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MOTHERING AND SURROGACY IN TWENTIETH-CENTURY AMERICAN  
LITERATURE: PROMISE OR BETRAYAL

by

KIMBERLY C. WEAVER

Under the Direction of Pearl A. McHaney, Ph.D.

ABSTRACT

Twentieth-century American literature is filled with new images of motherhood. Long gone is the idealism of motherhood that flourished during the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries in life and in writing. Long gone are the mother help books and guides on training mothers. The twentieth-century fiction writer ushers in new examples of motherhood described in novels that critique the bad mother and turn a critical eye towards the role of women and motherhood. This study examines the trauma surrounding twentieth-century motherhood and surrogacy; in particular, how abandonment, rape, incest, and negation often results in surrogacy; and how selected authors create characters who as mothers fail to protect their children, particularly their

daughters. This study explores whether the failure is a result of social-economic or physiological circumstances that make mothering and motherlove impossible or a rejection of the ideal mother seldom realized by contemporary women, or whether the novelists have rewritten the notion of the mother's help books by their fragmented representations of motherhood. Has motherhood become a rejection of self-potential?

The study will critique mother-daughter relationships in four late twentieth-century American novels in their complex presentations of motherhood and surrogacy: Toni Morrison's *The Bluest Eye* (1970), Kaye Gibbons's *Ellen Foster* (1990), Dorothy Allison's *Bastard Out of Carolina* (1992) and Sapphire's *Push* (1997). Appropriated terminology from other disciplines illustrates the prevalence of surrogacy and protection in the subject novels. The use of surrogate will refer to those who come forward to provide the role of mothering and protection.

INDEX WORDS: Motherhood, Surrogacy, Twentieth-century women's writing, Protection, Mother-daughter bonds, Abuse of female children, Trauma, Incest

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LITERATURE: PROMISE OR BETRAYAL

by

KIMBERLY C. WEAVER

A Dissertation Submitted in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for the Degree of

Doctor of Philosophy

in the College of Arts and Sciences

Georgia State University

2011

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2011

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LITERATURE: PROMISE OR BETRAYAL

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August 2011

## DEDICATION

This project would not have been possible without those who have loved and mothered me through the years. I will always be indebted to the one who gave me life, my own very dear mother, Lula R. Weaver. I have been blessed to have been loved unconditionally and completely by you. I am ever so grateful for your love, support, and ability to always see me. I carry your grace and calm with me everyday as I evolve into who I am meant to be. Thank you for reminding me that it is always ok to beat to the beat of my own drum. I shall love thee. I must also thank my father, Thompkins Weaver, Jr. for always reminding me to stay focused, to keep my eyes on the prize, and that the journey is not as long as it has been. Your keen perspective and ability to remind me of who I am and why I am special has been my backbone on this journey. You remind me that I can do anything, anything that I choose to do. My parents have empowered me to question, to love, and to accept. Completing this project has made me realize even more how truly blessed that I am. I would also not have been able to complete this project without the support, humor, and dedication of my siblings, Krystin, Jonathan, and Karen. You each have contributed to this project, and I remain thankful to have such a wonderful group of people to call my siblings.

As I reflect on the writers that I have chosen, I do not believe that I would have been able to tackle this project with empathy and love without the love that has been given to me. I would also like to dedicate this work to the memory of two eternally special women in my life, my grandmother, Helen Brydsong, and my Aunt, Mary Frances Weaver. My dear grandmother who will not be able to read this manuscript has been with me on my daily journey. There is nothing like a grandmother's love to remind you that you are a lovely, lovely gift. My Aunt Frances who was my role model in beating to the beat of your own drum and living life to fullest.

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As I have thought over the years about motherhood, mothering, and surrogacy, I am always reminded of the many individuals who have helped to shape who I am. I am thankful for my high school English teacher, Louise Simms, who encouraged me, held me accountable, and instilled in me a great appreciation and love for women's literature and respect for the written word. I would also like to thank my long-term mentor, Dr. Trudier Harris whose steadfast support and insight continue to help me develop as a scholar. Her tough love and honesty keeps me wanting to improve and to grow.

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## **INTRODUCTION: Motherhood and the Birth of Surrogacy in American Literature: Marginalized Mothers**

This study explores the foundations of American motherhood in American literature and the shifts that occur in twentieth-century American literature. The twentieth-century American woman writer deconstructs the notion of nineteenth-century motherhood conveyed in fiction and historical mothers' help books to illustrate the trauma experienced by the female children due to the abandonment, abuse, and trauma inflicted by their own marginalized mothers, and the entrance of the only ones who can see and mother these throw-away children, the non-normative surrogates who are also often times the new socially deviant and invisible. These surrogates allow the act of mothering to occur and attempt to mother the children who have been thrown away.

The dissertation centers on Toni Morrison's *The Bluest Eye* (1970), Kaye Gibbons's *Ellen Foster* (1990), Dorothy Allison's *Bastard Out of Carolina* (1992), and Sapphire's *Push* (1997). Each of these texts represents a contemporary sampling of trauma literature. In these novels, the marginalized mothers make many decisions that work against protecting their female children. The texts call to question who is actually mothered and what happens when no mother and no surrogates surface. Many critics place these texts in the coming of age genre while others cite them as incest novels: both represent reductive readings.<sup>1</sup> Each of the writers crafts her novel to not only explore the delicate balance between mothers and daughters, but also to question the mother-daughter bonds especially as they exist within marginalized structures. These texts are chosen based on the variety of trauma used in the texts as well as the variety of

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<sup>1</sup> The following critics have classified the subject novels as either coming of age stories and/or incest novels: Woo, Gwin, Horwitz, Liddell, and Rountree. I will incorporate their scholarship in my discussion.

potential surrogates. The texts in the study are organized chronologically as they reflect their respective historical periods. The earlier novels do not describe the active witnessing of the abuse by the birth mothers while the later novels show the mothers' active witnessing of the abuse on their daughters. The abuse upon the female children grows more complex and grotesque as the novels move later into the twentieth century. The direct responsibility of the mother becomes more evident. Also as the novels progress, the surrogate emerges to represent more community-based deviancy. Each novel will be critiqued through the framework of the role of the larger community institutions (courts, schools, churches, and later social services); the influence of the main nuclear family and extended family; false surrogates (those who could protect but choose not to and/or are too powerless in their own positions to have agency); and the true surrogates (those who step forward to actively engage in mothering and protection).

The earliest-published novel in the study, *The Bluest Eye*, is Toni Morrison's first novel. *The Bluest Eye* addresses black child development and the embedded self-hatred concerning beauty within the black community. The book is based on the Clark sociological study (original study conducted in 1939), the doll test, given to black girls in the late 1930s and 1950s. Morrison's is the only selected text in this study whose protagonist is not the narrator. Pecola Breedlove, eleven, is silent in the text until the end when she develops a psychosis because she is raped by her father. His incest results in her pregnancy and ultimately a dead baby. The narrator of the story, Claudia MacTeer, is a young black schoolgirl around Pecola's age. Claudia is the only character in the text willing to dismantle whiteness and what it represents. The mother-daughter relationship within the text is non-functional. This research focuses on the transference of whiteness in terms of values, that is, of the black community's embrace of the white culture's values and their transference of these values to their children. These values that are "prescribed"

racially and these racially ascribed values affect the interpretation of beauty and human worth. The historical impact of the great migration is also critiqued as the notion of raising a whole village falls apart in the novel. Also, the study explores the trauma that occurs when no surrogate exists within the novel to nurture and mother the child.

Kaye Gibbons's *Ellen Foster* is a first person account of a child who witnesses her mother's suicide. This novel is often viewed as a coming of age story. Ellen's father rapes her, and all the surviving women of her maternal family reject her. Ellen tells her story with wit and humor in the midst of trauma. The structure of the narrative, like others in the study, employs flashbacks and silences as a way for the female narrators to cope with their trauma. This novel has the most formalized interaction with a variety of institutions meant to establish a surrogate-like nurturing environment for the child, but the novel shows the challenges that institutions face. More so than in the other subject texts, in Gibbons's novel institutions function as conduits for surrogacy. Ellen's journey focuses on her finding a new home in the foster care system.

