are all part of the black diasporic myth-symbol complex. These tropes, which are present to a greater or lesser degree in most novels of the BWR, make up a contemporary heritage discourse that links the modern medium of the novel to the diasporic black "ethnie": sacrosanct traditions that constitute the timeless essence of the *Kulturnation*.

4.5 Womanist Literary Criticism and the Development of "an Essential Black Female Matrix"

As I highlighted at the beginning of this chapter, at the onset of the poststructuralist theoretical movement in the 1980s, there was a debate among primordial-essentialists and constructivists about how much of this residual "cultural stuff" is specific

and fixed, and how much is constructed or invented (Chaterjee, qtd. in Yuval-Davis, *Gender and Nation* 41), with Anthony Smith occupying the middle ground between the two camps. In this “authenticity debate,” essentialists clung to claims that the myth-symbol complex was real, whereas constructivists insisted on seeing it as “a contemporary manifestation of a longer historical process whereby human societies actively cultivate a social memory” (Johnson, “Heritage and Geography” 163). This dispute has been more or less resolved in favor of the poststructuralist constructivists. In “Heritage and Authenticity,” for example, Helaine Silverman argues that:

> [u]nlike previous scholarship that portrayed authenticity as a stable value/product, current research understands it as dynamic, performative, culturally and historically contingent, relative – a quality/tool that can be strategically configured and deployed according to the task at hand, be that social, cultural, economic, political, religious and so on. (69)

Consequently, while prior to the 1980s, the “heritage crusade” was inextricably linked to “an authenticity craze” (Silverman 69), since the 1980s there has been a consensus that writers, like folk storytellers, are engaged in the elaborate labor of “lying up a nation” (Hurston, *Mules and Men* 21). Most of the womanist critics of the 1980s were also “lying up a nation,” as McDowell observed a decade later (McDowell, *“The Changing Same”* 118). Early black feminist critics, including Barbara Christian, Barbara Smith and Mary Helen Washington, found it extremely difficult to move “from the ‘Age of Criticism’ to the “Age of Theory,’” (ibid.) and to poststructural/constructivist way of thinking about heritage. In effect womanist literary criticism was “another form of storytelling, of mythmaking,” which determined “*what* … [readers] see when they read and how they receive and represent what they read” (ibid.). It was thanks to these critics and their relentless “heritage crusade” that the volkish tradition became enthroned as the literary canon not just of black feminism but also of ethno-nationalism.

Multiple essays and interviews by African American women writers and critics strove to counter the idea that folk heritage was a construction. Toni Morrison is a good example of the sense of ambivalence that many BWR writers felt towards the issue of “authenticity.” At times, Morrison acknowledges the discontinuity of black heritage, as when she mourns over the passing of the time when “an artist could be genuinely representative of the tribe and be in it” (“Rootedness” 341). She admits that is impossible to go back to that ideal because “[w]e [Africans Americans] don’t live in places where we can hear these stories anymore; parents don’t sit around and tell their children those classical, mythological archetypal stories that we heard years ago” (ibid.). Like Walker, who sought in Hurston’s novels a remedy to cultural uprooting and deprivation, Morrison sees the novel as a means of reconstructing the broken connections with the ancestral past. She concedes that the novel cannot fully compensate for the loss of tribal traditions that has occurred in modern times, but maintains that it can create a semblance of temporal continuity between the present and the past by functioning as a “modern” substitute for folk storytelling, a contemporary way of cultivating social memories. Consequently, Morrison’s novels strive to evoke in

readers a sense of the historical depth of black experience by recycling "tribal" stories and archetypes. Likewise, her essay, "What the Black Woman Thinks About Women's Lib," pictures contemporary black women writers as engaged in what McClintock elsewhere called "an invention of a tradition" through "elaborate labour of regeneration" ("'No Longer in a Future Heaven'" 106-7). In her essay, Morrison argues that the black woman "had nothing to fall back on, not maleness, not whiteness, not ladyhood, not anything. And out of the profound desolation of her reality she may very well have invented herself" (Morrison, qtd. in Charles Johnson, *Being and Race* 97). In fact, most BWR writers also "invented" their female characters by borrowing from the archetypal imagery of the common folk culture to create "innovative fiction and contemporary myths to sustain a struggling people" (Thorsson, *Women's Work* 314). Morrison, as Charles Johnson has observed, became the most accomplished purveyor of such "mytho-poetic narratives" (*Being and Race* 103), in which she skillfully manipulates "cultural archetypes" to create a usable politically-charged heritage that black women could "fall back on" (ibid. 102).

More often than not, however, Morrison's writing gives in to the "authenticity craze," as, for example, when she states that as a novelist she "blend[s] the acceptance of the supernatural and a profound rootedness in the real world … with neither taking precedence over the other" and argues that this artistic strategy is not a magical realist or postmodernist "trick" but an indication "of the cosmology, the way in which Black people looked at the world" ("Rootedness" 342). In the following, often-quoted passage, Morrison asserts her belief that black people as a group have certain fixed racial characteristics that constitute a distinctively black worldview:

> We are a very practical people, very down to earth, even shrewd people. But within that practicality we also accepted what I suppose could be called superstition and magic, which is another way of knowing things. But to blend these two worlds together at the same time was enhancing not limiting. And some of those things were "discredited knowledge" that Black people had; discredited only because black people were discredited and therefore what they knew was discredited. (Ibid.)

Morrison's essays do sometimes offer such sweeping generalizations as this, which present a totalizing view of the black "people" as "articulate kinsmen" by nature. In this way, Morrison endorses the idea of what Frantz Boas called the "Volksgeist,"[59] an outdated, 19th-century anthropological concept, according to which culture is defined as a people's characteristics. While Boas separated his understanding of culture from any racial and demographic foundations and treated it as an autonomous abstraction, Morrison's essays and fiction attach it once again to racial identity and to rural lifestyle, ascribing to black people certain immanent and distinctive cha-

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59 See George W. Stocking, Jr., ed., *Volksgeist as Method and Ethic*: *Essays on Boasian Ethnography and the German Anthropological Tradition*.

racteristics. She presents black people as being bound together by a mythical episteme, the “discredited” knowledge that “has a very strong place in her [and their] world” (Morrison, “Rootedness” 342).

As I have stressed throughout this study, this approach to black heritage was a 1980s’ phenomenon. There is a marked difference between the ways in which black folklore was treated in the 1970s and the 1980s, even in the fiction by Morrison. According to Dubey, “[i]n black women’s novels of the 1970s, folk culture is subject to a sharp scrutiny that exposes its often-damaging consequences for black women” (*Black Women Novelists* 7). She says, for example, that *The Bluest Eye* presents a northern community whose “mythical perception of nature” does not help its members to challenge racism and occasionally “[leads] to a dangerous fatalism” (Dubey, *Black Women Novelists* 44). For instance, Pecola’s victimization is naturalized when Claudia speaks of her as a kind of flower that will not grow in that “soil,” and as a fruit “that the land kills of its own volition” (*The Bluest Eye,* qtd. in Dubey, *Black Women Novelists* 44). Ascribing Pecola’s tragedy to the environment in which she lives (“the land” and “soil”), allows the community to remain passive in the face of her suffering: “we acquiesce and say the victim had no right to live” (*The Bluest Eye,* qtd. in Dubey, ibid.). The novel seems in fact a criticism of such an attitude – it condemns violence and inaction made possible by a folk worldview. *The Third Life of Grange Copeland,* by Alice Walker, also puts across a mixed view of folklore. On the one hand, it abounds with Grange’s edifying tales of conjurers and slaves verbally outwitting their masters, which emphasize the liberating potential of folklore as a shield against discrimination and oppression. On the other hand, the novel also rejects the black vernacular, one of the key components of folklore, which it describes as a “broken language” and a weapon with which men lash out at “Black ugly nigger bitch[es]” (139).

This does not mean that 1970s novels set forth a totally negative view of folklore; rather that their positioning on this subject was simply far more complex. *Corregidora*, for instance, celebrated the blues as a vehicle for black spirituality and hope. The blues and other forms of vernacular expression also provided BWR writers with a repository of formal and aesthetic tropes that enriched their writing on the level of both language and narrative structure. For example, the unique “spiral” or “circular” structuring of time that is found in the novels of the 1970s was indebted, according to Dubey, to folkloric, mythical and musical, frameworks.[60] Sometimes, folk tales also shaped the storylines by creating escape routes for those characters who, like Son in *Tar Baby* or Milkman in *Song of Solomon*, did not fit into the imperfect real world.

By contrast, in the volkish tradition of the 1980s, myths and folktales began to signify the difference between essentialist ways of seeing the world imposed by cultural nationalist. In the heritage novels of the 1980s, the evocation of black folklore

60 According to Dubey, such novels as *Meridian*, *The Bluest Eye*, *Eva’s Man* or *Sula* have “circular” structure because they “stage a bleak drama of history as overdetermined repetition” (136).

goes beyond the "tokenism" of the 1970s. The writers embark on an ontological quest to validate an alternative black worldview and start to see folklore as an archive of eternal truths about black people, and themselves as custodians of that ancestral heritage. The black vernacular is no longer condemned for enabling a "monologic, derogatory construction of black women" (Dubey, *Black Women Novelists* 123) or for reinforcing the cultural marginalization of blacks: on the contrary, orality is seen as "fulfill[ing] the critical role of preserving cultural identity" (Braxton, "Ancestral Presence" 300). Folktales, songs, and spirituals are seen as receptacles of cultural essence, having "oral characteristics" that "speak to the realm in which the strongest and most empowering aspects of who we are collectively as a people is maintained" (John, *Clear Word* 2). That strong oral tradition and "black people's grace … with language" (Watkins, "Talk with Toni Morrison" 48) are treated as the cornerstone of an essential "tribal literacy."

Like black male cultural nationalists of the 1960s and 70s, who "invested oral forms with special power to authorize a pure and untroubled collective voice in black literature" (Dubey, *Black Women Novelists* 139), so BWR writers of the 1980s used black folk idiom and oral motifs in an attempt to reproduce the voice of the people. The vernacular structuring of the narratives is evident in the use of the collaborative and performative "call and response pattern" (*Mama Day*, *The Bluest Eye*, *Praisesong for the Widow*), the collective first-person plural narrative voice ("we") (*Mama Day*); and omniscient and self-righteous narrators who clearly speak on behalf of a collectivity (Cliff). These narrative voices build what McClintock, in a different context, has called "a community of identity" of mostly female voices that reiterate collective memories of the ancestral past (*Imperial Leather* 317). These voices conjured parabolic stories of heroic black women who had been written out of the nationalist tradition (Cliff); forgotten legends (*Tar Baby*) and genealogies (*Song of Solomon*); and national names, songs and dances (*Praisesong for the Widow*). They produced what Gates called in *The Signifying Monkey* "talking books" which functioned as "authentic" products of culture and consciousness and sought to represent what Yuval-Davis called "the 'essence' of 'the nation' (*Kulturnation*)" (*Gender and Nation* 21).

It was a great achievement of the writers and feminist critics of the BWR that they developed this "conjure narratology" (Valerie Lee 137) and made it their own. Storytelling that was rooted in oral folk forms was increasingly presented as the business of kitchen poets and was compared to other female occupations like braiding hair, cooking and mothering. Black women's "talking books" reflected what Jacqueline Bryant called "mother's wit" and "mother's tongue" (20), and according to Barbara Smith, they came to constitute "an identifiable literary tradition'" ("Toward a Black Feminist Criticism" 416-7). Black feminist critics argued that this tradition was the legacy of black mothers who "arrogated to themselves and their daughters the power to create through language, to define themselves through the written word, to become witnesses to the special sensibility of black women" (Washington, "I Sign My Mother's Name" 144). It stemmed from black folk cosmology and lore, including such practices

as rootworking, herbal medicine, conjure and midwifery, and was expressed through a discrete "specifically black female language" (Barbara Smith in McDowell, "New Directions for Black Feminist Criticism" 431). In Smith's opinion, the "'innumerable commonalities' of language and theme that structure[d] … [BWR] work" constituted a unitary woman-centered black aesthetic, distinct from the writings of both white women and black men ("Toward a Black Feminist Criticism" 21).

As McDowell has observed, the formation of this ethno-national canon, which sought to identify and reward those novels which best represented the feminist articulation of the imagined black community, was built at the expense of black men.[61] Black feminist criticism actively endeavored to consolidate a certain vision of black female poetics and collectivity: McDowell, for instance, has noted that "feminist critics … repudiated and subverted what they considered alien, male centered literary standards," replacing them with an oppositional "female aesthetic that reflected women's unique culture" (*"The Changing Same"* 50). She comments that this aesthetic was, however, "[s]imilar in spirit and methodology to the largely male-dominated black aesthetic movement," as it introduced a "no less rigid set of aesthetic orthodoxies" about what constitutes a successful synthesis of orality, myth and history in black writing (ibid. 19; 50).[62] This depended on the exclusion of black male writers, such as Charles Johnson, David Bradley and Randall Kenan, who also occasionally conjured vernacular myths to "lie up the nation." In their attempt to "[develop a] body of feminist political theory whose assumptions could be used in the study of black women's art" (Smith, "Toward a Black Feminist Criticism" 412), Smith and other black feminist critics had to disregard the fact that BWR writers were not the only ones to build their literary reputations on imaginative sojourns in the folk South.

Charles Johnson, David Bradley and Randall Kenan were not identified with the "the village novel" to the same extent as female writers. Morrison, for example, was adamant in her belief that what I call the volkish tradition was a hallmark of the BWR and that black women writers had different, quintessentially black, sensibilities

61 Similarly, Carby criticizes feminists, especially Barbara Smith, who constructed a tradition based on black female identity by creating a literary historiography of very divergent forms of black female cultural production. Carby argued that if there is such a tradition, it has not developed linearly (*Reconstructing Womanhood*).

62 "It is necessary to note," contended McDowell, that "ironically, in their earliest formulations, the objectives and practices of both the black aesthetic and feminist criticism often came dangerously close to insisting on a no less rigid set of aesthetic orthodoxies" (*"The Changing Same"* 50). She takes issue with Smith's essentialized and vague "critical jargon" (ibid. 8) which, as she aptly observes, was an example of "allowing ideology to inform critical analysis" (ibid. 8). McDowell points out that in Smith's discussion of the conjure aesthetics that was being presented as unique to the BWR, Smith did not provide any examples of the specifically black language that only BWR writers use. McDowell then asks: "is there a monolithic black female language? Do black female high school dropouts, welfare mothers, college graduates, and PhDs share a common language? Are there regional variations on this common language?" (ibid. 8).

as compared with black men. According to Morrison, "[b]lack men don't write very differently from white men," but there is an "enormous difference" in the narratives of black and white women. In her opinion, "[black] women probably do write off a different place. There is some difference in the ways they approach conflict, dominion and power" (qtd. in Edmondson, *Making Men* 100). In this way, she seems to intimate that BWR writing was genuinely black, unlike that of black men, since if black men's writing is indistinguishable from that of white men, then the writing of the BWR must presumably embody "authentic" black experience as captured in a recognizably black idiom. Furthermore, Morrison often expressed her belief in the existence of an authentic black novel that inscribes the authentic black voice. She certainly saw her own writing as a paragon of indigenous black fiction, as the following citation implies: "I try to incorporate, into that traditional genre of the novel, unorthodox novelistic characteristics – so it is in my view, Black, because it uses characteristics of Black art" (ibid.). Such claims have led Belinda Edmondson to conclude that "Morrison's logic seems to be grounded in the sort of essentialism that advocates that women are 'natural' bearers of culture, and therefore black women write with a sort of cultural intuitiveness that 'transcends' the adversarial (as I [Edmondson] think she would see it) phallocentric writings of black men, engaged as they are with racial politics" (ibid. 96). For Morrison, therefore, "blackness" is evidently a timeless cultural essence, an intuitive and "discursive feature" that relies on what Edmondson has called "an essential black female matrix" (ibid. 101).

The canonicity of BWR writers was constructed on this "essential black female matrix" and the urgency with which they strove to reconnect the modern African American "nation" with its pre-modern "ethnie." This matrix positioned black women writers as guardians of the African "spirit consciousness" and African "patterns of thought and the philosophical worldview" (John, *Clear Word* 158; 7), as encrypted in and expressed through the pastoral tradition. It presented contemporary society as lacking something desirable that was situated out of reach in the past, and it dramatized the tensions between tradition and modernity, country and city, the organic nature of indigenous folk tradition and grasping middle-class materialism. In short, the black female matrix adopted a politicized heritage rhetoric to counter both the history and the present reality of black disinheritance, and implied that this disinheritance could be reversed by a "sacramental repetition of folklore" (Gilroy, "Spiking the Argument" 186). It is important to emphasize that BWR heritage narratives never talked just about heritage; they dealt with the present as much as with the past. All purveyors of "mytho-poetic narratives" (Charles Johnson, *Being and Race* 103) have, as David Bradley has noted, "a hidden agenda," the aim of which is to "bend" men "with ritual": that is, to shape their sensibilities and worldview (Bradley, qtd. in John, *Clear Word* 158). Thus, BWR writers and critics were not passive recipients of inherited folk values and matrilineal traditions. On the contrary, they actively re-constructed heritage through creative writing and criticism in order to achieve preconceived social and political goals.

4.6 The "Essential Black Female Matrix" vs Goals of Black Feminism

The volkish tradition made a significant contribution towards rehabilitating denigrated black cultures of the American South and provided black people with resources to construct everyday strategies of resistance. Toni Morrison called these resources "old values of the tribe" ("Rootedness" 341) and claimed that her novels are like sermons, whose purpose is to heal, to effect change, and to "[unify] the tribe" (Braxton, "Ancestral Presence" 300). Written in black idiom and shaped by black cultural archetypes, Morrison's narratives used folk material to create a sense of a stable and immutable identity, something that black people could, indeed, "fall back on." Her evocation of folk culture tapped into a resonant archive of popular memory and the iconography of historical ordeals to provide the historical dimension necessary for national/tribal invention, a forum for the collective reliving of the past, and a rallying point for the future. Likewise, the narratives of other BWR women, such as Marshall, Naylor and Cliff, to name just a few, built bridges between the linear historical time of progress and the pastoral, cyclical time of rural nostalgia, in order to make it possible for urbanized, middle-class African Americans to face the political, social and economic challenges of racist America with greater confidence. These narratives secured for BWR writers a space in the African American literary canon and made the BWR "a vivid new fact of national life" (Hortense Spillers, qtd. in McDowell, *"The Changing Same"* xiii).