Dorothy Allison's *Bastard Out of Carolina* depicts a generational story of poverty. Allison's Bone, the main narrator, guides the reader through her harrowing reality as an illegitimate child in the South. The novel is deeply wedded to the southern notions of patriarchy and motherhood, outside of which Bone and her mother exist. These two notions govern their life; however, they are not viewed as proper within them. Bone is raped by her stepfather, Daddy Glen, and abandoned by her mother, Anney. The surrogates who surface in the text are the two outsiders within the family and in traditional southern culture, her Uncle Earle, an abandoned husband and father, and her Aunt Raylene, the town outsider and lesbian.

Sapphire's *Push* represents a complex trinity of abuse: sexual, mental, and physical. It also represents the only incest narrative of the selected texts in this study that details the graphic

abuse by both the mother and the father. I examine of how this first person narrative provides the restructuring of the mammy-jezebel in the urban, poor, young, illiterate black female. Precious, the narrator, must locate her value outside of her destructive maternal sphere. She births two children from repeated rapes by her father. Her growth and development are transferred to a mother-surrogate and an institution of people within an alternative educational environment. With the language and nature of the abuse, *Push* is the most traumatic of the novels examined.

There is a larger body of scholarship on Morrison's texts than on the other subject texts; however, even for *The Bluest Eye*, there is a lack of scholarship that analyzes the mothers' accountability in the abuse of their female children.<sup>2</sup> Existing scholarship also does not examine the lack of models available to these mothers in the midst of their own marginalized status; they have not and will not (at times deliberately and others unconsciously) prepare their daughters to emerge as self-sufficient women in society/culture. A majority of the scholarship looks at the triumphs, self-mothering, and nursing to wellness/healing that occur as the girls become self-aware and learn to protect themselves. What the scholarship does not examine critically is the emergence of the surrogate that often facilitates this transformation of self-awareness and self-nurturing. In my study, I examine the gaps in the current scholarship, how the writer inserts various individuals who are viewed outside the societal norms as extensions of mothering and as surrogates to the female protagonists, how decisions the mothers make to abandon their children are a result of the late twentieth-century changes in motherhood such that the writers use the role of the mother to illustrate a destruction of the female body. The female writers' categorization of the surrogates' roles and relationships in the healing is examined.

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<sup>2</sup> Focus critics O'Reilly, Eckard, Daley and Reddy.

It is ironic that the instances of incest in the novels are among the most graphic and grotesque violations that are used to illustrate the demise of the mother-daughter bond. Even within the grotesque experiences of incest, the mothers make choices to physically abandon their daughters, thereby mentally rendering them invisible or suicidal. Within many of the psychological studies surrounding treatment of children who experience trauma such as incest and abuse, the therapist often takes the role of the good mother for the child (Champagne). This transference happens in three of the texts when a surrogate appears to help guide the traumatized. Another point that occurs but is not fully explored in the existing scholarship is the phenomenon of Multiple Personality Disorder (MPD) when an alternative personality appears to help protect the child's psyche until a surrogate appears to help mother and protect her. In several of the texts, dissociation and disavowal emerge as key coping mechanisms for the girls. For example, when no surrogate appears, this transference to the other personality is witnessed in Pecola's demonization into insanity. The community, which the narrators often classify as "we," is highlighted throughout the scholarship as abandoning the child under the taboo of incest. In *Ellen Foster*, the child protagonist uses dissociation, the "old Ellen," to provide a mental buffer for herself. Within the taboo of incest is the risk and marker of pregnancy, signified as early as Nathaniel Hawthorne's novel *The Scarlet Letter* (1850).

Pregnancy has long been the marker and confessor to women's sexuality. Motherhood has long been marked with the historical literary commentary on pregnant women. In Chapter I of the study, I examine the power of pregnancy as a tool to bear witness to the atrocities of rape in a neo-slave narrative. Distrustful of the written record as outlined in many actual slave narratives, Gayl Jones's *Corregidora* women seek to use the marker of pregnancy as proof to a history of incestuous rapes. The model of mothering to reproduce to tell the story is examined.

However, pregnancy from an incestuous relationship draws even more attention to the mother as Corregidora's pregnancy bears witness. Pregnancy is the physical metaphoric tool<sup>3</sup> in two texts when daughters become pregnant. Pecola's child dies, and Precious's first child is born with special needs. These births symbolically represent what occurs when the child does not have a surrogate or mother-figure to offer any modeling. The girls' pregnancies also represent a commentary on race and the placement<sup>4</sup> of the black female body. In both *The Bluest Eye* and *Push*, the black child is reduced in the eyes of the mother and the community as expendable. The pregnancies in the texts are used as a tool to illustrate this extreme reduction and extends the daughters back into the paradigm of the black female body as breeder, which echoes the earlier neo-slave narratives explored in the study. Precious is unaware of what is happening to her body during her first pregnancy, and Pecola is unaware and dismisses what occurs with her body from the rape by her father. Both children are brutally beaten by their mothers. These beatings represent the mothers' denial and rage at their own marginalized situations, self-hatred, and their awareness of the physical/visual marker of the pregnancies. The survival of the child-rape-victim is evident in the birth of Precious's second child. This birth occurs after intervention of the surrogates and the "figurative" rebirth of Precious as a young woman. Several physical markers and reactions that result from various forms of trauma are evident in each of the girls. Pregnancy is the most evident testament to the abuse. Yet there is the physical proof of trauma for each of the girl-characters. The two black female characters become pregnant; the two white female characters do not. I will consider if this is a continuation of the breeding motif for black female characters in literature.

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<sup>3</sup> I use this phrase to show how the placement of pregnancy on the body of young black girls is a casting of value and a symbolic link to earlier sexualized concepts of black women and the development of black girls.

<sup>4</sup> Placement here refers to looking at the black female body as being marginalized and the disembodiment from the black female herself.

The right to gaze and the passage of judgment on the mother are evident in each of the texts. Within the chapters, I explore the symbolic nature of passing down or omitting of names as well as the methods that each of these daughters uses to protect herself, surrogates, and altered identities. In many ways, Precious enters as the re-writing of Pecola within the African American discourse. For Pecola, the community is silent and the potential surrogates are powerless to interact and engage, but the community will bring forth surrogates for Precious. This appears to be a contrast in the white American discourse since Ellen brings to light the emergence of surrogates outside of the family structure while *Bastard Out of Carolina* represents the only novel in the study that firmly grounds its surrogates in the traditional family structure. In some sense, the institutional structures that should help to protect the girls turn their backs in ways similar to the abandonment by their birth mothers. There is no reconciliation or reclaiming of motherhood by the birth mothers, but there is an embracing of surrogacy in the active form or in regret. There are also true surrogates who allow the promise of the creation and healing of the self; however, there are also false surrogates who continue the betrayal of the mother.

Before the analysis proper begins, I will review the historical influence and definition of surrogacy in literature and which of these roles transfers to the chosen texts. I establish the foundation for my study showing that there has been a gap in the critical scholarship regarding surrogacy in novels. Exploring this gap is important because throughout the twentieth century there has been an increase of outsiders who surface in the text to fulfill the role often neglected by the birth mother. I also establish that twentieth-century American female writers have used their various heroines and mothers to “*take over*” where the nineteenth centuries’ mothers’ help and etiquette books “*leave off*.” Late twentieth-century attempts to re-write history and motherhood through the emergence of the neo-slave narratives also complicate black women’s



access and role in motherhood. Literature published since the 1970s parallels the marginalized historical periods of poor white and black women in America that also actively call to question the role of motherhood, protection, and the redefining of the surrogate.