On the other hand, however, the writing of the BWR suggests that when artists and critics believe that they are not inventors of politically and culturally useful myths but "mediums" speaking to their readers directly from the "miasma of the past," folklore can become a dangerous trap. Writing that treats heritage as a revered cultural bequest can produce what Edouard Glissant called "petrified" culture (*Caribbean Discourse* 210), or what Arjun Appadurai called "metonymic freezing," where folk culture is presented as a static, rural, idealized past, against which all aspects of the present are measured. Metonymic freezing is Appadurai's synonym for essentialising representational strategies, whereby "one feature of a group – attached to the group, so to speak – may come to represent the group as its quintessence" ("Putting Hierarchy in Its Place" 36). He sees assumptions about black people's lingering "tribal" sensibility, supernatural ways of knowing, traditional constructions of black femininity and matriliny, and the universal dexterity of black people (particularly women) with language as "metonymic prisons" for a people who are endowed with certain prescribed racial characteristics (ibid.). Metonymic freezing also affects entire communities and places, such as the extended Caribbean. Speaking about Martinique, Glissant often described the poignancy of being "from a community that has been reduced to its folklore; to whom all productions except folkloric are forbidden" (*Caribbean Discourse* 151). Glissant warned against the "trap of folklore" as a special kind of escapism that offers a "neutralized, stagnant" form of pseudo-history and "contributes to a collec-

tive drift into oblivion" (ibid. 210). "Literature," he argued, should not "'function' as a simple return to oral sources of folklore" (ibid. 151).

The fetishistic view of culture as a "stock of particularisms" (Fanon, qtd. in McDowell, *"The Changing Same"* 114) and of cultural identity as a "metonymic prison" has had unpleasant consequences for black women in particular. Nationalist rhetoric traditionally presents women, on the one hand, "as the atavistic and authentic body of national tradition (inert, backward-looking and natural), embodying nationalism's conservative principle of continuity" (McClintock, *Imperial Leather* 359); and men, on the other, as agents of progress, modernization, and urbanization. BWR heritage fiction was based on the same well-rehearsed, reductionist and essentialist dichotomy, in which, as Trudier Harris among others has argued, men personify nationalism's principle of revolutionary change and women incarnate continuity and heritage. While men's writing ranked modernity and progress above nature, and consequently valued men above women, BWR writers reversed that hierarchy and gave preference to the green matriarchal world. In this way, BWR novels retained and even reinforced the masculine tradition that saw black women as traditional "pots of culture"[63] linked to nature (Stratton, *Contemporary African Culture* 39). The volkish tradition contributed to the perpetuation of the myth of "the generic black woman," to paraphrase Elizabeth Spelman's expression (*Inessential Woman* ix), be it in the form of a conjure woman, a community mother or a doting daughter. This understanding of female agency not only reiterated standard gender divisions and exclusions; within the domain of black feminist thought, it actually functioned in much the same way as the notion of "generic" man did in Western philosophy (Spelman, *Inessential Woman* ix).

Heritage studies has been said to be blind to questions of gender (Smith, "Heritage, Gender and Identity" 159), but BWR novels show the myriad ways in which gender does, in fact, inflect the discourses of heritage. In BWR volkish fiction women are associated with tradition, spirituality and domesticity, and they are made to inhabit the rural settings. Mama Day, Pilate, the Carriacou women (*Praisesong for the Widow*), Miss Mattie and the women of Eloe (*Tar Baby*) all draw their strength from the perfect rapport they have with nature and the wisdom they derive from the lore of the folk. As

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63 In her chapter "The Mother Africa Trope," Stratton argues that the trope has taken two distinct forms, one of which, I think, also rather accurately describes the Afrocentric womanist prose of the BWR in the 1980s. Stratton suggests that in the fiction of African nationalist men, women were represented either as the "pot of culture" or a "sweep of history" (39). In the first version of the trope, the African woman is identified with tradition, and with timeless values impervious to historic change. She says that this form of the Mother Africa trope "analogizes woman to a bygone culture which is usually conceptualized as immutable, rendering the female figure static, conservative, and ahistorical" (*Contemporary African Literature* 50). The woman, reduced to a nurturing mother, then becomes, in effect, "a symbol of essence" (Bryan, qtd. in Stratton 45), or, as Stratton herself has aptly put it, she is an "attractive packaging" for heritage (ibid. 52).

Yuval-Davis has pointed out, much of the explanation for women’s oppression can be found in the divergent placement of men and women with respect to the oppositions between civilization and nature and public and private domains. She notes that “[a]s nationalism and nations have usually been discussed as a part of the public political sphere, the exclusion of women from that arena has affected their exclusion from that discourse as well” (*Gender and Nation* 12-13). To a certain degree, BWR writers can be said to have remolded this stereotypical configuration that equates women as “inert, backward-looking and natural” to a “body of national tradition” (McClintock, “‘No Longer in a Future Heaven’” 92). By contrast with masculine nationalist discourse, which usually gave men forward-thrusting, potent and historic roles, BWR narratives did not generally value male protagonists (with the exception perhaps of Morrison’s Son and Milkman Dead). They refocused on representing the everyday heroism of blood-and-other mothers and the daughters of the nation, cast in the metonymic rather than metaphoric roles of national actors and leaders.

On the other hand, however, as Maxine Lavon Montgomery has argued, while BWR heritage novels such as *Mama Day* did “[reveal] women’s expanding sphere of influence,” the model of female empowerment that they offered was still limited to the domestic and folkloric spheres (“Good House Keeping” 64). Although women’s domestic work no longer had the pejorative connotations of female servitude and entrapment in menial jobs, it was instead presented as a means of creatively fashioning the community and the self. These narratives suggested that conjuring, healing, “matriarchal mythmaking” (Andrews, “Black Sisterhood” 287) and other traditional female occupations, such as nurturing, cooking and weaving, can be liberating for women if performed for their own families and rooted in black folklore. Seen from this perspective, the domestic sphere was no longer seen as “a place of bondage and subjugation” for women but a place “of rebirth and renewal” that “takes on spiritual dimensions, allowing black women to transcend imposed notions of female place” (Montgomery, “Good House Keeping” 64). Nonetheless, as Andrews has noted, none of the novels imagines black female self-fashioning and empowerment outside the kumbla of “female folk tradition and nature” (“Black Sisterhood” 287).

This approach to black female subjectivity obscured the heterogeneity of black women’s experiences and attempted to maintain gender conformity within black communities. It aimed to forge “affective affiliations” among women even where “such affiliations [were] far from automatic” (McDowell, *“The Changing Same”* 20). The ideas of female solidarity, bonding and sisterhood, which were championed by womanism and BWR heritage writing, were often used by writers and critics to educate, socialize and “police” those “sisters” who did not want to conform. In the words of bell hooks, “the black women who speak the most about love and sisterhood” were the ones who were most “deeply attached to essentialist notions of black female identity” (“Revolutionary Black Women” 221). These black feminists, according to hooks, used creative writing and literary criticism to censure all internal dissent, especially with regard to women’s roles as the core of family, culture and community:

> the struggle by black female characters for subjectivity, though forged in radical resistance to the status quo, (opposition to racist oppression, *less frequently to class and gender*) usually takes the form of black women breaking free from boundaries imposed by others only to practice their newfound "freedom" by setting limits and boundaries for themselves. Hence though black women may make themselves "subject" they do not become radical subjects. Often they simply conform to existing norms, even ones they once resisted. (ibid.)

By "conform[ing] to existing norms," hooks means that "the heroines settle down into conventional gender roles" (ibid. 222).[64] She argues that in many women's novels, the pursuit of self and identity is seen as a narcissistic act, a form of wildness that backfires on women who "go against the grain." These women undergo nervous breakdowns and need the help of elders in order to come to their senses (such as Velma in *The Salt Eaters,* Avey in *Praisesong for the Widow,* and Merle in *The Chosen Place, The Timeless People*, for example) or suffer from acute inauthenticity neurosis (as does Jadine in *Tar Baby*, Meridian, Clare in *Abeng* and *No Telephone to Heaven*).

As Yuval-Davis has noted, *Kulturnation,* ideation that is focused on the essence of national identity, "tends to have little tolerance of 'non-organic' diversity" (*Gender & Nation* 21). Even though the myth-symbol complex is "a rich resource, usually full of internal contradictions" rather than "a fixed and homogenous body of tradition and custom" (ibid. 43), it is usually the case that at any given time only one vision of cultural authenticity and one accepted interpretation of heritage prevails. Ethnic communities and nations privilege unity over difference; they seek to eliminate schism, friction and dissent, and to define and defend at all costs what would otherwise just be "open and indeterminate frontiers" (Chantal Mouffe, qtd. in Sharp, "Gendering Nationhood" 104). This intolerance for diversity explains the widespread exclusion and condemnation in writing of the BWR of female characters such as Jadine or Avey, and also writers such as Kincaid, who have partially, temporarily or completely "lost their ancient properties" (Toni Morrison, *Tar Baby* 305). LeClair has noted that Morrison seems to be the most uncompromising and harsh judge of models of black womanhood that go against the grain ("The Language Must Not Sweat" 121). In her drive towards what Chantal Mouffe called "totalizing effects" (qtd. in Sharp, "Gendering Nationhood" 104),[65] Morrison refuses black women emancipation, self-identity and fulfillment outside of the wider struggle for black liberation and nationalist ideas con-

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64 Thus, according to hooks, Ruth, in *The Third Life of Grange Copeland*, is kept in place by strong male patriarchs; Meridian "never developed a social and political success"; Celie, in *The Color Purple*, is "described within the context of family and domestic relations … The primary change is that these relations are no longer abusive"; and finally, Sula "is not self-actualized enough to stay alive" ("Revolutionary Black Women" 224; 222-3; 222).

65 As Chantal Mouffe stated, while plurality inevitably exists within nations and communities, "[t]his plurality does not involve the coexistence, one by one, of a plurality of subject positions but rather the constant subversion and overdetermination of one by the others, which makes possible the generation of 'totalizing effects' within a field characterized by open and indeterminate frontiers" (Chantal Mouffe, qtd. in Sharp, "Gendering Nationhood" 104).

cerning traditional codes of practice and belief. She rejects, in her 1980s novels, the very possibility of the existence of a plurality of subject positions for women within the "tribe." She often speaks of "her people" or "her tribe" and claims that peasant literature helps her to get in touch "with all sorts of people." The problem with this, as Lars Eckstein has aptly remarked, is that Morrison has also marginalized all sorts of people. It created a privileged *in-group* of blacks who believe in "old values" on the one hand, and an underprivileged *out-group* of those black people who adopted "new urban values" ("Re-Membering" 232-3). Other novels that made up in the 1980s the volkish tradition also represented women's desire for radical emancipation as a traitorous and despicable act.

5 *Volknation:* The Black Holocaust and the Poetics of the Slave Sublime

5.1 Neo-slave Narratives, Memory Work and Affirmation of Negative Heritage

As Richard Dyer has aptly remarked, while "[h]istory is a discipline of enquiry into the past; heritage is an attitude towards the legacy of the past" ("Nice Young Men" 44). Accordingly, where historians seek to generate knowledge and understanding about the national past, writers of historical novels are freer to interpret it in line with current political and ideological needs. But even though "heritage is not history" (Hewison, *The Heritage Industry* 10), both historians and writers are, in some measure, driven by a "heritage impulse," which, in the words of Higson,

> is thus about seizing hold of the selected aspects of the past and presenting them in a way that tallies with current sensibilities and needs – it is in Lowenthal's term, a declaration of faith in a particular way of seeing the past. Therefore, it is important to recognize that heritage is often invented or revised as it is conserved – hence the insistence on agency on the part of those who mobilize the past as heritage. (*English Heritage* 50)

I would like to suggest, in this chapter that like historians, BWR writers were social actors re-imagining the past with a view to creating in their heritage/historical narratives what Brett has called "popular" history (*The Construction of Heritage* 4), or what Ditchfield has called "applied" history ("Foreword" ix). I will argue here that some BWR historical and maternal romances aimed to reconstruct through the matrilineal line "the specific origin of the people (or their race) (*Volknation*)" (Yuval-Davis, *Gender Nation* 21), and to cull from the depths of this reinvented communal past cultural values that could form the core for "exclusionary/homogenous visions of the 'nation'" (ibid.). Historical romances of the BWR, bordering on history and oral traditions, were a particular kind of heritage practice that showed how creative writing can "transform present day reality" through the "effort to remember and reclaim the past, [and its] legacies of pain, suffering and triumph" (hooks, *Yearning* 147). Paule Marshall called this process "establishing the cultural base" and argued that for BWR writers the "task is two-fold: on one hand to make use of the rich body of folk and historical material that is there: and on the other to interpret that past in heroic terms, in recognition of the fact that our history … is one of the greatest triumphs of the human spirit in modern times" ("Shaping the World" 108, 107).

Thus, the reclamation of African American folk tradition by BWR writers in the 1980s went hand in hand with their reconstruction of the history of African American slavery that had previously been repressed by the dominant white culture and neglected by black nationalist men. Despite attempts in the 1960s and 70s to assuage

what Edouard Glissant called “the hammering nature of the past” (*Caribbean Discourse* 144) by drawing a line between the harrowing past and a more promising future, it became clear in the following decade that this black “nonhistory” (ibid. 64), to quote Glissant out of context, was nonetheless “obsessively present” in the collective consciousness of African Americans (ibid. 63). BWR fiction of the 1980s bore out Glissant’s assertion that for many black writers in the New World, it became “the duty of the writer …. to explore this obsession, to show its relevance to the immediate present” (ibid. 63-4). Thus, the exploration of the slave past became a hallmark of womanist historical writing in the 1980s. This decade saw the publication of Toni Morrison’s Pulitzer Prize-winning *Beloved* (1987), which has since become a paragon of the historically revisionist black feminist novel. Other extraordinarily diverse examples of neo-slave narratives also enjoyed immense critical and popular success, including Sherley Anne Williams’ *Dessa Rose* (1986), Octavia Butler’s *Kindred* (1979), and Jewelle Gomez’s *Gilda Stories* (1991).[66] Together these narratives constituted what Alice Walker called “the song of the people” that “holds them together” and gives them “a soul” (*Meridian* 372-3).

Admittedly, male authors also wrote novels in this genre. Alex Haley’s *Roots*, which was published serially in the *Reader’s Digest* in 1974 and as a book in 1976,[67] and Ishmael Reed’s parody, *Flight to Canada* (1976), are considered to be progenitors of the genre. Charles Johnson’s *Oxherding Tale* and *Middle Passage*, and David Bradley’s *The Chanesyville Incident* were as popular as female neo-slave narratives. The notable difference between female and male neo-slave narratives was that novels by the writers of the BWR foregrounded matrilineal descent and the black female past. In these narratives, black nonhistory was re-inscribed through images of strong and resilient female characters who mothered. In the words of Elizabeth Beaulieu,

> the reinvention of the slave narrative by black women writers in the late 20th century constitute[d] a rebirth of perhaps the proudest tradition in African American literature, a “rebirth” responsible for elevating the slave mother from “threefold” servitude… from virtual obscurity to a heroic status uniquely her own. (*Black Women Writers* 15)

These black feminist narratives repositioned slave women as heroes who “passed on to their nominally free female descendants a legacy of hard work, perseverance and self-reliance, a legacy of tenacity, resistance and insistence on sexual equality” (Angela Davies, *Women, Race and Class* 29).

66 I use Ashraf H. A. Rushdy’s term “neo-slave narrative” for this subgenre of historical fiction that he defines as including “contemporary novels that assume the form, adopt the conventions, and take on the first-person voice of the antebellum slave narrative” (*Neo-slave Narratives* 1).

67 The novel sold more than 1 million copies in 1977 alone, and the TV series was watched by approximately 130 million viewers (Beaulieu, *Black Women Writers* 144)

Margaret Walker's *Jubilee* (1966), the first neo-slave narrative and also the text which many critics regard as marking the beginning of the BWR, is credited with creating the paradigm in which the maternal voice is represented as the source of historical memory. *Jubilee* was the first novel to "[imagine] … an enslaved female as a speaking subject" (Beaulieu, *Black Women Writers* 139) and to treat slavery in an epic form in an effort to build on the maternal sources of black oral culture. It tells the true story of Walker's great-grandmother, which was passed on to her by her grandmother; a story that Walker had struggled to write for most of her life, as she herself admitted in *How I Wrote "Jubilee."* This essay details Walker's efforts to authenticate her grandmother's oral story with extensive historical research. The novel itself, however, gives precedence to the oral tale. As the threads of memory are interwoven with historical facts, it becomes clear that in this narrative orality is linked to women's histories and perspectives, and that these oppose the historical status quo by providing a decolonized and distinctively feminine version of the past. In other words, *Jubilee*'s orality established historicism through a non-institutional and quintessentially female voice.

Jubilee is a good example of a novel that re-mythicized the figure of the black slave mother and reasserted the value of matriliny. It provided a gateway to the black female history that was lost under slavery, featuring a cruel mistress, daily abuses, the breaking up of families, slave auctions, public beatings and hangings, the brutality of overseers, and the continually deferred dreams of freedom. First and foremost, however, *Jubilee* tells the story of a quintessential national mother, Vyry, a black female survivor of slavery, an exemplary Christian and a skillful midwife, who uses her faith and wisdom to bring reconciliation to divided black and white communities. *Jubilee*, which was written during the Civil Rights period, presents a politically correct black female subject, who is affirmative and optimistic, and whose pregnancy, at the end of the novel, was an expression of faith in the value of family and the future. The novel juxtaposes a son of the nation, Rendal, who is an avowed black nationalist clinging to his hatred of all things white, with the wise and compassionate Vyry, who argues for the need to forgive and integrate. The juxtaposition of these two characters reflected the debate between the divergent agendas of the Civil Rights and Black Power Movements at that time, but it also categorically positioned women as national foremothers and leaders. Vyry "passes on the baton of justice" to her daughter Minna, who, readers are given to understand, is to inherit the maternal legacy. That is why, according of Spillers, Vyry's story "is a story of the foremothers, a celebration of their stunning faith and intractable powers of endurance … it is an interrogation into the African American character in its poignant national destiny and through its female line of descent" ("A Hateful Passion" 305). Such effusive statements are well-justified, as Walker portrays Vyry as a larger-than-life, saintly and heroic ancestress:

> She was touched with almost spiritual fire and permeated with spiritual wholeness that had been forged in the crucible of suffering. She is …. a living sign and mark of all the best that any human could hope to become. In her obvious capacity for … redemptive and forgiving love, she

> was alive and standing on the highest peaks of her time and human personality. Peasant and slave, unlettered and untutored, she was nevertheless the best true example of the motherhood of her race, an ever-present assurance that nothing could destroy a people whose sons had come from her loins. (*Jubilee* 407)

All BWR historical and maternal romances, including both those embedded in folk traditions (*Beloved*, *Dessa Rose*) and those making good use of popular fiction genres (*The Gilda Stories*, *Kindred*), used the concept of matriliny to reverse the black nationalist aversion towards dealing with the slave past, and in this way, they redressed the imbalance in BN thinking about the best strategy for building national unity, or "tribal" unity, as Morrison might have put it. If, as Tom Nairn has observed, the nation is "the modern Janus" ("The Modern Janus" 71) gazing at the same time back into mythical time and forwards into the infinite future, black cultural nationalism of the 1960s and 70s was unique in its preference for the future. BWR fiction, by contrast, emphasized the continuity of black experience since slavery and rejected the utopian BN dream that the traumatic past could or should be put behind them. Black women writers such as Toni Morrison, Toni Cade Bambara and Michelle Cliff, for example, saw themselves as cultural scribes, whose mission was to overcome the affliction of disconnectedness by creating a new sense of historicity.