I will also examine narrative voice in the main subject texts. All but one of the four girl protagonists control their primary narratives. For example, when the young narrator Ellen Foster is silent during times of abuse, an omniscient narrator enters. The use of the omniscient narrator is also used in *The Bluest Eye* when the child narrator, Claudia, would be inappropriate. These silences exist because the child lacks the language to articulate the trauma. The study will also examine the appearance vs. non-appearance of surrogates in the focus texts. A future study will explore the use of surrogates in a variety of other texts.

The *Oxford English Dictionary (OED)* established the foundation of surrogate as “a person appointed by authority to act in place of another; a deputy” (1604) to later expand it to “a person or (usually) a thing that acts for or takes the place of another; a substitute” (1644). This later definition (substitute) is the first mention in the *OED* that accommodates mother-surrogacy but through the lens of the father-surrogate. The use of the term for this the study will be the later connotation to include the attribute/adjective of “taking the place of or standing for something else; representative.” In the four main subject novels, this representative becomes critical especially in contexts where the substitute helps to fulfill the emotional needs of a person.

In the first chapter, I also offer a brief analysis of how race impacts the role of mothering within the various historical periods and settings. Race is pivotal to each of these narratives. The choices that the mothers’ make are driven by their placement within a racist and race-driven society. What emerges and remains evident is that each of the mothers must exist and attempt to mother in marginalized circumstances. *Beloved* (1987) by Toni Morrison, *Corregidora* (1987) by

Gayl Jones, *Keepers of the House* (1964) by Shirley Ann Grau, and *Appalachee Red* (1987) by Raymond Andrews are the texts that I discuss briefly in the opening chapter because they provide a sampling foundation of the discussion of how protection has shifted in the later twentieth-century novels to include vivid trauma and abandonment of children. These four novels are earlier critiques of trauma, motherhood, and protection in twentieth-century American literature as well as an earlier look at Harriet Wilson's *Our Nig*, one of the nineteenth century's traumatic portrayals of abuse upon the young female body and mother abandonment. I use these texts to link the patriarchal impact and possession of motherhood to my later discussions of the four key subject texts. There is one illustration of a male writer who illustrates trauma and abandonment in a multi-dimensional way. The sensitivity illustrated in *Appalachee Red's* numerous descriptions of trauma is similar to the sensitivity that surrounds the female writers' descriptions of trauma. Andrews provides a glimpse into a future study of how men deal with trauma and surrogacy, but in this novel, *Appalachee Red*, Andrews carefully depicts the trauma that has an almost female gaze and shows how the mothers' marginalized positions contributed to their poor mothering choices. A later study might look at how male writers (James Baldwin, William Faulkner, and Raymond Andrews) handle trauma and surrogacy in their texts and the mothering choices that evolve as a result.

The abandonment and protection illustrated in these four earlier novels typically emerges from the mother's desire to protect their children by the means that are perceived currently available to them in their various marginalized states as women. The introduction of Andrews' novel provides a glimpse into the male writer's interpretation of trauma and how it mirrors the female narration of the women-written novels as they illustrate traumas to the female body. Andrews' text also illustrates a mother's abandonment that hints at more personal self-

preservation than actual protection of the child which will be in contrast to the other three earlier narratives. Even though two are directly linked to being neo-slave narratives, *Beloved* and *Corregidora*, the other two novels, *Keepers of the House* and *Appalachee Red*, both have firm relationships to American slavery and its valuing of motherhood and offspring. The decisions that are made in these later two novels stem from the legacy of slavery and the continued marginalization slavery produced on a variety of lives. This initial chapter also highlights the writings of Lydia Maria Childs and Frances E. W. Harper as their writings leave their imprint on women regarding the concept of guiding mothers.

Works by the following scholars connect neo-slave narratives with the late twentieth-century texts: Cathy Caruth, Rosaria Champagne, Elizabeth Fox-Genovese, Frances Smith Foster, Laurie Vickroy, Nagueyalti Warren, Barbara Welter, and Sally Wolff. Fox-Genovese's *Within the Plantation Household: Black and White Women of the Old South* explores the racial complexities between black and white women. Fox-Genovese illustrates that entrapment from the plantation lingers in twentieth-century American literature. The majority of the subject novels of this study are set in the South but all have their foundations/characters in the South. My discussion of motherhood is framed by Lydia Maria Child's and Frances E.W. Harpers's early writings and by the introductory neo-slave narratives in Nagueyalti Warren and Sally Wolff's *Southern Mothers: Fact and Fictions in Southern Women's Writing*. Their study highlights the complexities of mothering within the southern framework and how the South influences the way authors shape the mother characters and impact generational mothering (6-7, Magee 205-215). For the concept of mother protection that is also significant, I rely upon Laurie Vickroy's *Trauma and Survival in Contemporary Fiction*. The use of trauma in the narratives and the healing tools that Vickroy highlights further the analysis of the impact of

trauma in identifying a surrogate for healing to begin. Her discussion of therapeutic methods in response to trauma and trauma's impact upon the person includes the need for surrogates and the process of re-mothering by a non-biological mother (66-67, 117, 120). In this dissertation, I extend Vickroy's assertion that "trauma writers make the suffering body the small, focused universe of the tormented and a vehicle for rendering unimaginable experience tangible to readers" to include the use of the body as a method of healing through self-mothering (32-33). The use of the body as a writing technique also illustrates and makes visible traumas that are often desired to be invisible. Caruth also asserts, "the traumatized person...carries an impossible history within them, or they become themselves the symptom of a history that they cannot entirely possess" (quoted by Vickroy 174).

The focus texts authors, Morrison, Gibbons, Allison, and Sapphire, have chosen settings of pivotal periods to write of women, motherhood, and the American family. The marginalization of the mothers in each text is a result of race, class, and the historical milieu. I frame the discourse of these mothers in their relationship to the community and whether any models of mothering exist for them. Framing this marginalization is the females' relationship to the community and existing models of mothering. Relationships with the fathers also complicate the mothers' roles as nurturers and protectors for their children. Often these values of nurturer and protector are transferred to the men who have been infantilized and yet ultimately dominate the lives/loves of the mothers. I remain cautious to not presume or create motherhood as an innate role, for many women in the texts who are not the birth mothers remain incapable of serving as surrogates for the young female characters.

Throughout the study, I expand the definition and concept of surrogacy to include individuals outside the biological mother, the community, and institutions that nurture, protect

and help children to evolve. I chose these particular novels because they represent a progression of extreme outcomes of what happens to the child in the midst of the mother's silence in the face of trauma.<sup>5</sup> Throughout, the following questions guide my study: How many of the children survive? How does the abuse shift from outsiders (from whom the mother should protect her daughters) to the actual hand (indirectly and directly) of the mother? How is the mother used as a tool in the abuse? How does the mother evolve into the mother-victim who then needs a surrogate to nurse her children? What happens when the roles reverse and the child nurtures the mother (a transformation particularly prevalent in the focus texts of this study)?

How the mothers became mothers unable to protect and/or how mothers become trapped in their own social-economical marginalization is also evident in the core novels of this study. The authors provide the reader with background material based on the mother's experience and/or through the gaze of her own family life that illuminates the complexities of the mother-daughter relationship. I also analyze the legacies that the mothers transfer to their daughters and the silences within the novels that make the act of mothering difficult and impossible. The abuse has a legacy for these mothers, leading us to recognize and to question if mother-victims exist in the texts.

The novels also bear witness to the physical markers of trauma on the four protagonists' behaviors. The physical reaction to the traumatic manifests itself in many different ways. For example, Precious urinates on herself in school, and her mother forces her to overeat. Ellen shakes; Bone obsessively, ritualistically, masturbates as does her younger sister Reese; and Pecola is unable to allow anyone to see her. These behaviors all illustrate the effects of physical abuse. The mothers overlook or are unaware of these reactions to the abuse. Initially, the

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<sup>5</sup> Many of the trauma scholars highlight the use of these silences within the texts. The silences are interpreted as retraumatizing as well as places of protection and healing. See Caruth, de Man, Felman, Ramadanovic.

community ignores these signs in *Precious* and does not attempt to decode the meaning behind her withdrawn nature. Ellen's shakes and Bone's masturbation are kept within the narrative of the two girls.

Champagne's essay "True Crimes of Motherhood: Mother-Daughter Incest and Dissociative Disorders" brings motherhood, motherlove, and protection into the discussion regarding the transference that often occurs between the feminist therapist, the good mother, and the bad mother who abuses her children. Champagne also looks at the creation of the multiple personalities that develop as a way for children to deal with abuse. In each of the subject texts, some form of dissociation or disavowing exists for abused children. When a surrogate exists, transference occurs from the unproductive, ineffective birth mother to the surrogate mother. In the novels, the writers do not fully judge the maternal bond, and the majority of the daughters in the novels do not expand their assessment of their mothers beyond their anguish and betrayal of the loss and the severing the mother-daughter bond. Champagne asserts that by "not confronting the category of motherhood and by identifying only the individuals who occupy social spaces as the agents of transgression, these texts assume a neutral and natural belief that [these mothers] were simply evil anomalies of motherhood" (138). The mothers in the selected novels are not born to be bad mothers, but they evolve from a lack of modeling and as a response to their very own marginalized realities. Champagne also explores the usage of MPD syndrome as a path of healing. Within the paths of healing for the female protagonists are images of nursing and milk that occur within the spaces of motherhood.

Each of the subject texts challenges the notion of motherhood as a form of entitlement, and yet agency is afforded to few of these mothers, regardless of the period or the mothers' social standing. Each mother is held captive by the patriarchal structure that not only defines her

placement within the society and her family, but that also dictates and judges her methods of mothering. The social-economical lens shows the significance of motherhood throughout history by placing the mothers in often financially challenging situations. Children as economic and/or social value within the subject texts are also explored. The neglect that emerges in the novels results from the women attempting to claim some sort of agency and ownership in their roles of mothering. The children suffer from physical and psychological scars that shape them and limit their sense of subjectivity and agency. The examination of these texts explores the psychological impact the mothers also have on their children. The mothers' lack of protection of their daughters in terms of emotional contact and influence remains the proof of their neglect and their mother's challenges to mother effectively. The remaining image of the children in the texts bears witness to deficiencies caused by the mother's abandonment. These deficiencies become models. The mothers could have been better mothers to their children if they had received and benefited from models of mothering.

Mothering in these four novels is not confined to those who produce biologically. When the mothers lacked their own paths to mothering, there were surrogates that surface. Patricia Hill Collins would call it "othermothering": those who help to pick up the pieces and maintain some sense of normalcy for the girls. In the novels, these surrogates can be relatives or other women within the lives of those who need mothering. Mothering in these four novels is not confined to those who produce biologically. Some women very carefully avoid birthing children, but ironically, pick up the pieces of those who have birthed, but fail in mothering. Surrogates take responsibility for protecting and filling the voids of neglect for the children. The mothers who do neglect their daughters do so because of their own subjectivity as poor women, their isolation,

and disenfranchisement since they have never had the space to shape their own existence outside of the one dictated and defined for them.<sup>6</sup>

The narrations in *The Bluest Eye*, *Ellen Foster*, *Bastard Out of Carolina*, and *Push* are represented in the female voices that give accounts of mothering and family. Each of the writers establishes complex relationships between the mothers and fathers. The marriage paradigm is deconstructed in each of the texts. The authors tend to put the mothers in direct control and in direct responsibility of their female children and place them firmly in the role of motherhood. The mothers' behaviors drive the need for protection. The women authors create more well-rounded and balanced characters within their narratives. As we look at motherhood, we are able to judge the mothers in the female texts based on their actions since they are multi-dimensional players even within their reactions and relationships to the historical patriarchal constraints of motherhood.

Why do mothers not protect their children? Why do they ultimately neglect them? One answer is the reality that the mothers do not have solid role models for mothering. And when they do have a role model, the role model does not result in a proactive engagement or support system. In these novels, we read about the mothers of each of the respective mothers. The novels also disclose the various complexities of generational interaction and the lack of modeling challenges that the main mothers experience. Unfortunately, due to the systems and situations that these mothers have evolved in, they do not prepare their daughters to be mothers. Sethe in *Beloved* reflects on her lack of models when she says, "I wish I'd known more, but, like I say, there wan't nobody to talk to. Women I mean. So I tried to recollect what I'd seen back where I was before Sweet Home. How the women did there. Oh they knew all about it. How to make

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<sup>6</sup> Disenfranchisement is perceived differently for each of the women in the subject texts as well as in the earlier novels.



the thing you used to hang the babies in the trees – so you could see them out of harm’s way while you worked in the fields” (*Beloved* 161). Such confusion and lack of mothering models make the mothering of children even more difficult. Part of my study explores how this lack of models contributes to the mothers allowing their daughters to be abused and not protected.

In many ways, Mary in *Push*, Anney in *Bastard Out of Carolina*, Pauline in *The Bluest Eye*, and the nameless mother in *Ellen Foster* echo the slavery-binding pain experienced by Sethe.<sup>7</sup> The words of Anney echo the choices the mothers often make in terms of their male children, but, more importantly, men become the dominant distraction to their mothering. Anney tells Bone about her grandmother, “She always loved her boy children more. It is just the way some women are” which will become true in her own life and the choices she makes for Bone and Reese (18). The crafting of what the mother models looked like in each of the subject texts is telling. These descriptions confirm that the mothers we will closely examine, Sethe, Ursa, Margaret, the nameless mother of Ellen Foster, Pauline, Anney, and Mary, provide their children with no viable models to help shape their mothering skills.

The various mothers in the study are consumed with distractions in their lives. In the midst of these various distractions, great neglect of their children occurs, and as a result, the mothers do not protect their children, which amplifies the neglect and abuse of female child protagonists. The absent models for mothering and a fascination with things beyond themselves separate the mothers as nurturing forces from their children and alter the relationship, as is grossly highlighted in *Push*. The choices the mothers make are a result of their isolated

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<sup>7</sup> I am careful not to make the white characters’ experiences the same traumas as experienced by black women during slavery. I think due to the white female characters’ marginalization, they are judged and marginalized similar to the black female characters mainly based on their social standing rather than by slavery itself. The white female in both texts are often compared to black women as a means of future reduction and marginalization by more established whites in the novels. By slavery-binding pain, I want to stress the severe entrapment that these mothers have often based on their social-economical circumstances.

positions. The mothers' burdens complicate the lives of their children. These burdens render the girls powerless and make them unable to interfere in and react to the destruction of their mothers' choices inflicted upon their lives. Furthermore, the mothers' choices complicate their female children's ability to mother in the future. The interjection of surrogates in the majority of novels fills the void of the women who abandon their roles as mothers.

## CHAPTER I: Does the Mother Own the Cradle?

Motherhood represents the foundation of childhood development, but it has not always been allowed to be claimed by all. Historically, the possession and the ownership of motherhood have been an ongoing battle as illustrated in American literature. A brief review of motherhood and surrogacy in a historical sense with a brief discussion of four examples of American literature prepares us for the close examination of *The Bluest Eye*, *Ellen Foster*, *Bastard Out of Carolina*, and *Push*.

Sentimental Fiction and pamphlets of the eighteen and nineteen centuries sought to shape and to reinforce the ideals of motherhood. The literature of these periods was flooded with sentimental domestic fiction that focused on marriage as the end-desired position for young white women. Social standing and class were important in these texts. The orphan-protagonist, a British literary tradition, is also omnipresent in the texts of the American nineteenth-century writers, but it is instructive to view the depiction of motherhood when the child is not orphaned and the ramifications that the presence of the mother, albeit an ineffective mother, creates. In addition, the person who, other than mothers-proper, claims the child is also significant.<sup>8</sup>

In addition to the growing body of such fiction of the period, several writers were the architects of women's behavior. Lydia Maria Child was a foremother of the popular twentieth-century cultural mother how-to books.<sup>9</sup> Her nineteenth-century texts describing and guiding the behavior of women, especially mothers, are the cornerstones of the discussion on the mothers' help books. Her small books, two in particular, acted as foundation texts and what I will call

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<sup>8</sup> The title of motherhood during these early periods was reserved for white women of means.