Morrison has claimed that a sense of disconnectedness that either "erases the past" or "romanticizes" it is a feature of American society in general, saying about slavery that "[t]his culture doesn't encourage dwelling on, let alone coming to terms with the truth about the past" (Gilroy, "Living Memory" 179). By contrast, Morrison saw her fiction as a way "to re-inhabit those people [slaves]" (ibid.), and by doing so, to restore the erased past. Likewise, Bambara admonished American society for seeing forgetfulness and amnesia as a "virtue" (Chandler, "Voices beyond the Veil" 351). Her mission as a writer was to "teach about the necessity of being connected, and about the necessity of resurrecting the truth about our experiences … in this place called America" (ibid.). Chandler states that Bambara "believes in 'tomorrow' only as it is connected with what has been done yesterday and what must be done today (ibid. 343), and "[s]he insists that Black people are living in critical times, times which demand that [they] see and acknowledge connections to the past and develop a comprehensive program for dealing with today, for laying claim to power, and determining world reality" (ibid.). Similarly, Cliff's work addresses the amnesia that plagued postcolonial Jamaican society. Her writing is an attempt to reconnect Jamaicans to their denigrated or lost African lore and traditions. Consequently, BWR historical romances "figure[d] political change not as a sudden, linear rupture, but as a development that preserves the transformative possibilities of past history" (Dubey, *Black Women Novelists* 160). Female neo-slave narratives "foregrounded … the continuity of contemporary black Americans with 'the salves who were ourselves'" (ibid. 161). They also rallied the imagined community around political goals and set out to provide black people with a "myth of common origin or shared blood/genes" (Yuval-Davis, *Gender and Nation* 21).

The penchant of writers of the BWR for exploring the slave past was part of a new postcolonial trend to focus on this so-called "difficult heritage" (Logan and Reeves *Places of Pain and Shame*; Macdonald *Difficult Heritage*), "dissonant heritage" (Tunbridge and Ashworth, "Dissonant Heritage"), "heritage that hurts" (Uzzell and Ballantyne "Heritage that Hurts"; Sather-Wagstaff *Heritage that Hurts*), and "negative heritage" (Meskell, "Negative Heritage"). All these terms refer to various circumstances that produce cultures of "disinheritance" (Sandoff, "Black Matrilineage" 14), such as colonialism, slavery, genocide and racism. BWR neo-slave narratives can clearly be regarded as novels of this kind of negative heritage, or disinheritance, which set forth "popular," alternative and feminist histories in which History, described by Trouillot as "the power-laden creation of 'official' representations of the past" (*Silencing the Past* 195), is replaced by the subjugated collective memories of women. Drawing on Nora's discussion of the conflict-laden opposition between history and memory (Nora, "Between Memory and History" 9), Paul Gilroy has pointed out that in counter-narratives of disinheritance, "memory work" becomes the base from which dominant racialized and gendered cultural politics is disrupted, complicated and contested (*The Black Atlantic* 55 198). Memory work, which is "shared collectively in some manner with others through lived social contexts, be it with friends, family, local community or nation" (Waterton and Watson, *The Palgrave Handbook* 192), had a particularly important role to play in bringing to light the dark side of African American heritage. It was geared towards the undoing of the official history that was fixing and whitewashing the past, and towards the construction of "popular" and "parallel" versions of the past that were open to subversive readings from the ethnic and feminist fringes (Lowenthal, *The Heritage Crusade* 206).

5.2 Trauma Studies, the Black Holocaust and Narratives of Redemption

As already stated above, all of the BWR neo-slave narratives, except for Margaret Walker's *Jubilee*, were published around the 1980s, and it is interesting that their form, characterization and critical reception seemed to reflect shifting attitudes towards the idea of negative heritage, and its depiction and commemoration. That being the case, Toni Morrison's 1987 novel, *Beloved*, was written and published at a time when critical discourse about trauma was ubiquitous, and had started to exert undue influence over memory work and discourses on negative heritage. Works such as Nora's "Between Memory and History: Les Lieux de Mémoire" (1989), Ian Hacking's *Rewriting the Soul: Multiple Personality and the Science of Memory* (1995), Cathy Caruth's *Unclaimed Experience*: *Trauma, Narrative and History* (1996), Ruth Leys's *Trauma: A Genealogy* (2000), Dominick LaCapra's *Writing History, Writing Trauma* (2001), and Ron Eyerman's *Cultural Trauma: Slavery and the Formation of African American Identity* (2001) framed the "domain of memory" through their "deliberate focus on histo-

rical trauma" (Scott, "The Archaeologies of Black Memory" 4). Trauma criticism was grounded in psychology, particularly theories of post-traumatic stress disorder, and treated literature and art as testimony that could bring about the therapeutic effect of curing harm caused by historic suffering. As a result of this new interpretative framework, novels about negative heritage, such as *Beloved*, were increasingly written not only as narratives of recuperation but also as narratives of redemption. Thus, whereas *Jubilee* can be considered a novel of recuperation whose aim was to commemorate the forgotten "mothers of the race," *Beloved* was a different sort of a neo-slave narrative that attempted to offer an insight into the traumatized psyche of the ex-slave mother. According to Broeck, the novel "encircle[s] again and again the site" of the trauma (Žižek, qtd. in Broeck 240) in order to illuminate, in the words of Morrison herself, "the power of history, the necessity of historical memory, the desire to forget the terrors of slavery and impossibility of forgetting" (Morrison, qtd. in Gilroy "Living Memory" 179).

Beloved has most frequently been discussed through the paradigm of witnessing and remembrance, recovery and redemption. The novel is a retelling of the true story of a slave woman, Margaret Garner, who after an escape attempt killed her infant daughter to "protect" her from enslavement. It is considered a paragon of narrative testimony in which "everything that ought to have remained ... secret and hidden ... has come to light" (Heinze, *The Dilemma of Double Consciousness* 175). The secret in *Beloved* is the memory of what slavery was like, which Sethe is unsuccessfully trying to keep at bay. "Re-memories" – recurring images and memories she thought she had forgotten – float around Sethe's mind, providing unwelcome and vivid glimpses that make her almost physically revisit the past. Eventually, Sethe is literally almost consumed be a "re-memory" that comes in the form of the ghost of Beloved, the daughter she had killed. At the affirmative end of the novel, however, Beloved is exorcised with the help of the local community and Sethe's partner, Paul D. This optimistic ending, in which the evil apparition from the past is ejected, and the heroine can go on with her life again, led many critics to believe that the novel denotes "both an act of working through and moving beyond a traumatic relation to loss, and at the same time, an ethical intervention consistent with the therapeutic ethic" (Spargo, "Trauma" 116). Emilia Ippolito saw in *Beloved* a story of oppression that became a story of liberation. John Rohrkemper treated it as a "contemplation of the past ...[that] is a form of therapy" ("The Site of Memory" 55), while Emma Parker credited it with creating "a new perspective and new possibilities for the future," and for Jan Campbell, the novel illustrated the "passage from trauma to spiritual healing" ("Images of the Real" 137). Finally, Cynthia Hamilton thought that "[t]he basic problem of the novel concerns the need to transform the facts of unspeakable horror into a life-giving story, for the individual, for the black community, and for the nation" ("Revisions, Rememories and Exorcisms" 429). This is a point that I particularly want to elaborate on in the rest of this chapter.

There were very few critics who did not subscribe to an interpretative framework that saw in *Beloved* a recipe for the collective confrontation with and expiation for the national trauma of slavery. One of them was Sabine Broeck, who argued that in such readings the "rhetoric of trauma verges on, and sometimes crosses over into kitsch" ("Trauma, Agency, Kitsch" 241). She maintained that "*Beloved* enabled readerly [black but also white] containment of trauma as a sublime constitutive experience which may be absorbed rather than aggressively rejected" (ibid. 248). Stanley Crouch, a jazz musician, novelist and literary critic, was even less generous in his tough-minded appraisal of the confluence of trauma theories and art. In his scathing review essay of *Beloved*, titled "Aunt Medea," he situated what Broeck called "kitsch optimism" (ibid. 252) not within the field of critical response but in the novel itself, which, as Morgenstern has observed, "provides plenty of support for such [therapeutic and celebratory] readings" ("Mother's Milk and Sisters' Blood" 123).

Crouch, who used to be a supporter of black nationalism, re-emerged in the 1980s as a vocal critic of racialism, who took issue with what he saw as a recent trend in African American culture to hide mediocrity behind a mask of racial posturing. Crouch considered all literature that was grounded in the experience of slavery and trauma rhetoric to be counter-productive to the achievements of Black America. He argued in "Aunt Medea" that the persistent eulogizing of slavery resulted only in the perpetuation of African despair. According to him, BWR neo-slave narratives were a passing and phony literary fashion that found its most conspicuous expression in the discourse of womanism and helped to elevate the status of such writers as Morrison and Alice Walker. He argued that Morrison "gained more from the changes in literary fashion than anybody else" ("Aunt Medea" 204), with *Beloved* capitalizing on stereotypical depictions of victim mentality projected onto Black society.

Crouch's vehement and embittered criticism pointed to another corollary of converting negative history, filled with destruction, cruelty, and the negation of humanity, into a sacrosanct, even uplifting, memory that cemented African Americans as a people. Through its associations with memory studies and links with the academic discussion of the Holocaust (the trauma studies), *Beloved* and its multiple "therapeutic" readings seemed to appropriate (or misappropriate, as Crouch would say) a paradigm of victimization and survival that endowed slavery with "a special redemptive power produced through suffering" (Gilroy, *The Black Atlantic* 216). This dimension of the novel was brought to the foreground by Morrison's controversial dedication of the novel to the "Sixty Million and More" slaves who perished during the Middle Passage. The dedication not only conceptually related the genocide of enslaved Africans to that of the Jewish Holocaust; in Crouch's opinion, it indicated a kind of unsavory competition between the levels of racial terror that these two ethnic groups suffered. In his view, it signaled Morrison's resentment about America's fixation with commemorating the Jewish Holocaust and its concomitant neglect of the historical suffering of black Americans. Crouch accused Morrison, the most articulate spokesperson for the imperative to return to the history of slavery, of overstating African genocide at the

expense of the Jewish Holocaust. He famously observed that “*Beloved*, above all else, is a blackface Holocaust novel” that “seems to have been written in order to enter American slavery into the big-time martyr rating contest, a contest usually won by references to, and works about, the experiences of Jews at the hands of the Nazis” (“Aunt Medea” 205).

At the time when *Beloved* was published in 1987, comparisons between transatlantic slavery and the Holocaust were, indeed, commonplace (Sundquist, *Strangers in the Land* 449). These had had quite a long history, starting with Baldwin’s 1967 objection against the perceived “dominance” of the Holocaust in public memory in America, even though it was not a direct part of the nation’s history:

> [t]he Jew’s suffering is recognised as part of the moral history of the world and the Jew is recognised as a contributor to the world’s history: this is not true for blacks. Jewish history, whether or not one can say it is honoured, is certainly known: the black history has been blasted, maligned, and despised. (qtd. in Gilroy, *The Black Atlantic* 216)

In that context, the implications of *Beloved*’s “Sixty Million and More” dedication, which reflected the trend to discuss transatlantic slavery with reference to the Nazi era, were hard to ignore. Sundquist noted that as the term “holocaust” was becoming gradually less referential and more conceptual, “it began to exercise an eerie, enthralling power in which a people’s identity might be codified only in their destruction, nowhere more insistently than in African American culture” (*Strangers in the Land* 436). To make matters worse, the dedication seemed to suggest that the scale of the African genocide was equivalent (if not bigger) to that perpetrated against the Jews during the Holocaust. Thus, Morrison’s indirect allusion to the “Black Holocaust” deliberately fueled the “memory wars” that characterized what Newton described as “*blackjewishrelations*” in the latter part of the 20th century (*Facing Black and Jew*). In these wars, historical suffering was glorified and mystified and the collective self-esteem of African Americans and Jews was increasingly defined by claims to martyrdom and accusations of anti-Semitism and racism. Eventually, the phrase “black holocaust” came to symbolize an ignominious competition that degenerated, more often than not, into outright anti-Semitism.

5.3 “Blackjewishrelations” and the Politics of the Slave Sublime

Nevertheless, I would like to suggest that there is much to be gained by bringing together the discussion of Jewish and African American historic ordeals. There have already been several successful attempts to bring these histories into dialogue with each other. For example, Adam Zachary Newton used Levinas’s concept of “facing” to compare life experience in the Jewish and black diasporas. His *Facing Black and Jew: Literature as a Public Space in Twentieth Century America* (1999) is a study of classic African American and Jewish American writers, in which “facing” is the criti-

cal practice of reading literary texts comparatively. In such analyses, "correspondences are noted, but no single notion of identity or experience is allowed to subsume, displace, impersonate or eradicate the difference and integrity of the other" (Zierler, "My Holocaust" 48). In 2009, in *Multidirectional Memory: Remembering the Holocaust in the Age of Decolonization*, Michael Rothberg argued that the relationship between Holocaust studies and postcolonial/ethnic studies can actually be symbiotic. The idea of the Holocaust, Rothberg contended, has enabled the articulation of other histories of victimization, but memory of the Holocaust would itself not have erupted with such a force if it had not been galvanized by the process of decolonization and civil rights movements across the world. According to these thinkers, comparative interpretation of the Holocaust and other human-perpetrated horrors generates insights into what Paul Gilroy has called the "racial century" (*Against Race* 11). Likewise, Gilroy, who was among many defenders of Morrison's novel (*The Black Atlantic* 218-222), drew on Zygmunt Bauman's scholarship to argue that slavery, as much as the Holocaust, needs to be placed at the heart of modernity. Like Bauman, he traced the roots of Europe's murderous inclinations in the "racial century" to pseudo-scientific theories of race and eugenics. In an attempt to turn away from unproductive discussions about the "uniqueness" of the Holocaust, he proposed to see colonialism, slavery and the Holocaust all as outcomes of the modern fixation on the ideas of progress and racial purity.[68]

Gilroy made a convincing case for slavery being at the heart of modernity. But he also argued in favor of a memorial culture in which discussion of the Holocaust supplies a certain paradigm for remembering, which some critics, like Stanley Crouch, found highly problematic. In his influential text, *The Black Atlantic: Modernity and Double Consciousness* (1993), Gilroy devoted a chapter to the commemoration of slavery, in which he proposes to see the "slave sublime" as a form of remembrance in which the suffering of African slaves, like the suffering of the Jews, is endowed with deep mystical significance. The slave sublime is a practice of remembering in which the horrors of the Middle Passage and slavery are treated with an awe-filled quasi-religious reverence, as experiences which cannot be adequately expressed through language. This discourse of sublimity, which was established within Holocaust studies, assumes that the horrors of slavery should be remembered as a sacred – in the sense of incomprehensible and unrepresentable – experience. LaCapra calls this phenomenon "displaced sacralisation," in which "the excess of trauma becomes an uncanny source of elation" and an "occasion for sublimity" (*Writing History* 23). In the discourses of this "negative sublimity" (ibid.), religious formulations replace the language of reason to underline the impossibility of comprehending or representing the terror.

68 Gilroy suggested that ethnocidal terror goes hand in hand with the evolution of modern Europe. Far from being an aberration, events such as slavery and the Holocaust are integral to modernity's narrative of "progress" (Bauman, *Modernity and the Holocaust*, 1989)

In fact, Morrison has done a great deal, as both a novelist and critic, to introduce the notion of slavery as an ungraspable terror and an "unspeakable thing" (Morrison, *Beloved* 1987; "Unspeakable Things Unspoken" 1989; *Playing in the Dark: Whiteness and the Literary Imagination* 1992; "The Site of Memory" 1995). As Broeck has argued, *Beloved* shows the link between the historical trauma of slavery and "an impossibility of representation" ("Trauma, Agency, Kitsch" 252). Thus, the "slave sublime" aesthetic is conspicuous in *Beloved*'s representation of slavery as a "re-memory" beyond articulation that should never be forgotten. Not surprisingly, *Beloved*, which represents the suffering of slaves as an "unspeakable thing unspoken" and an ungraspable horror, was frequently placed alongside works such as Lanzmann's *Shoah*, which also emphasized a crisis of representation around the Holocaust. Rushdy has noted that "*Beloved* and *Shoah* examine [...] an event that makes the present incomprehensible because it is an event that constitutes a break, a fissure, a tear in the fabric of society" (*Neo-Slave Narratives* 4).[69]

Further analogies can be drawn between black and Jewish practices of memorialization if one places them in the context of theories of (ethno-)nationalism. As Renan has pointed out, where "national memories are concerned, griefs are more important than triumphs, for they impose duties and require a common effort" ("What is a Nation" 19). This is a particularly apt observation in relation to what Gilroy has called the Jewish and black counter-cultures of Modernity, which sublimate and sanctify historic trauma. Such communities, as LaCapra (*Writing History*, *Writing Trauma*) and Mowitt in ("Trauma Envy") have pointed out, are not only dedicated to the memory of past atrocities but also have a distinctive semi-religious collective/national identity. That identity, as Amato has observed (*Victims and Values* xxii), is grounded in the great moral capital that stems from claims to victimhood and a pious approach to remembrance.