<sup>9</sup> Child focused on many genres of literature as her career progressed. She was a staunch abolitionist and supporter of black writers. Her later writings show sensitivity to race and gender. Her introduction to Harriet Jacob's *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl* illustrates this sensitivity and passion. For my purposes, I will focus on her work *The Mother's Book* not as a means of simplification but as a method to provide a footprint to expected behavior of women and their relationship to motherhood.

throughout this study “help books.” *The Mother’s Book* (1831) and *The American Frugal Housewife* (1833) are biblical-like-texts that guide mothers and wives through their roles of contributing to the development of children and family. The carved out domain of these women was the domestic sphere. It was Child’s hope in chapters such as “On the Means of Developing the Bodily Senses in Earliest Infancy,” “Early Development of Affection,” “Early Cultivation of Intellect,” “Management in Childhood,” “Amusements and Employments,” “Sunday, Religion, Views on Death,” “Supernatural Appearances,” “Advice Concerning Books,” “List of Good Books for Various Ages,” “Politeness,” “Beauty, Dress, Gentility,” “Management during the Teens,” and “Views of Matrimony” to influence the raising of children. The bookend chapters are especially important to appreciate the formative recommendations for raising white children: the infancy phase with the accompanying realization of who actually had the privilege to fully embrace mothering during this fragile stage of development, and the marriage, which is reflected in the domestic fiction of the period. Child’s work sought to impact women’s roles as mothers.

*The Mother’s Book* functioned as the key reference source for women who are charged with the responsibility of raising children. Child dedicates her book to “American Mothers, on Whose Intelligence and Discretion the Safety and Prosperity of Our Republic So Much Depend.” The dedication inscribes to mothers the responsibility of a high calling in the development and the growth of the nation. Often in the early sections of *The Mother’s Book*, the pronoun “he” is used more frequently than “she.” This telling pronoun usage reinforces the period’s preference and obligation to white male children who as the dedication suggests will lead the republic.

The book traces the raising of children from infancy to warding off the potential for daughters of becoming old maids. Several rules are laid out in each chapter along with examples of vices and successes that Child has observed. She analyzes her observations and offers advice

on how to improve mothering skills. These nineteenth-century texts resemble parenting books of today; however, Child is extremely specific and culturally cautious in her advice for mothers. She says, “[T]he first rule, and the most important of all, in education, is, that a mother govern her own feelings, and keep her heart and conscience pure” (*Mother’s* 4). The task of motherhood requires that a mother not only govern her own feelings but also has a conscience. Culturally, this becomes more challenging in the late twentieth century, as the subject texts of this study will show. Child interjects a caution should the mother’s “fortune” or “other cares” require a surrogate or someone acting in the mother’s place. She says,

The next most important thing appears to me to be, that a mother, as far as other duties will permit, take the entire care of her own child. I am aware that people with moderate fortune cannot attend exclusively to an infant. Other cares claim a share of attention, and sisters, or domestics, must be entrusted; but where this must necessarily be the case, the infant should, as much as possible, feel its mother’s guardianship. (*Mother’s* 4)

Child acknowledges that when, for whatever reason, children may not be able to be absolutely and solely in their mother’s care, the mother remains responsible for the care in which she places her child. In time, this responsibility shifts as this study will demonstrate.

Early in *The Mother’s Book*, Child both asserts a child-rearing philosophy and acknowledges its weakness: “You may say, perhaps, that a mother’s instinct teaches fondness, and there is no need of urging that point; but the difficulty is, mothers are sometimes fond by fits and starts – they follow impulse, not principle” (5). Child accepts that mothers do react emotionally, but importantly they should follow principle. In her initial chapter, Child explores the logical side of mothers. “Perhaps the cares of the world vex or discourage you – and you do

not, as usual, smile upon your babe when he looks up earnestly in your face, – or you are a little impatient at his fretfulness. Those who know your inquietudes may easily excuse this; but what does the innocent being before you know of care and trouble?... It does you no good, and it injures him” (*Mother’s* 5). Warning of the harm that taking out the frustrations of the world on a child will ultimately cause a child, mothers, according to Child, should have patience and understanding to avoid placing their young charges in harm’s way regardless of circumstances. This becomes increasingly difficult as illustrated in the explications of the late twentieth-century novels, but is surprisingly more easily achieved in the lives narrated in the neo-slave narratives highlighted in this initial chapter’s discussion.

Like many writings of the era, Child writes that religion empowers a mother to maintain her composure and her interest for her child. Her book is written like a conversation with a young mother, imagined as questions and responses, Child repeats the question and answers, “Do you say it is impossible always to govern one’s feelings? There is one method, a never-failing one – prayer. It consoles and strengthens the wounded heart, and tranquillizes the most stormy passions” (*Mother’s* 5). Child instructs women to incorporate prayer as their point of strength and guidance since she knows motherhood challenges the emotions of young mothers. Prayer by the mothers is foreign in the subject novels in this dissertation, but their daughters often employ it. Prayers for agency and assistance give the daughters strength in their current realities. The earlier novels, especially, the neo-slave narrative *Beloved*, explore religion in terms of seeking strength but also as a controlling vice.<sup>10</sup> As the twentieth-century progresses, religion becomes

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<sup>10</sup> Toni Morrison’s *Beloved* uses religion and spirituality as a method of survival for the slaves. Baby Suggs functions as the leader at the clearing. It represented a time of peace, rejuvenation and strength to deal with the often-silencing traumas of slavery. *Beloved* also highlights the use of religion as a controlling force and justification for slavery.

less of a priority for the mothers within this study. Also, motherhood begins to shift from the primary focus of protecting children to mothers leading their own desired lives.

Child makes a distinction between two types of women: the noble housewife and the “sluttish” one.<sup>11</sup> The distinction between these two women in a housekeeping example can extend to those who choose to “see” or to “see to” their children and those who become blind to their children needs. Child reduces the latter to the sluttish category. She distinguishes between the two:

You will find that a smart, notable housewife is always an “*observing* woman.” What constitutes the difference between a neat, faithful domestic, and a heedless, sluttish one? One pays *attention* to what she is about, and the other does not. The slut’s hands may be very dirty, but she does not observe it; every time she takes hold of the door, she may leave it covered with black prints, but she does not observe it. One educated to *attend* to things about her, would immediately see these defects and remedy them. (*Mother’s* 18-9)

The need to attend to that which is around her, especially her children, is important. The attention and focus of the mother initially starts with protecting her young children and influencing, as Child suggests, “those whose early influence is what it should be, will find their children easy to manage, as they grow older” (*Mother’s* 23). Nevertheless, within the subject texts of this dissertation, there is a shift in the mothers’ relationships with their children and their ability even to see their needs. In the earlier texts analyzed in this chapter, the mother’s

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<sup>11</sup> “Sluttish” one is Child’s term.

existence and survival centers on the child.<sup>12</sup> Surrogates are secondary and usually not needed for protecting the needs of the child; they resemble the traditional concept of caregiver to a white child or focus on a mammy-charge relationship. The earlier texts primarily do not highlight any anger or rage of the mother directed at her child.<sup>13</sup>

Child deals with the mother's anger towards her child by asserting that "The woman who punishes her child because she is angry, acts from the selfish motive of indulging her own bad passions; she who punishes because it is necessary for the child's good, acts from a disinterested regard to his future happiness" (*Mother's* 29). Anger, punishment, and selfishness are important issues in the novels of the later writers as well. Emotions of anger and selfishness typically arise because of mothers' own interests will displace the child's welfare that should be the center of their lives. The level of violence will also increase as the settings of the subject texts move closer to present time. The nineteenth-century novels' violence typically focused on the atrocities of slavery, while the late twentieth-century novels' violence centers on the child within the nuclear family.<sup>14</sup> To represent the horrific experience and trauma inflicted upon the child, I will use Harriet Wilson's *Our Nig*. This shift of violence calls to question the role of motherhood in later time periods. The appropriate punishment, according to Child, "should always be as mild as it can be and produce the desired effect" (*Mother's* 30); "Where it is possible, it is a good plan to make the punishment similar to the offence (30);" and "Above all things, never suffer a child to be accused of a fault, until you are perfectly sure he has been guilty of it" (33). Punishments meted out accordingly were, however, a far cry from the severe trauma-producing acts depicted

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<sup>12</sup> The texts to be briefly discussed in this chapter will serve as foundation novels as we look at protection and surrogacy. These novels include: Toni Morrison's *Beloved*, Shirley Ann Grau's *Keepers of the House*, Gayl Jones's *Corregidora*, and Raymond Andrews's *Appalachee Red*.

<sup>13</sup> *Our Nig* represents an extreme example of the nineteenth-century literature to highlight this mother resentment and surrogate abuse.

<sup>14</sup> In this chapter, I will use the actual nineteenth-century novel, *Our Nig* and the several neo-slave narratives depicting the period.



within the later texts and from the trauma that emerges in the neo-slave narratives examined later in this chapter. Child offered these notions of appropriate discipline to a generation of women who wanted to mother and who looked for mother models.

As the world grew more diverse regarding mother-authority and mother-possession, Child's lessons and doctrines began to fade and are all together out of place in the late twentieth-century writer's narratives. Lessons that should have been upheld by the mothers through their maternal spheres came to be embraced and followed by surrogates who would have been considered extreme outsiders to Maria Lydia Child in the nineteenth century. The primary exploration and purpose for using these earlier writings are to see how the later writer uses her actual texts as models. The ability of who could write began to expand as did who could claim motherhood. Throughout the dissertation, I also look at the historical placement of each of the main novels. These novels respond to the histories of their time by emphasizing the challenges that accompany motherhood. Post-reconstruction and industrialization more women could actively claim the title mother. This ability to claim motherhood also began to question the success and measure the mother's abilities against earlier models. As motherhood became more accepting to a more diverse group of women, the judgment of mothering became increasingly evident. The writer began to respond to the numerous challenges that affect motherhood. The assault moves past basic questions of claiming motherhood and survival of the children to critically analyzing how the marginalization of mothers based on race, gender, and class affect the mother's attempt to mother and protect. These various forms of marginalization begin to challenge the actual models from the past and highlight the glaring omission from the present. The writer responds with vivid representations of mothers functioning on the extremes but not grasping their motherlove to protect their children.

The extremes of motherhood illustrated in American literature are startling. The images described in the written page grow more extreme as the depictions move from fictionalized representation of contemporary conditions to earlier realities in the neo-slave narratives to present time realities in the four subject texts. In the nineteenth-century, there were accounts of the horrific, the most horrific, of course, the institution of slavery. The most graphic representation of slavery, motherhood, and abandonment is Harriet Wilson's *Our Nig* (1859). The story of *Our Nig* embodies what will later be coined the "bad mother." The nightmare of Frado's life is a representation of stories that Child says mothers should not share. Child states, "I cannot find language strong enough to express what a woman deserves, that embitters the whole existence of her offspring by filling their minds with such terrific (horrors) images. She who can tell a frightful story to her child, or allow one to be told, ought to have a guardian appointed over herself" (*Mother's* 33). This second mention of a guardian is important since Child finds it inappropriate for a mother to cause such trauma and as a result this "bad mother" should have a guardian appointed over her. Child further qualifies the mother's poor judgment and provides the motive of "pure indolence; a mother is not willing to take the pains, and practise the self-denial, which firm and gentle management requires; she therefore terrifies her child into obedience" (*Mother's* 33). The use of fear causes trauma and affects the child's development. The variety mothers within this study will contribute negatively to their daughters' development by not proactively alleviating their fears and/or directly causing their fears.

What would the writer of *The Mother's Book* and numerous other help books from the nineteenth century say or comment on regarding our selected texts? Child, herself, was close to the abolitionists of the time and actually helped publish the most well-known black women scholars and writers, including Frances E.W. Harper, who, like Child, sought to add discipline

and modeling to the roles of women.<sup>15</sup> Both Child and Harper looked at the values that women could bring especially to mothering. Child has very specific recommendations on physical and mental treatment of children<sup>16</sup> in light of the forthcoming discussion. Fear drives the reality of the children during the neo-slave narratives and later within the familial bonds in the subject novels; fear will continue to drive the relationships that the female protagonists endure within their family units. Their lives are driven and controlled by physical violence. This was not always the norm. In earlier times, physical discipline was a necessity or common occurrence. Child elaborates on physical discipline:

Having mentioned that a mother slapped her little girl smartly, I shall very naturally be asked if I approve of whipping. I certainly do not approve of its very frequent use; still I am not prepared to say that it is not the best punishment for some dispositions, and in some particular cases. I do not believe that most children, properly brought up from the very cradle, would need whipping; but children are not often thus brought up; and you may have those placed under your care in whom evil feelings have become very strong. I think whipping should be resorted to only when the same wrong thing has been done over and over again, and when gentler punishments have failed. A few smart slaps sometimes do good when nothing else will; but particular care should be taken not to correct in anger.

*(Mother's 37)*

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<sup>15</sup> Alice Rutkowski's article "Leaving the Good Mother: Frances E. W. Harper, Lydia Maria Child, and the Literary Politics of Reconstruction" provides a detailed analysis of the similarities of the two women in the depiction and shaping of motherhood. She also looks at the use of surrogacy through marriage, baby switching, and adoption in several texts of the period including Harriet Beecher Stowe's *Uncle Tom's Cabin's* in which Ophelia adopts the enslaved Topsy.

<sup>16</sup> Child describes children and fear as "Mere fear of suffering never makes people really better. It makes them *conceal* what is evil, but it does not make them *conquer* it" (*Mother's 37*).

This anger (and rage) fills the relationships and homes of the female protagonists of this study. The violence becomes a standard in their households and something that they must work to survive. Child's assertions that, "Punishments which make a child ashamed should be avoided," and "A sense of degradation is not healthy for the character" (*Mother's* 37-38) are ironic since within the contemporary texts, shame and degradation, negation and fear are characteristics that keep the children trapped within the family paradigm of abuse.

Child's writings influenced discussions of women and motherhood. In addition, writing during this time was Frances E. W. Harper, a contemporary of Child; however, Harper focused her writing on black women and their plight. Harper and Child both wrote fiction and nonfiction. Both were instrumental in the shaping the role of women and motherhood within the context of abolition and reconstruction. In her speeches and essays, Harper critiques the duality that black women lived. She speaks of the "double duty" that black women balanced. Paula Giddings discusses Harper's assertion that "Black women also asserted their spirit in social and economic matters – especially when it became clear that the patriarchal family structure was not workable" (71).<sup>17</sup> Harper highlights this unworkable reality in the following two statements: "Now is the time for our women to lift up their heads and plant the roots of progress under the hearth-stone," and referring to the double duty of black women, "Man's share in the field and a woman's part at home" (71). Giddings's study documents how "Other Black pioneers spoke of 'the want of education and protection for their women.' Black women seemed more concerned, as they were in slavery, to protect their daughters from continuing exploitation by White men. One group of Black women pioneers spoke of their desires to 'rear their children up – their girls

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<sup>17</sup> Giddings provides numerous examples of the duality that black women encounter as they attempt to uphold their numerous prescribed roles.

– to lead a virtuous and industrious life” (71). These became the missions and the cornerstones of black women’s maternity that would likely appear in the texts written about motherhood.