Seen from this perspective, therefore, I think there is more to Morrison's and Gilroy's attempts to transform slaves into secular martyrs, and slavery into transcendental memory than Crouch's allegations of sentimentality and mimicry imply. In *Beloved*, as well as other neo-slave narratives, such as Alex Haley's *Roots: The Saga of an American Family* and Ernest Gaines' *The Autobiography of Miss Jean Pittman*, the use of "paradigmatic" victimization and survival created a memorial culture whose objectives were similar to those of Jewish writers'. That memorial culture defined African Americans through their relationship to the ineffable memory of slavery, and bound them to the duty of constantly remembering a past that is beyond both the limits of memory and the bounds of language and understanding. *Beloved*, according to Sundquist, is a supreme example of a novel that makes "a

69 Zierler has also persuasively argued that the way in which Morrison approaches the memory of slavery displays a deployment of the discourse of historical trauma ("'My Holocaust Is Not Your Holocaust'").

past discoverable only through an ineffable language of enduring, unspeakable pain, transformed through the act of 're-memorying' into the *essence of racial identity*" (*Strangers in the Land* 461; emphasis mine). It consciously creates an exclusive kind of "race membership" that is built through the ritualistic "encircling" of a shared "cultural trauma" (Angelou, qtd. in Eyerman, *Cultural Trauma* 5), and an awe-filled reverence for the unspeakable horrors of the slave past. In this way, to quote Sundquist, the novel sets forth the assumption that "black life, and therefore black memory, is characterized … by a heritage of psychic and cultural destruction" (*Strangers in the Land* 462); that is to say, by the founding traumas of the Middle Passage and slavery.

As argued in the previous chapter, Morrison often speaks of "her people" as "her tribe" (LeClair, "The Language Must Not Sweat" 121). For that reason, I would like to propose that her mystical representation of slavery in *Beloved* constitutes a sort of a "rite of the tribe," and that traumatic entry into the past through the aesthetic of the slave sublime served to shape contemporary collective consciousness. I have borrowed the phrase "rites of the tribe" from Jack Kugelmass, who employed it in 1992, in "The Rites of the Tribe: American Jewish Tourism in Poland," to describe Jewish American rituals of remembrance of their negative heritage in the Nazi concentration camps in Poland. This ritual, Kugelmass argues, has become commonplace for Jewish Americans who visit concentration camps on package tours whose programs stress Jewish suffering, annihilation and redemption. According to Kugelmass, these visits constitute a kind of secular pilgrimage, the aim of which is to confirm the ethnic identity of Americanized Jews. Kugelmass suggests that, as knowledge about the precise genealogical links of American Jews to Poland has gradually faded, memory work that relates to the Jewish martyrdom in World War II has become increasingly important in reorienting Jewish American identification ("The Rites of the Tribe" 401). According to Kugelmass:

> [b]y evoking the Holocaust dramaturgically, that is, by going to the site of the event and reconstituting the reality of the time and place, American Jews are not only invoking the spirits of the tribe and laying claim to their martyrdom, but they are also making the past time present. ("The Rites of the Tribe" 411)

Beloved embodies a different, more symbolic sort of commemoration. Admittedly, it is a very sophisticated novel that points to the complex relationship between memory and the present and should not be reduced to a ritualistic rite of passage. However, the novel was also, inevitably, a part of the cultural and political landscape of the 1980s and reflects the theoretical limitations of that epoch. As Sundquist has argued, the message that *Beloved* conveys does not differ much from other discourses on the Black Holocaust. He compares *Beloved* to the documentary book, *The Black Holocaust for Beginners*, by the black educator S. E. Anderson, and concludes that the two books differ only "in genre and artistic accomplishment" (*Strangers in the Land* 460). He

argues that both Anderson’s and Morrison’s narratives assume that “black life, and therefore black memory, is characterized not peripherally but centrally by a heritage of psychic and cultural destruction” (ibid. 462). Both are products of the memory boom and the resurgence of interest in negative heritage, as well as the Afrocentric drive “to remember the tragedy of the past, to teach diaspora Africans that Africa is their home and that they are part of the African family” (Aina, *Through the Door of No Return*). They are testimonies, based on a consensus about slavery, that assert a national identity and a sense of common destiny.

Although Afrocentrism tended to ignore slavery focusing instead on “princesses, pyramids and pageantry” (Patterson, qtd. in Eyerman, *Cultural Trauma* 14), it nonetheless embraced the “black holocaust” school of thought. Like American Jews, in the 1980s, many African Americans embarked on “pilgrimages” to the “slave dungeons” of the Cape Coast to “memorialize their Holocaust and reorient themselves through personal identification with Africa” (Imahküs Okofu, tour operator, qtd. in Aina, *Through the Door of No Return*).[70] Thus, African Americans participated in similar rituals of remembrance to the one described by Kugelmass, and symbolically enacted by texts like *Beloved*. One might argue that like Shoah literature, *Beloved* emerged from an intellectual current which saw the Middle Passage as a moment of national genesis, a traumatic origin and a “founding crime” that created the African American “nation” and united it in a continual rite of commemoration through the language of trauma and the sublime.

In her interview with Paul Gilroy, bell hooks highlighted another disturbing aspect of the slave sublime aesthetic. hooks not only noticed that slavery “[began] to have a kind of mythic quality” (Gilroy, “A Dialogue with bell hooks” 215); she also pointed out that mythifying slavery led to the aestheticization and commodification of suffering. In other words, neo-slave narratives served the same purpose as what Adorno called the “Shoah business”; namely, the consumption of terror (Adorno, *Prisms* 17-34). In hooks’s critique, the discourse of the slave sublime was an example of how atrocity could be beautified and turned into a commodity consumed for aesthetic pleasure.[71] Speaking about *Beloved*, hooks went so far as to actually accuse the novel of embellishing slavery: “Think about the scar on Sethe’s body,” she argued, “that has become like a tattoo almost, this fascinating representation. It is invoked almost as though it’s a painting. That’s very different from looking both at the economics of slavery and also the impact of slavery on contemporary black experience” (Gilroy, “A

70 See also E. M. Bruner, “Tourism in Ghana”; and Anne Reed, “Diaspora Tourism: The Heritage of Slavery in Ghana.”

71 It is important to note that Gilroy did not approve of embellishing slavery. He made his opinion on this point clear when he criticized James Baldwin’s famous statement that: “This past, the Negro’s past, of rope, fire, torture, castration, infanticide, rape … contains, for all its horror, something very beautiful” (*The Fire Next Time* 84).

Dialogue with bell hooks" 215).[72] In this way, hooks took issue with Gilroy's praise for neo-slave narratives and disputed his assertion that the new interest in slavery, what he termed "the rapport with death," had the double function of "confer[ing] insight and creat[ing] pleasure" (Gilroy, *Against Race* 128-9). In hooks's contrary opinion, in neo-slave narratives facts about slavery are severed from their material reality – the indignity of slavery – and sublimated into highly "digestible" stories. Consequently, their aim is, first and foremost, to "confer pleasure," and then, in the second place, if at all, to "create insight" (ibid.). For hooks, understanding slavery as transcendent horror, as symbolised by the aestheticised trope of the suffering black body, was not the best way "of getting inside that history" (Gilroy, "A Dialogue with bell hooks" 215), but certainly the easiest. Although there are "documents [about slavery] available to us in cheap paperback," argued hooks, "[i]t's easier to read the narrative of slavery that's in *Beloved* than it is to actually read slave narratives" (Gilroy, ibid.). Rather than being confronted in neo-slave narratives, therefore, slavery is woven into a mythic tale of origin and loss, a melancholic tale of displacement, victimhood and triumph against all odds, which ultimately blurs, rather than explains, the legacy of the slave era.

hooks's criticism gets to the heart of the matter by exposing the naivety of Gilroy's belief that "the rapport with death" in the slave sublime "precipitat[ed] anxiety about *the coherence of the nation* and *the stability of its imaginary ethnic core*" (*Against Race*, 128-9; emphasis mine). hooks argued that fetishizing slavery as an object of aesthetic exploration, and extolling it as a "redemptive model of resistance" (hooks in Gilroy, "A Dialogue with bell hooks" 225) had precisely the opposite effect. This approach adopted what hooks called the "ideology of victimization" (ibid. 224), in order to create and legitimize an imagined community of African Americans outside the dominant and oppressive social order. By this means, slavery was increasingly politicised to the point where it became a means of asserting an alternative ethno-national identity. It was utilized as "the founding trauma" that, like the Holocaust, "paradoxically [became] the basis for collective or personal identity" (*Writing History* 80). Through "impossible, endless, quasi-transcendental grieving" (ibid. 69), neo-slave narratives like *Beloved* validated contemporary African American trends of thought, such as belief in the tribal "harmony" of Africa and a communal unity that was supposedly destroyed by slavery. They also urged African Americans to rebuild what was lost.

Gilroy's discussion of the slave sublime, which assumed that memory can have an uplifting and redeeming potential and historic trauma can lead to transcendence, failed to consider the susceptibility of memory to ideological manipulation; the fact that memory, like history, is a performed social construct (Wertsch, *Voices*

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72 The same sort of criticism could be made of *Jubilee*, whose protagonist Vyry, at the novel's climax, bares her whip-scarred back that is described as "the domestic stigmata of a heroic mother" (Rody, *The Daughter's Return* 54).

of Collective Remembering). As Ricoeur has argued, all remembering is political and memory is steered by various, often competing, ideologies. Remembering is a space where the personal and collective converge as people search for coherent identities that are expressed through their national/ethnic heritage. It is in this space, Ricoeur suggests, that the abuses of memory take place, as imagined communities (nation states or different social groups within them) mobilize collective memories to tackle the challenges they face. He claimed that "the remembrance of those events belonging to a common history that are held to be remarkable, even founding, with rest to the common identity" is, therefore, always "instructed" or "trained" (*Memory* 85). In "Heritage and Geography," Nuala C. Johnson has observed that memory work is subjected to "forced memorization"[73] through national mythologies and literatures and "through spectacle and parade, through art and craft, through museum and monument" (163). She adds that all of these gestures towards celebrating negative heritage "attempt to maintain … [national] identity by highlighting the historical trajectory of the cultural group" (ibid. 164).

Charles Johnson, who was the author of *Middle Passage* and *Oxherding Tale* (two neo-slave narratives that Stanley Crouch liked), suggested that the claims to martyrdom that are apparent in discourse on the Black Holocaust should be seen as "one of the legacies of cultural nationalism (or the Black Aesthetics) … [which upheld] that all blacks have a shared history of oppression" (*Being and Race* 74). According to Johnson, the purpose of the "racial melodrama" enacted in novels about the slave past was "to bring blacks together for political action," but he thought that that strategy "presented a few problems" for the fiction itself (ibid.). He described one of these problems as the "deadly sameness" of slave narratives, many of which "often seem to be the same story recycled or sliced into from many different angles" (ibid.). Since Johnson's history of black literature since the 1970s was published in 1988, only a year after *Beloved* appeared, his criticism was levelled at other novels, primarily Alex Haley's *Roots* and Ernest Gaines', *The Autobiography of Miss Jean Pittman,* both of which were also criticized by Stanley Crouch.[74] For Johnson as for Crouch, these classic neo-slave narratives were filled with stereotypical, almost archetypal, figures, which were compromised by "a single limited approach to art and life" and "dominated by strict social formulas and calcified ways of seeing" (*Being and Race* 121). As a consequence, he thought that they represented "a generic, blanket vision of the past," the corollary of which was that "a certain interpretative sameness is unavoidable" (ibid. 74). This

73 An example of this can be found in Cliff's *No Telephone to Heaven*, where colonial school children in Jamaica are made to learn obedience to the "benign" mother country by memorizing and reciting canonical English texts.

74 See also criticism by: Russell L. Adams, whose "An Analysis of the Roots Phenomenon in the Context of American Conservatism" accuses the novel of romanticizing the past; and David Gerber, whose "Haley's *Roots* and Our Own: An Inquiry into the Nature of a Popular Phenomenon" exposes inaccuracies in the narrative).

interpretative sameness, as I have pointed out, was also clearly visible in the critical reception of Morrison's novel, which was doggedly and justifiably read through the lens of trauma theories.

5.4 Alternatives to the Slave Sublime

In the closing part of this chapter, I would like to emphasize the fact that not all slave narratives written by black women were elegiac and subject to "obsessions with origin and myth" (Gilroy, "Spiking the Argument" 188). Some slave narratives managed to rise beyond "a single limited approach to art and life." Sherley Anne Williams's *Dessa Rose*, Octavia Butler's *Kindred* and Jewelle Gomez's *The Gilda Stories* are all examples of neo-slave narrative that are antithetical to the mode of remembrance that was borrowed from trauma studies. They do not portray the suffering of African American slaves as a point of entry into the sublime. Instead, they focus on the system of slavery and its effects on both black and white characters, thereby forcing the reader to rethink common assumptions about the era. The main assumption that is challenged in these novels is the black/white dichotomy that juxtaposed saint-like and martyred slaves with diabolical and depraved slave masters. In other words, while the sanctified remembrance of the slave sublime presupposes an absolute divide between the master and the slave – the evil perpetrator and the blameless victim – *Dessa Rose*, *Kindred* and *The Gilda Stories* dismantle this formulaic rhetoric. The sort of remembrance that these novels offer does not corroborate the schematic "black and white" view of the past and contemporary racial politics. Instead, the novels bridge this simplistic divide, allowing for greater ambiguity in the rendering of the workings of the "peculiar institution." Williams, Butler and Gomez steer clear of what might be called "Black Holocaust piety," which does nothing either to advance understanding of the historical atrocity or to explore in greater depth the inherent intricacies and contradictions of the system.

It has been suggested that neo-slave narratives were written to give psychological depth to the inner life of slaves. One consequence of this is that white characters in these novels are often treated as one-dimensional evil antagonists. By contrast, *Dessa Rose*, *Kindred* and *The Gilda Stories* focus upon both black and white experience. Instead of presenting the reader with an aestheticized vision of black suffering amidst the routine cruelty of the white society, the novels give equal attention to black and white protagonists. *Beloved*, which introduces the "good" white indentured servant, herself a victim of the system, can be viewed as Morrison's attempt to overcome the white/black, perpetrator/victim binary in order to create a more complex and nuanced depiction of slavery. However, despite this one brief episode, which proves that Morrison tried to work through the rigid rhetoric of the slave sublime, her narrative maintains a gulf between the white and black characters, which is exemplified by Sethe and the evil Schoolteacher. I would argue that the other three novels under

discussion here not only give equal weight to their portrayals of master and slave, but also more successfully challenge prevailing stereotypes underlining the black/white binary by contextualising and explaining all the characters.

In his essay, "The Structuring of Emotion in Black American Fiction," Raymond Hedin argues that in many contemporary neo-slave narratives, black authors unsuccessfully grapple with their anger at atrocities committed in the era of slavery:

> the narrative dilemma posed by anger became worse for black fiction writers than it was for slave narrators. For the inclination to express anger and to see it as an essential element in black humanity has increased, while the felt need to mute its expression and to provide counter-balancing signs of rationality and control has diminished. (qtd. in Beaulieu, *Black Women Writers* 51)

While *Beloved* can be seen as the expression of an anger that is impossible to contain, *Dessa Rose* features a black character who overcomes that negativity and rediscovers "her human side" (Hedin qtd. in Beaulieu ibid.). Beaulieu points out the pun in Dessa Rose's name; she is "Dessa" who "rose." In this way, as Deborah McDowell suggested in "Negotiating between Tenses: Witnessing Slavery after Freedom," the novel "posit[s] a female-gendered subjectivity, more complex in dimension, that dramatizes not what was done to slave women, but what they did with what was done to them," an approach that Crouch and other critics of *Beloved* would surely endorse (McDowell and Rampersad, *Slavery and the Literary Imagination* 146). Like *Beloved*, therefore, *Dessa Rose* is the story of an enslaved mother who rebels; but unlike *Beloved*, Williams's novel does not chart a healing journey from the trauma of slavery to conciliatory wholeness. It rather problematizes the perception of black slaves as victims and describes the successful, if not instinctive and natural, collaboration of black and white women who might have been mortal enemies.

Dessa is a runaway slave, a "debil woman" (*Dessa* 21) with an admirable fighting spirit, who finds refuge in Sutton Glen, a slave plantation run by Ruth, a white woman. Ruth, who had been abandoned by her reckless husband, manages to survive only due to the help of other run-away slaves like Dessa. Thus, the novel reverses the logic of the white/black binary by making the white and black characters interdependent. Ruth depends on the runaway slaves to make the plantation function; in turn, they depend upon Ruth's protection. The most potent symbol of this interdependence is Ruth breastfeeding Dessa's baby, a clear reversal of the more common practice of black women being forced to act as wet nurses for white babies. Sutton Glen is, then, a place where rigid racial and patriarchal hierarchies are overturned, and where inter-racial relationships, friendships and even affairs develop. Consequently, black characters in the novel have a degree of power, confidence, and agency that would be impossible in "slave sublime" novels. Eventually, they devise and operate a scam slave-selling scheme, the aim of which is to allow all of them, including Ruth, to leave the slave South and head for safer territory (West, in case of the slaves, and North for Ruth).

The main focus of the novel is on the interracial bonding between Dessa and Ruth, who gradually come to understand that what they have in common is more important that what sets them apart. What they share is their bid to defy the authority of white men and forge a pathway to freedom, which can be achieved only if they cooperate and trust each other. Interestingly, of the two women, it is Dessa who is more prejudiced and distrustful than Ruth. Ruth is consistently described as having been a blinkered white woman who was nevertheless able to rise above the racist societal norms of the antebellum South. Shaken out of complacency by her own difficult situation, Ruth learns to depend more on her personal judgment rather than social conditioning. The novel is as much about Dessa's difficult journey towards accepting Ruth's friendship as about Ruth's efforts to overcome her own limitations. In effect, both women are truly multidimensional, round characters who deconstruct racial and gender stereotypes. Ruth evolves from a helpless, racist Southern gentlewoman into a compassionate, independent, self-confident and open-minded woman. Dessa manages to get control over her anger and becomes "a strong, assertive, individual with infinite capacity to love, to nurture, and to adapt to changing social conditions" (Beaulieu, *Black Women Writers* 52).

In Octavia Butler's *Kindred* (1979), there are also no blameless, sanctified victims, or heartless villains. *Kindred* is a neo-slave narrative in the genre of science fiction, though Butler herself preferred to call the novel a fantasy (Kenan, "An Interview" 495). The narrative employs the concept of time travel to juxtapose contemporary life in California in the 1970s with the historical reality of antebellum Maryland. The modern form facilitates an exploration of the master-slave relationship and problematizes the conventional understanding of the peculiar institution in a matter-of-fact and unsentimental manner.

Dana, the main protagonist of *Kindred*, is an African American writer who has no historical awareness or sense of her roots. She lives in the present and has a white husband, Kevin. She is not unaware of racism, which is manifested in her friends' and family's reactions to her interracial marriage, which is described by Dana's colleague as "chocolate and vanilla porn" (56). The plot of the novel takes Dana back in time to her "kindred," including, first and foremost, the abusive white slave owner Rufus, who was Dana's great-grandfather. Very gradually, Dana realises that she is called back to the past when Rufus's life is in danger and that her mission is to save him as well as her own line of descent. Dana meets Rufus when he is a vulnerable boy who is abused by his father no less than the slaves, a fact which makes it possible for her, and for the reader, to sympathize with him. Initially then, Rufus is presented as a victim of a cruel father and a helpless, immature and irresponsible mother. At the same time as Dana fills the gaps in her knowledge of her family history and her understanding of black history, she also becomes a surrogate mother, mentor and guardian to the boy.