Harper and other outspoken black women<sup>18</sup> interjected their thoughts and politics into a debate in which black women were “largely excluded” from “access to social and political events” (Tate 5). The exclusion of these women resulted from the perceived divided allegiances based on race and gender. Historically, black women’s double marginalization in a white male-driven culture created friction for them as they attempted to share their voices. It also required black women to create and exist in a dual reality where race and gender resided. Claudia Tate also applies Mikhail M. Bakhtin’s theory of “‘a zone of direct contact with developing reality’ in order to mediate the conflicting viewpoints about the participation of black Americans in general and black women in particular in public enterprise at the turn of the century, a time and place when the politics of race, gender, and class were particularly volatile” (5).<sup>19</sup> Tate continues to establish the purpose and value of early black women’s texts in her assertion that

contemporary readers frequently regard politics as simply an exercise of power over others, the political desire in these black female texts is the acquisition of authority for self both in the home and in the world...a female text is one in which the dominant discourses and their interpretations arise from women-centered values, agency, indeed authority that seek distinctly female principles of narrative pleasure. While male texts often center on a female figure or recall a marriage story, the text itself is governed by male expectations, privilege, and propriety

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<sup>18</sup> Maria W. Stewart, Sojourner Truth, Frances Harper, Anna Julia Hayward Cooper, and Ida B. Wells-Barnett.

<sup>19</sup> Tate’s *Domestic Allegories of Political Desire: The Black Heroine’s Text at the Turn of the Century* remains a cornerstone in the literary discussion of black women’s novels and their various political motives in their writings.

authority. In other words, the text is regulated by a dominant masculine ideological narrative – a patriarchal “master narrative” (8).

The women writers of the nineteenth century, thus, wrote outside the traditionally accepted master narrative. They also did not allow themselves to be limited to entertainment but also took on political challenges of the times.

The mothers within the subject novels, *The Bluest Eye*, *Ellen Foster*, *Bastard Out of Carolina*, and *Push*, illustrate dramatic shifts in mothering.<sup>20</sup> The mothering employed in the subject novels drastically contrasts the three texts determined by historical settings: Toni Morrison’s *Beloved* (1987), Shirley Ann Grau’s *Keepers of the House* (1964), and Gayl Jones’s *Corrigedora* (1987), and from two novels that serve as bookends in this chapter’s discussion: Harriet Wilson’s *Our Nig* (1859) and Raymond Andrews’s *Appalachee Red* (1987). Child says that “nothing is a safe guide but the honest convictions of own own hearts” (*Mother’s* 38). This honest conviction of the heart begins to diminish in the literary form as the bad mother’s presence becomes stronger and stronger. The judgment of the bad mother shifts from perceived horrific choices that mothers make within neo-slave narratives to the abuse and witnessing of abuse in the later subject novels. Child addresses relationship of beauty, goodness, amicability in all its complexity in fiction.<sup>21</sup> Beauty is a vice in *Ellen Foster*, *Bastard Out of Carolina*, *The Bluest Eye*, and *Push* and is an unwelcome characteristic in *Our Nig*, *Corrigedora*, and *Appalachee Red*. Mothers in earlier novels carefully prescribed their daughters placements. They were ever mindful and watchful of their daughters. The mothers focused on ensuring their

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<sup>20</sup> The imprint left from the legacy of slavery dominates the historical periods of the earlier texts.

<sup>21</sup> “I would restrain myself in expressing admiration of beauty; and when others express it, I would always ask, ‘Is she good?’ Is she amiable?’” (*Mother’s* 124).

children's realities would be better than their own. There was a time when mothers wanted the best for their children, especially their female children. Child describes,

The wish to place children in as good society as possible is natural and proper; but it must be remembered that genteel society is not always good society. If your manners and conversation imply more respect for wealth than for merit, your children, of course, will choose their acquaintance and friends according to the style they can support, not according to character. (*Mother's* 126)

This opportunity to place their daughters in good society does not appear in any of the texts in this study. The earlier period clearly depicted and classified good society. It represented a smaller, more confined group. There is a shift from the writings of Child which predates the twentieth-century writers that can be seen in *Beloved*, *Keepers*, *Corregidora* when the lines of race and acceptability were clear. The mothers of these three novels attempt to redefine the placement of the daughters; however, the daughters are trapped in a variety of circumstances that follow the stations of their mothers. Grounding their mother-daughter relationships in the historical notion that the slave girl who follows the station of her mother, the various female protagonists find themselves with a reality that they did not create but can only strive to survive. The roles that mothers will play in these three novels are pivotal as they grasp what good society constitutes during their respective novel settings. Even within their marginalized states, these mothers, *Beloved's* Sethe, *Keepers'* Margaret, and *Corregidora's* Ursa's foremothers, created their own blue prints for their mothering based on survival and their perceived well-being of their children. These women in their marginalized status claimed their motherhood and defined it based on their experiences. Often in these novels, their mothering existed in isolation. As the later main subject novels emerge, the mothers have more complications to consider. The subject

novels' women's marginalization plays out differently as well as the challenges directed at and related to protecting their female children. The unthinkable will be experienced, but within these experiences comes exposure and mini-saviors appear. For the nineteenth-century, Child casts these saviors as undesirable people who would influence inappropriate or unlady-like behavior, or as she delicately attempts to put it in *The Mother's Book*,

There is one subject, on which I am very anxious to say a great deal; but on which, for obvious reasons, I can say very little. Judging by my own observation, I believe it to be the greatest evil now existing in education. I mean the want of confidence between mothers and daughters on delicate subjects. . . . Information being refused them at the only proper source, they immediately have recourse to domestics, or immodest school-companions; and very often, their young minds are polluted with filthy anecdotes of vice and vulgarity. This ought not to be. Mothers are the only proper persons to convey such knowledge to a child's mind.

(151-2)

Child does not account for abandonment of children other than to explore the possibility of caregivers who may come into contact with one's children; she does consider the reality that will appear in later texts that will model an extreme image of motherhood. The assertion and casting of Child will become increasingly problematic as the model for motherhood shifts outside of the confines of slavery and the desire for good societal placement. The later novels explored in this dissertation grow out of earlier depiction of motherhood; however, their authors use the new constraints on women to help craft previously unconsidered extremes and models.



Child does not include the mother herself being bad to children. She critically stresses in her section on the management of children that the mother must make good and sound decisions on managing their young and impressionable charges. She says that

It is a bad plan for young girls to sleep with nursery maids, unless you have the utmost confidence in the good principles and modesty of your domestics. There is a strong love among vulgar people of telling secrets, and talking on forbidden subjects.... It is extremely important that warm-hearted, imprudent youth, should have a safe and interesting companion. A judicious mother can do a vast deal toward supplying this want; but those who have such a shield as a good sister are doubly blessed. (*Mother's* 153-4)

Child cautions mothers to ensure they understand the moral standing of their hired help. She highlights how poor morals create a “bad plan” when it comes to offering appropriate guidance and protection for children. The bad plan for many of the female protagonists’ results from the people enlisted or entrusted to care and to love them, their biological family.

Child also prescribes that the mother’s role encompasses a compassionate relationship with her husband. She says, “Mothers should take every opportunity to excite love, gratitude and respect, toward a father. His virtues and his kindness should be a favorite theme, when talking with his children. The same rule that applies to a wife, in these respects, of course applies to a husband. It should be the business of each to strengthen the bonds of domestic union” (*Mother's* 156). The strengthening of this union should not entail neglecting the child. In the subject novels, there is a shift in the mother’s ability to balance this role, what Harper later calls “double duty” in her 1878 essay “The Colored Woman of America” (235). The later writers challenge the realistic ability of this double duty.