With the help of Kevin, who occasionally travels in time with her, Dana attempts to "humanise" Rufus by educating him. She works from the assumption that ignorance is what makes slave-owners like Rufus's father, Tom Weylin, brutal. Dana reads

classics to Rufus and reveals to him the truth about being married to Kevin in "her time" in an effort to make Rufus see beyond "his time." Contrary to the character of Ruth in *Dessa Rose*, however, Rufus is not able to transcend the social norms of the slave South despite the love and attention that Dana lavishes on him. Butler does not redeem Rufus, but she explains him and the cycle of violence that made slavery possible. He remains a small man with a childish ego, "erratic, alternatively generous and vicious" (*Kindred* 260), and he is focused entirely on fulfilling his own needs and desires. He rapes Alice Greenwood, Dana's nominally free great-grandmother, and forces her to become his mistress. After her death, he also attempts to rape Dana, who is so much like Alice that in Rufus's eyes they are practically one woman. In the words of Sandra Govan, "[t]ry as she might, she [Dana] is unable to teach the maturing Rufus enough about respect, responsibility or compassion to prevent him from adopting the behavioral patterns of his class and race" ("Connections" 86). The novel is, therefore, an indictment of the system that dehumanises all; both the slaves who are treated like human beasts and the slave-owners who behave like savage animals. In a sense, the system also dehumanises the pacifist Dana who dreads and abhors violence but is forced to kill Rufus in self-defense.

In *Kindred*, nobody can escape from the endemic racial brutality or the pathological interpersonal relations of the slave society. This aspect of the system is highlighted when Dana acquiesces to Rufus's underhand request for Dana to become an intermediary between himself and Alice. Dana's task is to persuade Alice to give in to Rufus's sexual demands. Aware of the fact that Rufus will have his way anyway, Dana "couldn't refuse to help the girl – help her avoid at least some pain" (*Kindred* 164). She is aware how morally ambiguous it is for her to take this task on, admitting "I didn't think much of myself" (ibid. 164). Having saved Rufus's life on multiple occasions, Dana paves the way for the tragic culmination of the novel's plot. Moreover, by developing a loving relationship of sorts with Rufus, Dana prepares the ground for him to claim her own great-grandmother, who is like Dana's other "half" (ibid. 257).

Dana fails to change the abusive nature of the relationship between her ancestors, Alice and Rufus. She does not have a life-changing effect on Rufus's life; nor is she able to avert the tragedy that starts her own line. But she gains a very personal understanding of slavery, its challenges and the heart-breaking choices that black people had to make to survive. This understanding is visible not only in her tough-minded appraisal of her role in facilitating the ill-fated relationship between Rufus and Alice, but also in her harsh judgement of the "mammy" Sara, a cook whose children were sold to slavery:

> She had done the safe thing – had accepted the life in slavery because she was afraid. She was the type of woman who might have been called "mammy" in some other household. She was the kind of woman who would be held in contempt during the militant nineteen sixties. The house-nigger, the handkerchief-head, the female Uncle Tom – the frightened powerless woman who had already lost all she could stand to lose, and who knew as little about the freedom of the North as she knew about the hereafter. (ibid. 145)

When she acquires an insider's perspective on slavery, Dana distances herself from "the militant nineteen sixties," when, as Butler observed to Randall Kenan, "people were feeling ashamed of, or more strongly angry with their parents for not having improved things faster" (Kenan, "An Interview" 496). She begins to realise that slaves, traumatised by history and struggling for survival, deserve compassion even if they had to choose what Primo Levi called the "grey zone" of morality in order to survive (*The Drowned and the Saved* 22).

In fact, Sara and Dana both belong to that grey zone of powerlessness and complicity where very few victims are blameless and holy. Just as Levi's concept of the "grey zone" provides a clear challenge to "Holocaust piety," *Kindred* resists the comforting rhetoric of the slave sublime. In the words of Karla Holloway, it stages an "overwhelming emotional and physical confrontation" with the slave past, emphasizing "the consequences of psychic fracturing without any necessary trajectory towards conciliatory wholeness" (*Moorings and Metaphors* 116). Dana's mutilation on her final trip back to her own time, when she loses her left arm, is a symbol of the "psychic fracturing" she undergoes after her confrontation with the past. As Butler admitted: "I couldn't really let her come back whole and that [the amputation], I think, really symbolizes her not coming back whole. Antebellum slavery did not leave people quite whole" (Kenan, "An Interview" 502). In these novels, the white slave-owners are, like Rufus and Ruth, by turns mean-spirited, generous, ignorant, callous and troubled; similarly, the black slaves can be heroic and ruthless or submissive and resigned. Slavery and racism are depicted not as the fruits of transcendental evil, but rather of ordinary human greed and ignorance. The system as a whole is condemned in a way that provokes a reassessment of common stereotypes about slavery.

These two novels also revise the genre of the maternal historical romance. For example, the most important relationships in Dessa's life are with her husband, her son, and the white woman, Ruth. She is preoccupied with ensuring the survival of herself and her son, rather than with shaping his worldview with her maternal wisdom. There is no significant female/mother-daughter bonding in the storyline of *Kindred* either. Dana is an orphan who fails to bond with her great-grandmother Alice, who considers Dana to be a "white nigger, turning against … [her] own people" (*Kindred* 137). Instead, Dana develops a love-hate relationship with her white great-grandfather, whom Caroline Rody describes as "the archetypal subject of History and of the Euro American novel" (*The Daughter's Return* 74). Thus, *Kindred* imagines the past through the paternal as much as the maternal line. Both novels are remarkable for the fact that, as Beaulieu has noted, African Americans subversively gain power over whites, and women, both white and black, emerge as strong leaders capable of managing their own destinies. In this way the novel overturns the conventional victim-oppressor paradigm.

The Gilda Stories by Jewelle Gomez also provides an interesting variation on the maternal romance. Rody has described this novel as a "New Age/lesbian/gothic romance developed from … [Gomez's] observation that 'black women characters of

heroic dimensions in fantasy fiction were almost impossible to find'" (ibid. 78). It is the story of a fugitive slave girl adopted by a kind woman who is probably white, and who turns out to be a vampire. The black girl adopts her foster mother's name and joins the family of vampires. Like *Kindred, The Gilda Stories* uses the motif of time travel, albeit in a different manner: Gilda is "a living history" (*The Gilda Stories* 177), an ex-slave whose life spans 200 years of African American ordeals and triumphs, including slavery, emancipation, the Ku Klux Klan, the Great Depression, the Civil Rights movement and the BWR. In the novel, she is described as "a character who had known the intimate horrors of ... the [African American] past and still had the capacity to dream grandly of our triumph" (ibid. 13). This citation may suggest that *The Gilda Stories* is another novel that taps into the redemption-through-suffering paradigm, but it is not. Like *Dessa Rose* and *Kindred*, Gomez's novel portrays a powerful black woman who refuses to be victimised and who breaks not only racial but also gender and sexual stereotypes.

Gilda's trans-historical memory makes her a figure of continuity. Her genealogy is well described in the novel, connecting her to her Fulani ancestors. The narrator states that "[h]er essence as an African still shone through her soft, wide features" (*The Gilda Stories* 23). Gilda's earliest memories include "the dark comfort of her mothers' Fulani face" (ibid. 128) and her stories of Africa and the Middle Passage. Yet she bears the name of a surrogate mother, a light-skinned vampire called Gilda, whose ethnicity is unknown, and who belongs to a predominantly "white crowd" of vampires who form her extended family (ibid. 187). In fact, she is initiated not only by Gilda but also by another female vampire, the Native American Bird, who "complete[s] the circle" of initiations to "make ... [the black girl] ... [their] daughter" (ibid. 47). Thus, Gilda is a daughter of two female vampires, one of whom, Bird, also becomes her lover. When Gilda gives eternal life to two black vampires, she becomes a sort of black mother who has ensured "black historical continuity" (Rody, *The Daughter's Return* 98). By comparison with other maternal romances, however, Gomez's version of genealogical descent has conspicuous hybrid and lesbian elements.

Rody notes that for an ex-slave, Gilda leads an exceptionally harmonious and "transcendent new life in multiracial camaraderie, like a black female figure introduced to the pantheon of cartoon superheroes" (ibid. 82). She is a quintessentially syncretic character, feeling at home among the family of vampires, who are mixed-raced, homosexual, benevolent and enlightened. The family do not kill but "share" blood "in a fair exchange," and leave their victims with "something new and fresh," with "energy, dreams, and ideas" (*The Gilda Stories* 44-45, 50). They are a part of a larger egalitarian, ethical and even utopian community, which provides a counterbalance to the racist, homophobic and misogynist society. Rody notes that "Gomez replaces the European male vampire's rape-like predation ... with an idealised vision of mutually nurturing lesbian communalism" (*The Daughter's Return* 79). Being a vampire is a sort of "commitment" to liberation that one thinks of when talking about "revolution" or "changing the world" (Gomez 46). It also implies open mindedness and commit-

ment to plurality. When Gilda is initiated, her foster mother tells her that "[t]he night I found you … I sensed in you a spirit and understanding of the world; that you were the voice lacking among us" (*The Gilda Stories* 43). The vampires are portrayed, then, as "an inclusive new culture, [and] a *multiracial* tribe" (Rody, *The Daughter's Return* 82; emphasis mine). Rody comments that "[a]ll who join this new tribe must sacrifice an easier adherence to their original peoples, giving up racial exclusivity along with their mortality" (ibid. 83).

Contrary to other novels discussed in this chapter, *The Gilda Stories* is not a novel about slavery *per se*; it is, rather, as Rody has suggested, a novel about "a progressive, ever widening millennial social vision" (*The Daughter's Return* 83), in which the achievements of black people in America are presented through uplifting plots about interracial and homoerotic love. It is a "version of vampire creation [that] portrays a de-naturalized (and interethnic) form of reproduction that counters the biological essentialism of some other black women's matrtifocal historical fictions" (ibid. 97). The novel constructs a parallel utopian universe, in which characters that would be ostracized or disempowered in real life escape from biological determinism and preconceived, oppressive social norms. This universe deconstructs the strict historical division of American society into black and white, holy victims and evil oppressors, slaves and citizens; and it focuses on harrowing and glorious moments in African American history in equal measure. As Rody has pointed out, the novel is therefore "the inverse of the inheritance of black female victimization in *Corregidora* or *Beloved*" (ibid. 81), and it also goes against the grain of the sanctification of historic memory in the slave sublime.

In fact, *The Gilda Stories*, *Kindred* and *Dessa Rose* all have plots based on a reversal of roles that makes white men weak and defeated, while black women are empowered and proactive, rather than merely abused and victimised. They locate women, particularly black women, at the centre of American, rather than just African American history. For example, Dana's return to her own time takes place on the 4th of July, the American nation's symbolic birthday. This date, which designates America's celebration of freedom, places Dana's experience of slavery at the very heart of an American history that has been sentimentalised and sanitized. Similarly, *The Gilda Stories* spans two hundred years of American history and engages not only with black emancipation but also with homophobia and capitalism, and corruption and environmental destruction that it engenders. When the novel touches upon the theme of black "nation time" (170), it has the hybrid Gilda denounce the short-sightedness of black nationalism that failed to include other minority groups in its struggles for liberation. In the words of Gilda, black nationalist men "had a big dream about black men being free, but that's as far as it went. They didn't really have a full vision – you know women being free, Puerto Ricans being free, homosexuals being free. So things kind of folded in on top of themselves" (ibid.).

Reckoning with the past is a recurrent motif in all the novels examined in this chapter. These novels tap into the late-20th century heritage and memory boom and

its ongoing debates over whose memories and versions of history should matter. Most of the BWR novels of the 1980s embraced their negative heritage and “nonhistory,” because, as bell hooks has argued, “remembering makes us subjects in history [and] [i]t is dangerous to forget” (“Narratives of Struggle” 54). Consequently, as Beaulieu notes, even the novels which did not tackle slavery directly “explore[d] the black woman’s past as the source of the future” (*Black Women Writers* 140). She adds that *The Color Purple*, *Praisesong for the Widow* and *Mama Day* “[remove] … their protagonist from the mainstream of American life to a place more remote and more connected to an Afrocentric past, a place where the protagonists can get in touch with sides of themselves they have long forgotten or repressed” (ibid. 141). This Afrocentric connection and awareness, together with their search for integrity and desire to come to terms with their negative heritage, generated knowledge about slavery and reoriented the political consciousness of African Americans, making them into a more cohesive social group. Moreover, the new political awareness that was born out of this exploration of the past gave black people more strength in their struggle with the lingering disinheritance of slavery. This strength can be variously defined as the personal integrity that comes from historical awareness, or, in a larger social context, as political leverage and the capacity to survive.

In *Vessels of Evil: American Slavery and the Holocaust*, Laurence Thomas, an African American professor of philosophy and political science argues that “what allowed Jews to survive the Holocaust and rebuild their nation afterwards was a common narrative that made a sense of the past. This narrative consolidated various aspect of Jewish culture: religion, sacred texts, institutions, commemorating rituals” (202). In his opinion, however, African American culture did not have such a core, and he provocatively argues that “skin color does not make a narrative” (ibid.). Yet, as I have tried to show in this chapter, the aesthetic of the slave sublime, relying on the scholarship on the Jewish Holocaust, was a concerted attempt to create such “a common narrative.” That national narrative mobilized cultural memories in an attempt to ensure the survival of African Americans as a people with a distinctive history and heritage that set them apart from other ethnic and national groups in the USA. It was both a “postcolonial” and a “populist” parable of African American enslavement and the fight for freedom and equality (Rody, *The Daughter’s Return* 78), whose aim was to build “the coherence of the nation and the stability of its imaginary ethnic core,” to misquote Paul Gilroy (*Against Race*, 128-9).

In view of the total silencing of the slave past that has been enacted by the USA, it is understandable that African American writers of the 1980s wished to honor the victims of this dark chapter in American history. In the case of female writers, this objective was combined with a desire to put black women back into the emerging script of their national history. Rody argues that the resultant “magic black daughter paradigm,” which uses the supernatural to dramatize the female authors’ “quest for the mother-of-history,” became a defining feature of BWR (*The Daughter’s Return* 103). In the form of historical maternal romances, it ushered into the canon of African

American fiction a black feminist "discourse of racial heroism," which occasionally, as in *Beloved*, betrayed the "essentialism of … [the writers'] black matrifocal visions" (ibid. 104). I agree with Rody's claim that this strategic essentialism was needed to claim the authority "to rename and reimagine the bitter inheritance" and to extract an "imaginative triumph from a historical void" (ibid.). On the other hand, however, this strategic essentialism and the rhetoric of the slave sublime also put forward a distorted vision of the past, which, inadvertently, I think, incorporated some of the reductivist logic of the Afrocentric school of thought. The slave sublime aesthetic refused to acknowledge the constructed and political dimension of its memory politics, and proposed a limited and selective version of the past. Granted, this is a standard process for consolidating nations and communities, which "are created not simply by forging certain bonds but by fracturing or disallowing others, not merely by invoking and remembering certain versions of the past, but making sure that others are forgotten or repressed" (Loomba, *Colonialism/Postcolonialism* 169).

That is why I consider the BWR neo-slave narratives that do not fall back on the rhetoric of the slave sublime and African American particularism to be so exceptional and admirable. *Dessa Rose*, *The Gilda Stories* and *Kindred* do put black women in the center and stage in their quest "quest for the mother-of-history," but as they reclaim a black matrilineage, they also revalorize cross-cultural and hybrid affiliations. They honor heroic slave women, emphasize the ingenuity and agency of black people, male and female, but also paint a more multi-dimensional and inclusive picture of American society. They focus on America rather than just black America as a nation and emphasize the need for inter-ethnic solidarity, plurality and reconciliation, which, for Williams, Gomez and Butler, seem to be more important than black-Jewish holocaust recriminations or insatiable grieving over the tragic past.

6 Culturalism, Classism, and the Politics of Redistribution

My study distances itself from the black nationalist agendas of the Black Revolutionary Theatre, Afrocentrism and the Black Women's Renaissance. I do, however, recognize the double-edged character of nationalism. This was emphasized by Elleke Boehmer in *Stories of Women: Gender and Narrative in the Postcolonial Nation*, when she stated that "nationalism can be deployed to reactionary and progressive ends; as a means of self-determination and social justice for an entire people and a channel of their at once national and international consciousness *and* as an oppressive formation run in the interests of an elite" (4). The essays collected in this seminal study by Boehmer lean towards a positive evaluation of nationalism which "historically not only offered important ways of recovering self and reclaiming cultural integrity after colonial occupation, but has also remained an important ground for transforming political and economic conditions, forging identity and achieving social justice" (ibid.). Likewise, my own reading of the fiction of the BWR has attempted to shed light on both the achievements and the pitfalls of the womanist version of the black aesthetic and black cultural nationalism. In this concluding chapter, however, I would like to look back on the ethnographic and historical/heritage prose that the BWR produced in the 1980s from the vantage point of the contemporary political science and feminist social criticism, both of which paint a harsher picture of this body of work.

As I argued in my Introduction, the cultural nationalism of the BWR was, in Robert Carr's words, "a doctrine of crisis" (*Black Nationalism* 4). It called for essentialist notions of culture and positive representations of black identity as a means to mobilize African American people against cultural denigration and racial oppression. The nationalist surge in black feminist fiction of the 1980s was also a backlash against the rampant sexism that prevailed within the Black Arts Movement, but first and foremost, it was triggered by late 20th century social and political crises.[75] These crises were described by Nancy Fraser as a shift from the "welfare society" that was "associated with social democracy" to "the insecurity society" that came into being in the 1980s with the resurgence of the free-market policies of global neo-liberalism ("Mapping the Feminist Imagination" 303). This decade of conservative rule in the US created for African Americans a situation of instability and disruption. I would argue that this contributed to the rise of black nationalism since it brought about an increase in discrimination, alienation, and economic and social marginality for American

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75 A few books have discussed ethno-nationalism as a reaction to crises of national identity. See for example: Michael Ignatieff's *Blood and Belonging: Journeys into New Nationalisms*, which is about ethno-nationalism in Eastern Europe after the fall of communism; and Julia Kristeva's, *Nations without Nationalism*, which is about the rise of neo-Nazi groups in Germany and Eastern Europe and the continued popularity of the National Front in France.

blacks. Under Ronald Reagan's administration, black people in America began to feel once again the pinch of reactionary racial policies that caused a rise in unemployment and a reduction in social services and educational opportunities, as well as the incarceration of black men on a massive scale. The conservative ascendancy continued in the 1990s, when the endemic brutality of the police rose to new heights, culminating in 1991 in the beating of Rodney King that marked the beginning of "zero-tolerance policies" and racial profiling. The changing political climate contributed to an ever-growing sense of vulnerability in black communities, which felt that in this increasingly conservative environment the stakes were set against them. Indeed, the divisive tactic of playing the race card became a common practice in American politics; after Reagan's attack on black "welfare queens," George H. W. Bush used adverts that featured Willie Horton[76] to capitalize on radical anti-black sentiments in order to win his presidential election. This zeitgeist undoubtedly contributed to the revival and entrenchment of black nationalism. Courtney Thorsson summed up this position with respect to the BWR novels of the 1980s when she said that these "novels remake cultural nationalism to sound the alarm, to insist that the 1980s and 1990s were years of racial crisis, even though that crisis [might] be complex or hard to see. Resistance, too, remain[ed] central to … [BWR] writers, even when this resistance [was] less visible than a civil rights march or a Black Panther patrol" (*Women's Work* 181).

BWR narratives certainly countered claims that America was a post-racial and color-blind country, a claim that was still being frequently and forcefully repeated under the presidency of Barak Obama and dismissed only after the triumphant emergence of the alt right under Trump. The prose of the BWR, rooted in folklore and uncompromising in its assertions of the continuing relevance of the negative slave heritage, was an attempt to shore up a cultural nation and recall the "positive particularities that may have accrued to black cultural and communal practices over time" (Nikhil Pal Singh, qtd. in Thorsson ibid.). BWR writers were tapping into the tactics that were being employed by the whole postcolonial world, which saw nationalism as a powerful "anti-systemic movement" that could combat racism, marginality, and inequity (Wallerstein, "New Revolts"). In multicultural America, too, "the idea of the nation was a powerful vehicle for harnessing anticolonial energies … at all … levels": political, intellectual, emotional (Loomba, *Colonialism* 155).

The overwhelming majority of BWR novels of the 1980s, particularly those written by African American rather than African Caribbean authors, engaged with issues, of "ethno-national" importance. Contrary to 1970s social protest novels, this 1980s fiction was less focused on depicting the circumcised social conditions and economic

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76 The so-called "Revolving Door" ad was used by George H. W. Bush when he ran for President in 1988 to discredit his opponent, Michael Dukakis. As a governor, Dukakis had supported a prison furlough program which made it possible for Willie Horton, serving a life sentence for murder, to leave a Massachusetts prison on a weekend furlough, escape and rape a woman.

exploitation of black people; instead, it overtly celebrated the cultural essence of the black nation. At the time when the nation seemingly fell out of fashion, these black women writers sought to re-create what Renan called "a soul, a spiritual principle" for their nation ("What is a Nation?" 19). Consequently, in the 1980s, BWR writers were less interested in the economic and racial warfare that had dominated the literature of the 1960s and 70s; in its stead, they redirected their energies to building pride in being black and "regenerating the community from within," as Harry Reed has put it ("Toni Morrison" 52). The difference between the approach of the women of the black Renaissance to nationalist ideology and that of their male predecessors can be best illustrated by the following quote from Ntozake Shange, who said: "I have to feed the people but when I feed the people I can't give them rations, I have to give them a meal that is nurtured with love and that has particular spices for particular tastes" (Shange et al., "Artists' Dialogue" 159). The feminist version of black nationalism and the black aesthetic, as Reed has also aptly observed ("Toni Morrison" 52-53), was about creating food for the soul, rather than ensuring the mere physical survival of the community. BWR novels of the 1980s showed that imagined communities are both "territorial and social spaces" (Anderson, *Imagined Communities* 184), made up of folk myths, practices and rituals. They stemmed from the slave cultures of the extended Caribbean and were preserved by black foremothers and by the "community of black women writers" whom Beverly Guy-Sheftall has described as having willfully "written themselves into the national consciousness" ("Preface" xvv).

On the surface, the shift that occurred in the black feminist agenda in the 1970s and '80s may seem positive, but it appears less so if viewed from the perspective of a larger, political and socio-economic perspective. It could be argued that the abrupt change in black feminist priorities and sensibilities in the 1980s reflected another much larger transition in American politics of the conservative era that Nancy Fraser called, in her 2005 article: "Mapping the Feminist Imagination: From Redistribution to Recognition to Representation," a "shift from redistribution to recognition" (300). Fraser argues here that in the late 20th century, feminism in America radically rethought its agenda. She states that in its first phase, from the post-Second-World-war years to the civil-rights era, "feminism stood in a close relation to the various 'new social movements'"; in the second phase, however, it "was drawn into the orbit of identity politics" (296).[77] Consequently, it was no longer interested in the "problems of class distribution," becoming instead "preoccupied with culture" (ibid.). In effect, therefore, "whereas the previous generation [of feminists] pursued an expanded ideal of social equality, this one [in the 1980s and '90s] invested the bulk of its energies in

77 Fraser argues that in a third, contemporary, phase, feminism is increasingly practiced as a transnational politics. She states that "[i]n Europe and elsewhere … feminists have discovered, and are skillfully exploiting, new political opportunities in the transnational political spaces of our globalizing world" ("Mapping the Feminist Imagination" 296).

cultural change" (ibid. 299). This new emphasis on the politics of recognition, whose aim was to acknowledge and appreciate previously devalued cultures, coincided with a rolling back of the frontiers of the welfare state due to pressure from the global neoliberalism that was gathering momentum in the 1980s. According to Fraser:

> In the *fin-de-siècle* context, the turn to recognition dovetailed all too neatly with a hegemonic neoliberalism that wanted nothing more than to repress all memory of social egalitarianism. The result was a tragic historical irony. Instead of arriving at a broader, richer paradigm that could encompass both redistribution and recognition, we effectively traded one truncated paradigm for another – a truncated economism for a truncated culturalism. The timing, moreover, could not have been worse. The shift to a culturalized politics of recognition occurred at precisely the moment when neoliberalism was staging its spectacular comeback. Throughout this period, academic feminist theory was largely preoccupied with debates about "difference." Pitting "essentialists" against "anti-essentialists," these disputes usefully served to reveal hidden exclusionary premises of earlier theories, and they opened gender studies to many new voices. Even at their best, however, they tended to remain on the terrain of recognition, where subordination was construed as a problem of culture and dissociated from political economy. The effect was to leave us defenseless against free-market fundamentalism, which had meanwhile become hegemonic. Effectively mesmerized by the politics of recognition, we unwittingly diverted feminist theory into culturalist channels at precisely the moment when circumstances required redoubled attention to the politics of redistribution. (Ibid. 297)

Fraser claims that the *fin-de-siècle* culturalism was therefore a "regressive" politics that played into the hands of the neo-liberal establishment in the United States (ibid.), which was "perfecting its own strategic deployment of a regressive cultural politics to distract attention from its regressive politics of redistribution" (ibid. 302).

That strategy can be summarized in one term: multiculturalism. With its emphasis on essentialism, separatism, unity, and "sensitivity to difference" vis-à-vis other ethnic groups, feminism became a "version of multiculturalism with all its problematics" (Yuval-Davis, *Gender & Nation* 118). In other words, it could be argued that the cultural turn in feminism colluded with a neoliberal multicultural politics whose objective was to valorize ethnic and cultural difference at the expense of the struggle for social and economic equality. The cultural turn convinced black women writers and feminist critics that they should invest it in a nationalist outlook. Consequently, a politicized black culture as identity politics became the principal concern for feminist writers and critics.

Fraser is of the opinion that it may have been a coincidence that the "shift from redistribution to recognition" in feminism occurred simultaneously with the political shift from the "welfare society" to "the insecurity society," but many theorists of ethnicity, multiculturalism and ethno-nationalism see both shifts as part of the neo-liberal grand design. Yuval-Davis has observed that in fact the "culturalized discourses" of ethnic nationalisms "emerged with national and international policies of multiculturalism" (ibid. 39). Werner Sollors, in *The Invention of Ethnicity* (1989) and *Beyond Ethnicity: Consent and Descent in American Culture* (1986), asserted that the neo-libe-

ral endorsement of ethno-nationalisms was deliberately geared towards maintaining a hierarchy of culture and race. Sollors pointed out that the politics of multiculturalism, which was based on the affirmation of ethnic heritages and ethnocentric aesthetics, was actually another manifestation of neo-liberal state politics that encouraged ethnic groups to see themselves as sub-nations within the American supra-nation. He argued that the politics of recognition did not change the fact that multiculturalism always covertly privileged the white middle-class mainstream over the ethnic other, treating WASP culture as the universal standard of cultural refinement. As a consequence, the politics of recognition reinforced the center-periphery model of society by reinforcing cultural stereotypes attributed to minority cultures and consolidating existing power structures.[78] In Sollors's opinion, therefore, the politics of cultural recognition was counterproductive and deeply flawed from the outset.

As Yuval-Davis has pointed out, however, when culturalism "started to emerge as a means of political empowerment," it was easy to take its positive rhetoric of recognition at face value, and it is no wonder that it had particular appeal "among marginalized groupings such as blacks and women" (*Gender & Nation* 39). BWR writers were certainly caught up in this culturalist imaginary, which, in retrospect, can be seen as a strategy not entirely of their own making, and they reinvented themselves in the 1980s as "cultural workers," "archivists" or "redemptive scribes" (Mobley, *Folk Roots* 11). As my study has demonstrated, they invested immensely in what Nancy Fraser has called the "culture-centered politics of recognition" ("Mapping the Feminist Imagination" 296). The cult of ethnicity was nowhere more conspicuous than in the discourse of womanism that became an article of faith for most BWR writers in the 1980s. Layli Phillips stressed that "to be a womanist, one [had to] identify one's cultural roots and experience oneself as a cultural or ethnic being," ("Introduction: Womanism on Its Own" xxxvi). She added that:

> Womanism detests race but loves ethnicity and culture, because the concept of race is rooted in the relations of domination and oppression, whereas ethnicity and culture are storehouses of human knowledge that contain such systemic and life-enhancing elements as ancestry, history, memory, geography, cosmology, epistemology, worldview, metaphysics, ethics, aesthetics, logic, psychology, spirituality, traditions, rituals, art, literatures, architecture, food, medicine, science, and language. In other words, culture is rich, while race is impoverished; culture is life affirming, while race is dehumanizing. (xxxvi)

78 For a critique of the multicultural social model, see also David Hollinger's *Postethnic America: Beyond Multiculturalism*. In this book, which was hailed as a groundbreaking proposal for healing American ethnic divisions, Hollinger argues for replacing the pluralist and divisive model of multiculturalism with a cosmopolitan model that recognizes the reality of shifting group boundaries and multiple identities. See also Richard King's *Postcolonial America*, and John Carlos Rowe's *Post-Nationalist American Studies*.

Admittedly, such "strategic essentialism" had the positive effect of building black self-esteem, consolidating imagined communities, and mobilizing black people to resist the fallacy of a post-racial and color-blind America. On the other hand, however, as Fraser has suggested, it inadvertently helped to "subordinate social struggles to cultural struggles, [and] the politics of redistribution to the politics of recognition" ("Mapping the Feminist Imagination" 299).

The dialectic between culturalism and ethno-nationalism in the BWR also had other undesirable side-effects. As a strategy of cultural survival, the politics of recognition required strict management of ethnic boundaries. Yuval-Davis notes that in African American discourse, as in many other oppositional ethnocentric discourses, this management "[took] the form of oppositional construction or demonization" of the Other (*Gender & Nation* 48), for example, Gilroy's analysis of the antagonistic relationship between African Americans and American Jews and "[demonizing] those thought to be excessively 'modern'" (*Gender & Nation* 48). This tendency clearly informed Afrocentric and BWR writing. Though Afrocentrism and the BWR championed different versions of African American heritage, both targeted assimilated and westernized African Americans as the Other, whilst promoting pre-modern, African-derived values and identities. This aversion for worldviews that were considered too "modern" and ambitions that were too worldly permeates novels such as Morrison's *Tar Baby* and Marshall's *Praisesong for the Widow,* which attack individualism, materialism, the Puritan work ethics and the ideal of bourgeois domesticity as pillars of western polity. Cliff is another good example of a writer whose fiction can be said to "reconstruct some notion of purified African culture" (Gilroy, "A Dialogue with bell hooks" 209). We can add to this list the Afrocentric distrust of practitioners and consumers of syncretic forms of popular black culture that hooks described as being "contaminated" by the white mainstream (Gilroy, "A Dialogue with bell hooks" 209). Similarly, as Trinh T Min-ha argued about postcolonial women, "[t]he search for that lost, pure, true, real, genuine, original, authentic self, [was] often situated within a process of elimination of all that … [was] considered other, superfluous, fake, corrupted, or Westernized" ("Not You/Like You" 415). Both Afrocentrism and the late BWR favored a concept of identity that was understood as "an essential, authentic core that remain[ed] hidden to one's consciousness and that require[d] the elimination of all that is considered foreign or not true to the self" (ibid.).

When black feminism took the cultural turn in the 1980s and BWR writers and critics became "theorists of identity" (Thorsson, *Women's Work* 4), the most vocal advocates of the politics of recognition could be found among womanists. Womanism, which was rooted in the black folk tradition, was diametrically opposed to feminism. It endeavored to articulate a distinctively and exclusively black version of feminism by exaggerating racial differences and dissociating itself from white feminism. Womanism could be viewed a nationalist wing of black feminism that promoted racial separatism. As Patricia Hill Collins has argued, it "sits squarely in black nationalist traditions premised on the belief that blacks and whites cannot function as equals

while inhabiting the same territory or participating in the same social institutions" ("What's in a Name?" 10). The womanist rhetoric of ethnicity, authenticity and roots made differences between African American and other women insurmountable, and boundaries between white and black feminisms more rigid (Sandoval, "U.S. Third World Feminism" 1-24). Womanism championed "racial separatism," favored female bonding among black women, and saw white feminists as "enemies" (Collins, "What's in a Name?" 11). Even though Alice Walker found many followers, the essentialism of womanism was criticized from both outside and within the black feminist movement for failing to consider the interconnectedness of women's experiences of oppression. According to Collins, whereas within African American society, womanism created opportunities to address gender imbalance and create better relationships between black women and men, outside that context, it prevented inter-racial and inter-ethnic cooperation among women ("Sisters and Brothers" 59).[79] Schultermandl concludes that womanism was also "counterproductive to the building of feminist solidarities within the US academy where feminists and womanist scholars often position themselves in opposition to each other" (*Transnational Matrilineage* 51).

Likewise, Chicana feminists condemned all types of culturally embedded feminist counter-movements, such as womanism and yellow and red feminisms, arguing that these movements inadvertently tapped into the neo-liberal and multicultural politics of "divide and rule." Where womanists erected and defended ethnic boundaries, the so-called border-studies feminists deconstructed them by claiming a new location for post-ethnic feminism between the extreme positions of the center/periphery and Us/Them binaries. For example, Gloria Anzaldua's autobiography, *Borderlands/La Frontera: The New Mestiza* (1987), proposed a hybrid model of feminist consciousness, embodied by the term "New Mestiza." This was a fragmented and inclusive self, situated at the borderland of cultural indeterminacy. Although Chicana writers and critics were also preoccupied with the issue of cultural identity, they were less concerned with the politics of redistribution, exhibiting instead a greater awareness of the fact that, as Anzaldua stated, "culture is made by those in power – men. Males make the rules and laws; women transmit them" (*Borderlands* 31). That was particularly true about essentialized notions of culture intent on reinforcing the multicultural status quo, with its established racial and gender relations. Unlike womanists, Chicana writers and critics attempted to represent black women from a trans-national and

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79 Layli Phillips states that "[t]he three most common critiques of womanism are that (1) it allows Black women to reject feminism, minimizing the gains that Black feminists have achieved for all Black women through struggle; (2) it undermines feminist struggle by creating confusing and diversionary new terminology with ambiguous politics and little connection to activism; and (3) like white feminism, it is imperialist insofar as it privileges the views of U.S. Black women and pushes them globally onto womanists of other nations and cultures" ("Introduction" xlxii)

cross-cultural perspective challenging the racially and ethnically segregated terrain of neo-liberal and multicultural America.[80]

Another problem with womanism's embrace of culturalism was its handling of what Helen Charles called "the difference within difference" ("Harmony, Hegemony, or Healing?" 369). Even though womanism was based on the politics of recognition, it paradoxically silenced the pleas for recognition of difference that came from within black communities themselves. According to Anna Yeatman, this is how the multicultural "politics of difference" inevitably works. It makes it imperative for "a leadership of the [minority] group" – its political elites, artists, writers, critics and educators – to "represent its homogeneity of purpose by speaking with the one authoritative voice" ("Minorities" 4). For womanists, this authoritarian voice took the form of ethnographic prose and criticism which aimed "to rally the force needed to face the multidimensional threats to … [black] survival in the 80s" (Lorde, "Learning from the 60s" 138). The volkish tradition, which was based on "conjuring and orality combine[d] to produce an emphatically antimodern, anti-urban, and anti-textual [oral] model of community" (Dubey, *Signs and Cities* 170), served as a cultural repertoire of strategies of resistance and survival. It promoted the image of a "community of cultural insiders engaging in harmonious, crisis-free, acts of knowing, speaking and listening" (ibid.). As southern black regionalists, womanists believed they had an exclusive connection to the one-and-only, time-sanctioned and "women-borne" tradition of the black aesthetic. They believed in the existence of "ancient properties" – the "eternal" and authentic cultural values embedded in southern black communities presided over by wise black women. Womanist narratives of immersion indulged in metaphysical

80 Other post-national and post-ethnic studies and essay collections based on the intersection of postcolonialism, postmodernism, poststructuralism and Third World feminism that argue for creating post-ethnic alliances include: *This Bridge, Called My Back: Writing by Radical Women of Color* (1981), an anthology edited by Gloria Anzaldua and Cherrie Moraga, Trinh T. Minh-ha's *When the Moon Waxes Red: Representation Gender Cultural Politics* (1991); Chandra Talpade Mohanty and Ann Russo Lourdes Torres's *Third World Women and the Politics of Feminism* (1991); Ana Louise Keating's *Women Reading Women Writing: Self Intervention in Paula Gunn Allen, Gloria Anzaldua and Audre Lorde* (1996); Sandra Kumamoto Stanley's *Other Sisterhoods: Literary Theory and US Women of Colour* (1998); Inderpal Grewal and Caren Kaplan's *Scattered Hegemonies: Postmodernity and Transnational Feminist Practices* (1994); M. Jacqui Alexander and Chandra Talpade Mohanty's *Feminist Genealogies, Colonial Legacies, Democratic Futures* (1997); Caren Kaplan, Norma Alarcón and Minoo Moallem's *Between Woman and Nation: Nationalisms, Transnational Feminisms, and the State* (1999); Amal Amireh and Lisa Suhair Majaj's *Going Global The Transnational Reception of Third World Women Writers* (2000); Uma Naryan and Sandra Harding's *Decentering the Center: Philosophy for a Multicultural, Postcolonial and Feminist World* (2000); Chandra Talpade Mohanty's *Feminism Without Borders: Decolonizing Theory, Practicing Solidarity* (2003); Ella Shohat's *Talking Visions: Multicultural Feminism in a Transnational Age* (2001); Caren Kaplan and Inderpal Grewal's *An Introduction to Women's Studies: Gender in a Transnational World* (2002); and Carole R. McCann and Seung-kyung Kim's *Feminist Theory Reader: Local and Global Perspectives* (2009).

speculation on the wholeness and spirituality of this timeless maternal culture and its regenerative and empowering potential. In effect, as bell hooks has noted, they established "a totalizing notion of black experience that [saw] only those folks who live[d] in segregated communities or [had] little contact with whites as authentically black" ("Revolutionary Black Women" 226).

As Helen Charles has pointed out, a corollary of Walker's "view that there can exist a [unique black] 'woman's culture'" was "the notion of an all-encompassing 'single black super-woman'" ("Harmony, Hegemony, or Healing?" 367). According to Charles, womanism failed to acknowledge that "while difference exists between the black woman and the non-black woman, it also exists between *individual* black women" (ibid. 373). The notion of the black super-woman, which was a foil for the "generic" woman of the second wave of feminism, was potentially as totalizing as the notion of authentic black southern culture since for womanists, black women, as "bearers of sheer, untranslatable difference" (Dubey, *Signs and Cities* 23), were seen as metaphors for black southern culture. Womanism refused to consider the individual positioning of black women and the fact that "within the parameters of blackness, not all black women are the same," as Charles argued, adding that "[t]hey are diverse politically, culturally, sexually; colour, caste and class-wise" ("Harmony, Hegemony, or Healing?" 369). Admittedly, many BWR novels of the 1980s, such as *The Color Purple*, *Zami* and *The Gilda Stories*, were radical and groundbreaking in their treatment of the taboo subject of lesbianism, seeing in lesbian relationships a special kind of female bonding that was empowering for women. On the score of class, gender and generational divisions, however, womanism gave rise to what Trinh T. Minh-ha called, in a different context, an "essentialist hegemony" that "work[ed] at leveling out differences and at standardizing contexts and expectations in the smallest details of daily lives" ("Not You/Like You" 416).

This drive towards the "imposition of sameness" (ibid.), which the ideal of the black super-woman entailed, was nowhere more conspicuous than in discourse on mothering and matriliny in the 1980s. The 1980s saw a spectacular reversal in womanist thinking about mothers and their role in preserving and conveying the cultural/ethnic essence of black identity. The black mother in 1970s feminist fiction was a deeply ambiguous figure: self-loathing and negligent like Pauline Breedlove in *The Bluest Eye*; self-sacrificing but ultra-conservative like Meridian's mother; crassly materialistic like Selina in *Brown Girl, Brownstones*; helpless and absent as in the *The Third Life of Grange Copeland*; or toxic and unforgiving like Corregidora's women. As a consequence, younger women, such as Meridian, Sula and Ursa, were represented as being increasingly averse to motherhood, seeing in it an "oppressive formation" that threatened to derail their lives. In the womanist decade, by contrast, motherhood was once again idealized as the core of national/cultural identity. Wise grandmothers, "community" mothers and female griots, conjurers and storytellers played a pivotal role as "reproducers of narratives of the [nation]" (Yuval-Davis, *Gender & Nation* 39). Black women writers created formidable female characters, such as Thérèse, Mama Day,

Baby Suggs, Aunt Cuney and the mythical Nanny, in order to "imagine the nation into being," to use Boehmer's expression (*Stories of Women* 15). Their novels hailed these foremothers as "semiotic sites" and archivists of the "myth-memories" of the African Caribbean motherland (Smith A.D.). These maternal characters can be described not only as "custodians of traditions" and "the root of culture and values" (Wisker, *Postcolonial* 140), but also as ethnic "territory markers" (Yuval-Davis, *Gender & Nation* 39) and "boundary subject[s]" (Kristeva, *Nations* 35). In other words, they function in the narratives as benchmarks against which the aspirations, dreams and moral choices of all the black female characters were measured. In this way, womanism created a moralistic ideology that subsumed the multiplicity of black women's lives into one universal category of generic black womanhood that valued black women primarily as wise "culture-bearing" mothers or reverent and obedient daughters.

As Susan Stanford Friedman has argued in "Creativity and the Childbirth Metaphor," such "biologic poetics," in which motherhood is privileged as a source of creativity and female activism, is a special kind of essentialism that runs "the risk of biological determinism" (390). She adds that:

> It theoretically privileges motherhood as the basis of all creativity, a position that symbolically excludes women without children and all men. It also tends toward a prescriptive poetic that potentially narrows the range of language and experience open to women writers. (Ibid.)

None of the novels that have been discussed in this study, except for those by Jamaica Kincaid, are entirely free of "biologic poetics." Even those female characters who do not expressly equate the black mother with the black nation, like Dana (*Kindred*) and Gilda (*The Gilda Stories*), are cast in the maternal roles of nurturers, protectors and mentors. Most of the foremothers and "grannies" in historical and heritage maternal romances, including Mama Day, Pilate, Aunt Cuney, Miss Matie, Vyry and Nanny, take the "biologic poetics" one step further. They are iconic figures of cultural continuity, resistance and female struggle for social justice, described by Rody as "ancestral guides of a more spiritual kind," who do not always "privilege conventional motherhood," but instead take pride in "the spiritual role of mother of a nation" (*The Daughter's Return* 97).

Friedman's criticism is crucial to my thinking about the volkish tradition that elevated *one* (womanist) kind of text and *one* (matrilineal) formula for female empowerment. As Hazel V. Carby argued in *Reconstructing Womanhood: The Emergence of the Afro-American Woman Novelist* (1987), biological poetics obscured other cultural traditions, such as the 19th century novel of passing.[81] It created a womanist histori-

81 See also: Ann duCille's *The Coupling Convention: Sex, Text, And Tradition in Black Women's Fiction* (1993); Deborah McDowell's *"The Changing Same": Black Women's Literature, Criticism, and Theory* (1995); and Claudia Tate's *Domestic Allegories of Political Desire: The Black Heroine's Text at the Turn of the Century* (1996). Audre Lorde commented that "Black writers ... who step outside the pale of what

ography of African American letters that started with female slave narratives and the anthropological writings of the foremother Zora Neale Hurston. In her essay, “Revolutionary Black Women: Making Ourselves Subject,” bell hooks criticizes this simplified and linear, womanist literary canon for its “potential to repress and contain” (221). She condemns Michelle Cliff, among other writers, for glorifying in her essays the black women writers who created the womanist/volkish canon (ibid.). hooks quotes at length the following passage from Cliff’s essay, “Women Warriors: Black Writers Load the Canon,” in which she analyses the source of “the power of black women’s writing”:

> There is continuity in the written work of many African-American women, whether writer is their primary identity or not. You can draw a line from the slave narrative of Linda Brent to Elizabeth Keckley’s life to *Their Eyes Were Watching God* to *Coming of Age in Mississippi* to *Sula* to *The Salt Eaters* to *Praisesong for the Widow*. All of these define a response to power. All structure that response as quest, a journey to complete, to realize the self; all involve an attempt to break out of expectations imposed on black and female identity. All work against the odds to claim the I. (Cliff, qtd. in hooks ibid.)

According to hooks, “passionate declarations like this one, though seductive, lump all black female writing together in a manner that suggests there is indeed a totalizing *telos* that determines black female subjectivity” (ibid.). They construct a “master narrative” that promotes “a homogenous black female subject whose subjectivity is most radically defined by those experiences she shares with other black women” (ibid.). hooks contends that “the wonderful experience of sisterhood and black-woman bonding” was unfortunately more often than not used by writers and womanists to “‘[police] … anyone who [did] not conform” and to censor those black women who wished “to speak an identity from a different location” (ibid. 219).

hooks claims that as a result of this approach, the BWR lacked “honest” books on “mothering, on sexuality, on feminist film criticism” (ibid. 232). She asks: “Where are our autobiographies that do not falsely represent our reality in the interest of promoting monolithic notions of black female experience or celebrating how wonderfully we have managed to overcome oppression” (ibid.)? In her opinion, “honest confessional narratives by black women” played an important part in African American literary history and were still badly needed at the turn of the century in order “to understand the complexity and diversity of black female experience” (ibid. 233). Instead, womanist fiction, based on Walker’s certainties about black culture, presented a false sense of unity and urged black women to embrace this model of black womanhood alone. In

writers are supposed to be, are [sometimes] condemned to silences in black literary circles that are as total and destructive as any imposed by racism” (Tate, “Audre Lorde” 101). Popular writers who have been excluded by the womanist tradition include Terry McMillan, Sapphire (Ramona Lofton), Bebe (Elizabeth) Moore Campbell, Sister Souljah (Lisa Williamson).

effect, hooks contends, womanism was counterproductive to the goals of black feminism and thwarted black women's ambition to become iconoclastic radical subjects. She denounces all of Michelle Cliff's novels, arguing that none of them is successful in inventing a radical black subjectivity that "works against the odds to claim the I" (Cliff, qtd. in hooks 221), as Cliff put it. hooks's argument can easily be extended to the BWR novels of the 1980s, whose narrators did not look kindly on their heroines' attempts to venture beyond the tribal fold. Class-conscious and upwardly mobile Jadine, Kitty (Clare's mother), Avey and Silla are presented as flawed and inauthentic daughters or mothers.

The matrtifocal writing of womanism, with its "gender-coded politics of recognition" (Fraser, "Mapping" 300), was like a cultural "smokescreen" that sought to conceal psychological, generational and class differences among black women (White, "Africa on My Mind" 135). Like BCN's reminiscences about the golden days of the ghetto, this writing promoted nostalgic notions of segregated southern communities. According to Dubey, it was a "dangerous [kind] of political work … used as a [stick] with which to beat the black urban poor" (*Signs and Cities* 238). It also ushered in conservative notions of black womanhood that stifled internal dissent, especially with regard to black women's roles. E. Frances White suggests that as womanist volkish writing became entrenched, "the power of the older women over younger women … [became] idealized as a vision of the elders' wisdom in decision making" ("Africa on My Mind" 145). Putting it differently, she said that matrifocal womanist romances "accept[ed] the view of age relations presented by more powerful older women whose hidden agenda [was] often to socialize girls into docile daughters and daughters-in-law" (ibid.).

The majority of BWR writers stand in judgment over their female characters who, like Jadine, Kitty and Avey, defect from the nationalist and matrilineal project. They are unwaveringly single-minded in insisting that maternity is a site of female power, and that the volkish tradition is indispensable for the survival of the "nation." By contrast, the novels of Kincaid problematize the conflation of mother and nation, and challenge the "nurturing 'motherland' myth" (Boehmer, *Stories of Women* 15). Unlike African American writers, African Caribbean women authors are not so consistent in picturing domestic hearths and southern/Caribbean folk communities as the sites of reproduction of essentialist female black cultures. And even though they exhibit the anthropological longing for cultural roots that the motherland myth designates, they nonetheless dramatize the impossibility of fulfilling this obsessive desire. Their narratives represent the historical, cultural and generational ruptures that are characteristic of the experiences of diasporic black women. For example, Marshall and Lorde expose the asymmetries of power in the mother-daughter dyad and address generational gaps in women's outlooks on the issues of gender, sexuality and class. Their fiction does not gloss over conflicts and divergent interests among different groups and generations of black women or naturalize them by focusing on cultural alliances between mothers and daughters. By representing

cultural and psychological conflicts, these writers counter, to a greater or lesser extent, the "ethnographic approach" of African American matrifocal historical fictions and debunk the illusion of the unbroken generational continuity of diasporic African cultures.

The novels by Cliff and Kincaid, in particular, constantly underline the "shifting and variable process of creolisation" (Glissant, *Caribbean Discourse* 15). In spite of Cliff's efforts to valorize matriliny, the Clare Savage novels inadvertently document the decline of an idea that grounds female activism in the myth of the great foremother Nanny. They also betray a sense of nostalgia for the irretrievable loss of the indigenous histories, cultures and identities that were obliterated by slavery and colonization. Kincaid, on the other hand, makes the best of the historical and ontological void caused by uprooting and displacement to negotiate the newness of her situation in her own terms. In her autobiographical fiction, exile makes possible the dissolution of class, race, and gender boundaries and offers alternatives to conventional gender roles. For Annie John and Lucy, migration offers the promise of enhanced possibilities to reinvent themselves free from patriarchal or nationalist dictates and the controlling "colonizing" gaze of older women. As Kincaid's young women resist rigid patterns of socialization and being co-opted to preconceived essentialist cultural formations, they become the "radical black subjectivities" that bell hooks searched for, but did not find, in the mainstream BWR fiction.

I believe there is strong rationale for comparative reading of African American and immigrant African Caribbean authors. On the one hand, there are fundamental areas of consonance between their historiographical projects and the ways in which they use the allegory of motherhood to talk about the negative heritage of New World slavery and colonization. What connects these writers is primarily their adoption of similar tropes: namely, the link between women and culture; the theme of the motherland(s); and their engagement with the difficult heritage of African people in the New World. On the other hand, however, their outlook and the internal dynamics of their novels are very different. Whereas African American writers drew on their ethnic cultural reserves to construct a strong and authoritative communal voice in order to combat misrecognition and misrepresentation, writers of Caribbean descent fell back on the ideology of ethnic particularism less frequently. For example, while Lorde's and Marshall's texts recover and recreate African spirituality and myths, in social and psychological terms, these writers generally depict the intersectional conflicts that undermine the black nationalist/womanist insistence on unity. Cliff's narratives openly tackle the painful disinheritance of black people that Walker and other womanists were at pains to conceal. Unlike womanist texts, the Clare Savage novels do not lend themselves to any overoptimistic and redeeming readings. Similarly, Kincaid's idiosyncratic, irreverent and provocative writing stands as a categorical refusal of any form of biological, gender or racial essentialism.

In an interview with Moira Ferguson, Kincaid described the huge gulf she perceived between her own attitude to race, culture and writing and that of the BWR,

giving an interesting explanation of African Americans' propensity to adopt a politics of racialised culturalism:

> I don't think that American [black] women have much that we [Caribbean women] can draw from. I mean the use of language is very different, and their concerns are much different. A much different sensibility. For instance, I think that American black people seem to feel almost that being black is a predestination in some way. They have a kind of nationalism that we don't have; black nationalism. Because they are a minority, they are concerned with their identity being extinct, whereas we don't feel that way. Everybody is black. I mean we don't think that white people are permanent. We don't feel permanent either, but that feeling of "there will always be white people sitting on top of black people" – we don't have ... Black nationalism in this country [the USA] is very much because there is an acceptance, in some way, of how the majority of the population have thought about black people. There is very much internalization of that. Why else have "black pride"? I mean there is no reason to be particularly proud of something you can't help. It's not an effort you made and you became black. It is just the way you are. There is nothing particularly pleasing or displeasing about it. (Ferguson, "A Lot of Memory" 164)

While I think that more common threads run through African American and African Caribbean literary traditions than Kincaid cares to admit, her apt comments elucidate the divergent ways in which African American and African Caribbean women writers approach the essentialist and regulatory politics of cultural nationalism and the history of the African diaspora in the New World.

This divergence is conspicuous in these writers' attitudes to the slave past and its contemporary legacy. While the African Caribbean narratives of Cliff and Kincaid do address the importance of remembering, and take issue with the cultural amnesia experienced by assimilated diasporic Africans, they are generally less concerned than African American writers of the BWR with the dim and distant slave past and are totally oblivious to the rhetoric of the slave sublime. Their work is also more persistently focused on the politics of redistribution, an issue that was sidelined by womanism. African Caribbean writers also more frequently tackle the recent history of neo-liberal exploitation. For example, Audre Lorde in "Grenada Revisited" and Jamaica Kincaid in *A Small Place* and *Lucy* address the subject of American imperialism; and Paule Marshall in *The Chosen Place, The Timeless People* and Michelle Cliff in *No Telephone to Heaven* deal with the issue of neo-colonialism. These writers resist the idea that a shared traumatic heritage of slavery unites all blacks into a distinct and exceptional "people." Slavery, the Middle Passage and the indignities of the colonial system are represented as the origin of postcolonial economic and social malaise, but none of these four writers uses what Paul Gilroy has called "memory work" to build a memory-centered ethnic/national community (*The Black Atlantic* 55). Nor does their writing attempt to transpose the tragedy of enslavement into an edifying message for humanity. Slavery and colonization are, first and foremost, important progenitors of racism and neocolonial deprivations; they are not stripped of their material ramifications or configured as sublime experiences that exist in the sanctified and elevated realm beyond understanding, language or representation.

With the exception perhaps of Paule Marshall, the African Caribbean writers discussed in this monograph do not invest so much in the practice of "textual healing" as the narratives of immersion and neo-slave narratives do. I borrow the term "textual healing" from Thorsson, who draws on Farah Griffin to argue that in BWR prose the healing takes place in black female bodies that are presented not only as "sites" of "pleasure and resistance" in their own right, but also as the victimized and "scarred" consciousness of African America as a whole (Griffin, qtd. in Thorsson, *Women's Work* 37). Novels such as *Jubilee* and *Beloved*, for example, use the female body as a metaphor for the national body politic, illustrating what the process of textual healing is about. Griffin sums this up by saying that "[t]he body can never return to a pre-scarred state," and so the healing "is not a matter of getting back to a truer self, but instead of claiming the body, scars and all – in a "narrative of love and care" (ibid.). As this remark implies, textual healing is both a corporeal and a psychological process but also a historical and revisionist practice in which historical discourse is used "to move from individual to nation … Just as the body must be claimed 'scars and all', so the African American nation must be built by claiming its usable past, including the wounds of racial and gendered oppression, into a 'narrative of love and care that can heal and define the communal as well as individual body" (Griffin, qtd. in Thorsson 37-38). Healing was, therefore, a "movement from individual bodies to psyches to communities" (Griffin, qtd. in Thorsson 38). Textual healing put women writers at the center of the national imaginary as conjurers capable of "inscribing a national destiny into time and injecting new life into … myths of the past" (Boehmer, *Stories of Women* 11). It allowed African American writers of the BWR to claim the experience of the whole "nation" in order to assert themselves against the oppressive dominant culture and polity. Textual healing was also a cultural "treatment." Gabbin notes that it "[drew] upon a rich legacy of storytelling and myth-making" ("A Laying on of Hands" 246), and Thompson suggests that folk rituals were "the real medicine" that served the purpose of "debunk[ing] years of negative programming in the media" and "reconnecting [black women] with [their] past, with [their] roots" so that they could "affirm [them]selves holistically, psychologically, and spiritually" ("The Power").

On the other hand, however, the concept of textual healing could also be seen as having a somewhat "supremacist" tendency towards both the oppressors and those black people who, like Crouch, wanted to let go of the past. As Sandoval suggests, it endowed BWR writers with the power to "assert that those [racial and cultural] differences have provided them with a superior level than those currently in power" ("U.S. Third World Feminism" 13). By claiming their oppression, "scars and all" (Griffin, qtd. in Thorsson, *Women's Work* 37) through heroic narratives of trauma and redemption, perseverance and survival, immersion and healing, the writers of the BWR assumed a higher moral ground from which they demanded recognition for their painful histories and denigrated cultures and respect for their civil rights. Like Jewish discourse about the Holocaust, the rhetoric of the slave sublime conferred on their "people," or "tribe," a sense of nobility and pre-eminence that fed into the conviction of African

American exceptionalism. In addition, the efforts of the BWR to raise consciousness about the slave past, and particularly about black women's oppression, created not only a "shared tradition" but also a "coercive common destiny," to quote Elleke Boehmer out of context (*Stories of Women* 11). According to bell hooks, BWR fiction was almost exclusively about black women's suffering and resistance, and their need for healing. She suggested that this fiction gives the impression that female writers at the time of the Renaissance were in "doubt that there [was] an audience for fictions where black women are not first portrayed as victims" ("Revolutionary Black Women" 224). Indeed, the frequency with which the idea of textual healing recurs in BWR fiction of the 1980s was unnerving for several African American writers and critics, including not just bell hooks but also the aforementioned E. Frances White and Stanley Crouch. Charles Johnson, whose criticism of the "deadly sameness" of neo-slave narratives was quoted earlier, also advocated that black authors should try to get over their "tendency to plow the same racial and social ground over and over when an entire universe of phenomena lay waiting for investigation" (*Being and Race* 119).

For hooks, the only BWR author who was successfully transcended the "racial and social ground," was Toni Cade Bambara. hooks describes Bambara as being among the very few truly revolutionary black women who dared to "assert nonconformist politics and habits of being,"[82] to "decolonize minds," and to develop a more "critical consciousness" ("Revolutionary Black Women" 233). For me, Bambara's novel, *The Salt Eaters*, is an uncommonly enlightening and entertaining take on the "textual-healing" approach of BWR fiction and other excesses of the womanist/volkish tradition. As Dubey notes, like most womanist novels, this narrative handles the "issues of ancestry, conjuring, oral tradition, … [and] the South…," but Bambara does not "offer readers the fix of tribal values or aestheticized racial difference" (*Signs and Cities* 237). The novel presents, in a realistic manner, a culturally and ethnically diverse community, in which Puerto Rican, Chicana and African American women "[share] not only a common condition but also … a common vision about the future" (Guy-Sheftall, "Commitment" 239). In this way, as Carter Mathes has stated, "Bambara's writing suggests conceptions of late-twentieth-century racial subjectivity that embrace the seeming chaos of multiplicity and interconnection, not as an erosion of particular identities and locations, but rather as crucial starting points for the realization of the political complexity within them" ("Scratching the Threshold" 370). Bambara's novel does not glorify ethnicity, and flatly refuses to romanticize the South as a place where, in the words of Walker, one "feel[s] the soil between the toes, smell[s] the dust thrown up by the rain, lov[es] the earth so much that one longs to taste it and sometimes does" ("The Black Writer" 21). Bambara's South is not a magical place of spiritual immer-

82 Other writers who are placed in this category by hooks include Gloria Joseph, Faye Harrison, June Jordan and Angela Davis.

sion but a real place affected by racism, sexism, poverty and environmental destruction, as symbolized by the Claybourne Transchemical Plant. Against this backdrop, Bambara presents the process of spiritual healing of a black female activist, Velma, who had had a nervous breakdown that led her to attempt suicide.

Spread thin by "them dead moments alive," memories of past suffering, lost opportunities and defeats (*The Salt Eaters* 22), Velma is an embodiment of the shared history of black female oppression. But it soon transpires that the process of healing Velma's traumatized psyche is not so much about laying a claim to "scars and all" as about giving "the right amount of weight" to these "dead moments," so that she does not completely give in to what the novel presents as unnecessary and self-indulgent suffering. Velma's pain is contextualized through the folk myth about captured Africans who had swallowed so much of the salt in their tears that they lost their ability to fly and break free from slavery. Bambara has commented that as "some of the folks say, we got grounded because we open ourselves to horror … that created tears. And it was that salt that drowned our wings and made us earthbound" (Bonetti, "An Interview"). Thus, according to Bambara, while it is important to absorb just the right "amount of salt," the source of Velma's problem is that she obsessively dwells on the horrors of the past. Bambara believed that "there is no future without memory," as did all of the writers of the BWR, but at the same time she emphasized the need to glance "both … back … as well as flash forward" (ibid.). Minnie Ransom, the healer of Velma and other "salt eaters," is, therefore, "mostly future-oriented," like Bambara herself. What Minnie thinks about her patients could just as well be applied to most BWR writers and their female protagonists:

> They wore the crippleness or blindness like a badge of honor, as though it meant they'd been singled out for special punishment, were special. Or as though it meant they'd paid some heavy dues and knew, then, what there was to know, and therefore, had a right to certain privileges, or were exempt from certain charges, or ought to be listened to at meetings. (*The Salt Eaters* 108)

It does not make any difference that "way down under," these women knew that "'special' was a lie" (ibid.). They were "so used to being unwhole and unwell" that they "forgot what it was to walk upright and see clearly, breathe easily, think better than was taught" (ibid.). As a remedy for their metal afflictions and a way to become "well" again, Minnie counsels her patients to let go of the past and "stride into the future sane and whole" (ibid.). The alternative – the belief "that it was safer to live with complaints [and] … necessary to cooperate with grief" – was, in her opinion, tantamount to "becom[ing] an accomplice in self-ambush" (ibid. 107).

Admittedly, by laying claim to historic suffering and victimization, BWR writers were rightly expressing their rage at the national lack of concern for the African American history of oppression and for the plight of black people in the extreme sociopolitical conditions of the 1980s and 90s. However, as bell hooks has pointed out, "the intensity of … [that] struggle, [and] the fear of failure" led womanist writers "to

wrongly assume that strength in unity can only exist if difference is suppressed and shared experience [of oppression] is highlighted" ("Revolutionary Black Women" 226). The sense of righteousness that BWR writers felt was, as Patricia Hill Collins has stated, grounded in "claims of moral superiority … because of black suffering" ("What's in a Name?" 10). However, it gave rise to what Trinh T. Minh-ha has described as an "essentialist hegemony" ("Not You/Like You" 416), or even a matrix of hegemonies. The principal hegemony of the volkish tradition, namely "[t]he prevalence … of the focus on relations between women and the 'tribe' (mothers, daughters and grandmothers)" (Rhonda Cobham, qtd. in John, *Clear Word* 57), was matched by the equally hegemonic paradigm of the textual healing of the female and national body. This assumed that "the reality of women's oppression is … shared by all women who are perceived to constitute a basically homogenous social grouping with the same interests" (Yuval-Davis, *Gender & Nation* 119). Thus, in the name of "an implied stability, an internal coherence," womanist writing and criticism "neutralized" tensions among black people and forged instead "affective affiliations" based on common roots and common oppression (McDowell, *"The Changing Same"* 20).

It is interesting to see what tensions these affective affiliations helped to hide, and to note that these tensions were not resolved in either the creative writing of the BWR or the discourse of black feminism. Speaking about feminist movements in general, Yuval-Davis has argued that building affective affiliations, or, in other words, creating dominant discourse, is in the interest of "those [women] holding the hegemonic power within the movement" (*Gender & Nation* 119). Indeed, feminists often use the technique of "consciousness rising" to delegitimize the voices of those women who, as bell hooks has put it, want to "to speak an identity from a different location" ("Revolutionary Black Women" 219). Consciousness-raising was "the backbone of the [feminist] movement and a chief organizing tool."[83] However, in Yuval-Davis's opinion, it allowed activists to split women into two groups: the knowledgeable leaders, who were politically and socially aware; and the followers, whose level of self-consciousness was regarded as low. She maintains that this maneuver made it easy to sidestep differences among women and explain them "as mainly reflections of different stages of raised consciousness" (*Gender & Nation* 119). Thinking further about who wielded this hegemonic power in the black feminist movement in the 1980s, it is fairly clear that the feminists who, in Bambara's words "ought to be listened to at meetings" (*The Salt Eaters* 108), were the figures such as Alice Walker, Toni Morrison and Michelle Cliff. As a Marxist feminist critic, bell hooks saw the feminist technique of "consciousness raising" as a means of constructing a "particular brand of black feminist essentialism" whose hidden agenda was to fix attention on culture,

83 Feminist Consciousness-Raising Groups. Collective Action through Discussion. April 26, 2017. https://www.thoughtco.com/feminist-consciousness-raising-groups-3528954

history and oppression rather than on the problem of class stratification and the concomitant disempowerment of the lower classes ("Revolutionary Black Women" 219).

In this way, cultural nationalism in the black feminist movement (and in black creative writing), with its focus on cultural representation and the negative heritage of slavery and colonialism, became a sort of "smokescreen" between people and reality, to misquote E. Frances White ("Africa on My Mind" 135).[84] While Fraser thought that feminism had unconsciously fallen for the trap of culturalism, hooks and White, conversely, suggested that the end-of-the-century cultural turn in black feminism was an expedient way for black writers and feminists to construct "subordination" as "a problem of culture … [that was] dissociated from political economy" (Fraser, "Mapping 299) and to hide the ambivalent relationship between well-to-do elites and the black precariat. The uneasiness with which BWR writers and critics tackled the issues of social mobility, wealth acquisition and western education (vs folk ways of knowing) speaks volumes, I think, about their anxiety about their black middle-class identity. Caught between class and race loyalties, BWR feminists and critics tried to resolve the ideological contradictions in their position by replacing economism with culturalism that was expressed through their passion for the folklore and tragic history of African America. As bell hooks has observed, the writers, critics and feminists of the BWR were "[o]ften professional black women with academic degrees," and many of them "[were] quite conservative politically. Their perspectives differ[ed] greatly from our foremothers, who were politically astute, assertive, and radical in their work for social change" (*Talking Back* 181). In hooks's opinion, the preoccupation of the BWR with ethnicity, cultural roots and slavery actually discouraged black women from "thinking critically," and, not surprisingly, led the BWR to distance itself from "all efforts to engage with leftist or socialist ideas" which middle-class feminists wanted to sideline ("Revolutionary Black Women" 232).

In "Revolutionary Black Women," hooks gives an account of how coercive the "black feminist essentialism" of the 1980s could be when it came to discussing different experiences of being black and female. She also explicitly links the regime of black feminist essentialism to privileged, middle-class, feminist colleagues. hooks describes a feminist gathering, during which the topic of black female victimization had come up. She recalls being "chastised" by one of her "famous" black colleagues for saying that she did not feel victimized and being accused of "trying to erase another black woman's pain by bringing up a different experience" (219). It seemed, claims hooks, that "the cathartic expression of collective pain wiped out any chance that my

84 These discourses: cultural nationalism in creative writing and black feminism are similar to the dominant discourses that are also based on misrepresentation (e.g. orientalist discourses), or negative images (e.g. images that equate Africa with AIDS, famines, civil wars, corruption, child soldiers, huts, FGM – female genital mutilation and slums). All of them are "closely tied to the socioeconomic and political institutions that enable oppressive relations" (White, "Africa on my Mind" 135).

insistence on the diversity of black experience would be heard" (ibid.). It appeared to hooks that "the black female voice that was deemed 'authentic' was the voice in pain; only the sound of hurting could be heard" (ibid.). According to hooks, the essentialist black feminists at that gathering tried to suppress difference by exhibiting "collective black female 'rage' […], the anger directed at individual black women who dared to speak as though [they] were more than [their] pain, more that the collective pain black females have historically experienced" (ibid. 220). bell hooks, together with some other participants who dissented from this view, "left with a sense of estrangement" feeling that "[to] speak against the grain was to risk punishment" (ibid. 219).

hooks then contrasts that experience with a gathering of the Council for Battered Women, whose participants were not "famous" black colleagues, but ordinary black women, whom bell hooks tellingly calls her "comrades." She emphasizes the fact that there was a marked difference between these two meetings that were attended by women from different social backgrounds. At the Council for Battered Women's meeting, she says the women were working "collectively […] to problematize [their] notions of black female subjectivity. None of [them] assumed a fixed essential identity. It was so evident that [they] did not share a common understanding of being black and female, even though some of [their] experiences were similar" (ibid. 220). She adds that any woman could speak out without fear of being censured or accused of trying to "construct radical subjectivity within white supremacist capitalist patriarchy" (ibid.). For hooks, it was clear that radical black subjectivity should be informed by critiques of cultural misrepresentation, sexism *and* capitalist oppression.

I would like draw this study to a conclusion by pointing out that contemporary black feminism is in the vanguard of creating what Fraser has called "a broader and richer paradigm that could encompass both retribution and recognition" that is concern with economic and cultural oppression ("Mapping" 300). The work of deconstructing the "totalized, unitary definition" of black womanhood had already begun with what Deborah McDowell has described as the "'paradigm shift' [in the late 1980s], from the 'Age of Criticism' to the 'Age of Theory'" ("*The Changing Same*" xi). Informed by poststructuralist theories, black feminist critics like McDowell and Hazel Carby set out to abolish the form of literary criticism practiced by womanist critics such as Barbara Smith, whose work McDowell accused of offering "political persuasion" that was aimed at forging deceptive "affective affiliations" among black women (ibid. 9). These post-structuralist critics shed light on how nationalist ideology was informing critical analysis in such a way as to create "solidarity from a sense of particularity" (Gilroy, qtd. in McDowell, ibid. 19). They exposed the literary criticism of the 1970s and '80s as being, in McDowell's words, "another form of storytelling, of mythmaking," a highly politicized and affective discourse whose aim was to determine "*what* … [readers] see when they read and how they receive and represent what they read" (ibid. 118).

The intersectional analysis that emerged at around the same time went beyond the "theoretization of identity" to highlight interlocking systems of oppression, not only

the racism that had necessitated the struggle for cultural recognition, but also sexism and classism. The new intersectional methodology, which was associated with the work of Kimberlé Crenshaw,[85] bell hooks, Patricia Hill Collins and the Chicana feminists Cherríe Moraga and Gloria Anzaldúa, considered complex relations of domination and subjugation in American society and within the black "nation." It delineated a "matrix of domination" (Collins, "Black Feminist Thought" 221), which was developed from bell hooks's earlier theory of the "politics of domination."[86] Collins defines the matrix of domination as "an over-reaching structure of domination" made of three "interlocking systems of oppression," namely race, gender and class (ibid. 222). These systems of oppression can affect different groups of people: women in general, colored women in particular, the LGBT community and workers, all of whom can be subjected to one or more systems of oppression at the same time. As Collins observes, however, whereas "most individuals have little difficulty identifying the sources of their own victimization within some major system of oppression – whether it by race, social class, religion, physical ability, sexual orientation, ethnicity – they typically fail to see how their thoughts and actions uphold someone's else's subordination" (ibid. 287). What Collins's theory implies is that in different contexts the same person may turn from the oppressed into an oppressor, as, for example, within the black feminist movement, where middle-class feminists used the philosophy of consciousness rising to repress other women's experiences and voices.

Intersectional analysis, which is glaringly absent from Nancy Fraser's analysis of the trajectories of late 20th-century feminism, replaced the flawed womanist theory and did a lot to rectify what Fraser, in called "mis-framing." She defines mis-framing as "partition[ing] the political space in ways that block many who are poor and despised from challenging the processes that oppress them" (304). While Fraser uses the term to talk about the compartmentalization of feminisms by nationality "frames" and calls for the "re-framing" of feminism as an international movement, it is clear that in the latter part of the 20th century in the US, mis-framing also operated at an ethnic level and within the politics of multiculturalism. Mis-framing can therefore

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85 Kimberlé Crenshaw is credited with coining the term in 1989, but the original concept was developed by the sociologist Beatrice Potter Webb in 1913. See Kimberlé Crenshaw's "Demarginalizing the Intersection of Race and Sex: A Black Feminist Critique of Antidiscrimination Doctrine, Feminist Theory, and Antiracist Politics."

86 It should be noted that these two critics were frequently at odds with each other. In her interview with Paul Gilroy in *Small Acts*, bell hooks criticizes Patricia Hill Collins, an Afrocentric black feminist critic, and her study, *Black Feminist Thought: Knowledge, Consciousness and the Politics of Empowerment*, as a book that "doesn't challenge that [traditional and conservative] construction of family and home at all" (Gilroy, "A Dialogue with bell hooks" 232). They did, however, agree about the intersection of various forms of oppression. See Patricia Hill Collins's "Black Feminist Thought in the Matrix of Domination," in *Black Feminist Thought: Knowledge, Consciousness, and the Politics of Empowerment*.

also be understood not just as the partitioning of feminism into womanist, black, yellow and red feminisms, but also, I think, as the analysis of different forms of female oppression such as racism, classism and sexism in isolation. In fact, intersectionality allowed feminism to be to "re-framed" by offering new ways of reading class, race and ethnicity, thus making it possible to synthesize the concern with economic and cultural oppression. Like the theories of feminist researchers of nationalism and post-structuralist feminism, intersectional analysis is a useful conceptual tool that allows us to see BWR fiction of the 1980s for what it really is: namely, an elaborate effort to regenerate the imagined black community from within; an ambitious nation-building enterprise, in which black women are made the principal agents/carriers of national identity; and, in the final analysis, an inevitably flawed project that replicated all the problematics of the nationalist ethos, including its gender essentialism, its denial of class stratification, and its tendency to adopt a "rigid set of aesthetic orthodoxies" (McDowell, *"The Changing Same"* 50).

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