The definition of motherhood differs in nineteenth-century literature as it pertains to black women and white women. It was a daring assertion for a black woman to claim the title of mother and often a deadly assertion to actively claim her child as her own when she too was enslaved. The social confines placed on women during the period centered on the concept of virtue and the importance of preparing daughters for their respective roles within society. For the white mother (of a certain class) this meant preparing her daughter to emerge and to be accepted as a socially desired member of her respective social class, while for the black mother who was often a slave and whose every move was dictated by her marginalized position, it meant to find ways to maintain her virtue within a system of slavery that sought to constantly compromise it. The fear of compromising their daughters acts as the catalyst for many mothers to seek freedom for their children. Both black and white writers, male and female, explore motherhood and the development of the child around this concept of protection and maintaining virtue, especially of female children. Lydia Maria Child has also explored literature of this focus. Two of the earliest depictions of forbidden motherhood are Hester Prynne in Nathaniel Hawthorne's *The Scarlet Letter* (1850) and Frado in Harriet Wilson's *Our Nig* (1859). Frances Harper's statement from "The Two Offers" (1855) comes to mind: "His mother put beautiful robes upon his body but left ugly scars upon his soul; she pampered his appetite but starved his spirit" ("Two" 66). Harper's concept of motherhood was to create an environment and appetite in a child for a noble and proper life. The short story details how too much effort and energy goes into outside impressions but not enough in creating good, whole people. She calls the mother an artist who "knows how to weave into her child's life images of grace and beauty, ... teaching it how to produce the grandest of all poems—the poetry of a true and noble life" (66). In the short

story, Harper echoes Child and the desires of many mothers. The goal of the mother should be to protect and nurture the soul, but are her choices always the best to do so?

Many stories within nineteenth literature hint at the transgression of the fallen woman when she is white, but Hawthorne's portrayal of Hester Prynne is magnified since the child is the actual marker of the fall.<sup>22</sup> Hester fails to protect and to shield her child from the ills and judgments of the Puritan court since she could have left prior to the child's birth and even afterward before the imprint of the sin would be left on Pearl.<sup>23</sup> Hester and fellow Puritan town people often describe Pearl as devilish. Pearl must develop within a culture that despises her since she is an illegitimate child. This is a normalcy for black slave mothers but without the same judgment, because the slave mother is already marginalized.

Hawthorne's tale of the scarlet letter not only illustrates that the condition of the child follows mother but also that the definition of virtue can never be fully obtained once there is proof of the transgression. This is not to suggest that Pearl will have the same fate as Hester, but Pearl does become an outsider within the community based on Hester's behavior and modeling. Women's bodies represent a site of betrayal where motherhood must conform to the cultural dictates; women's bodies hinder and limit the mother's ability to protect her children from the outside world. Over the course of my discussion on motherhood, I will use the female body as symbolic representation or as Julia Kristeva claims female language as "semiotic." She resists the rigid labels and embraces feminine language as being "derived from the preoedipal period of

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<sup>22</sup> Shari Benstock in her article, "The Scarlet Letter (a)dorée, or the Female Body Embroidered" asserts like other scholars that Hester does protect Pearl. She points out that by Hester's refusal to name Pearl's father and based on her treatment of Pearl stays outside of the patriarchal conventions (289). My main protection argument is that she chooses to stay in the community under the patriarchal gaze and elaborately clads her daughter drawing more of a critical eye.

<sup>23</sup> My view seems to be in the minority since Hester Prynne is often viewed as a rebellious and courageous mother who stands up to the culture and does not drape her child in shame by transferring the mother's sins to her child, but she instead embellishes the spirit of her child in her dress and relationship. This open embellishment speaks against the Puritan restrictions and traditions.

fusion between mother and child. Associated with the maternal, feminine language is not only threatening to culture, which is patriarchal, but also a medium through which women may be creative in new ways” (quoted by Murfin 277). Kristeva also describes the semiotic representation as being innate and emotional. I will use this lens to discuss motherlove and the need to protect their children ( ). As the novels progress over time, there are several abjections that occur in the maternal realm of the subject novels. Mothers make numerous decisions that adversely affect their daughters. The body continues to serve as a physical marker of motherhood that mothers often try to escape.

In Wilson’s *Our Nig*, the burden of motherhood is a result of miscegenation. The decision of Frado’s mother Mag to surrender her child to an outside household is telling. The story begins with describing Mag’s condition and her resulting marriage to a black man. Prior to this union, she had a child who had died. The narration confesses, “her offspring came unwelcomed, and before its nativity numbered weeks, it passed from earth, ascending to a purer and better life” (Wilson 289). To Mag this purer and better life meant that “God be thanked...no one can taunt her with my ruin” (290). This taunting echoes Pearl’s outsider presence within the Puritan culture. Mag’s marriage comes about after Jim, described as the “kind-hearted African,” repeatedly requests her hand (291). Jim reminds Mag of her condition:

You’s had trail of white folks, any how. They run off and left ye, and now none of ‘em come near ye to see if you’s dead or alive. I’s black outside. I know, but I’s got a white heart inside. Which you rather have, a black heart in a white skin, or a white heart in a black one? (293)

The use of the white heart is ironic especially because the conversation foreshadows the environment in which Mag leaves Jim’s child. Mag realizes that “I can do but two things...beg

my living, or get it from you” to which Jim responds, “Take me, Mag. I can give you a better home than this, and not let you suffer so.” They marry, but the narrator interjects a dismal vision of the union:

He prevailed; they married. You can philosophize, gentle reader, upon the impropriety of such unions, and preach dozens of sermons on the evils of amalgamation. Want is more a powerful philosopher and preacher. Poor Mag. She has sundered another bond which held her to her fellows. She has descended another step down the ladder of infamy. (293)

This further demise of Mag as a white woman is only made more crushing as she births two black children. The relationship was significant for Jim because he is “proud of HIS treasure, – a white wife – tried hard to fulfill his promises ... he was determined she should not regret her union to him” (294). The narrator tells that while Mag “cared for him only as a means to subserve her own comfort; [yet] she nursed him faithfully and true to marriage vows till death released her,” she never fully embraced any pride or love past Jim’s utility (294). The notion of treasure and release are powerful. These two words, treasure and release, will be used to explore the relationship and the ultimate relinquishing of motherhood by Mag after Jim’s death.

As Mag moves back into the sphere of whiteness, her motherhood becomes a vice instead of a blessing. After she marries Jim’s white business partner Seth, Seth introduces the idea of throwing away the children. He tells Mag that “It’s no use...we must give the children away, and try to get work in some other place” (295). Mag, the mother, snarls in response, “Who’ll take the black devils?” which firmly places her children as “other” (295). Seth reminds Mag that “They’re non of mine” (295). This conversation displaces the children and casts them as throwaway children with no value. When the Bellmonts are suggested, Mag responds that “His

wife is a right she-devil! And if-” and “She can’t keep a girl in the house over a week; and [when] Mr. Bellmont wants to hire a boy to work for him,... he can’t find one that will live in the house with her; she’s so ugly, they can’t” (296). By her own confession, Mag understands the world in which she places her female child. She attempts to scapegoat her duty as mother onto Seth who prefers not to inform the child and tells Mag, “I do n’t want to tell her she is to be given away” (296). The child escapes. After Frado is found, Mag abandons her child to the “she-devil” by trickery. Wilson writes,

A knock on the door brought Mrs. Bellmont, and Mag asked if she would be willing to let that child stop there while she went to the Reed’s house to wash, and when she came back she would call and get her... Why the impetuous child entered the house, we cannot tell; the door closed, and Mag hastily departed. Frado waited for the close of day, which was to bring back her mother. Alas! it never came. It was the last time she saw or heard of her mother. (298)

Frado’s abandonment brings her several false surrogates, but none can protect her from the evil mother-daughter pair.

The new home signals a living place of torture and trauma. Frado is not a slave; she is an indentured servant. Wilson’s earlier parallel about the life of a freed black “in a two-story white house, North...Showing that Slavery’s Shadows Fall Even There” to the image of the white house and that the horrors of slavery are only confined to the south are illustrated in her title. The myth of the good northern white is dismantled by Mrs. Bellmont and her daughter Mary. Mary suggests, “Send her to the County House...I do n’t want a nigger ‘round *me*. Do you, mother?” (300). Mrs. Bellmont responds, “I do n’t mind the nigger in the child. I should like a dozen better than one...If I could make her do my work in a few years, I would keep her. I have

so much trouble with girls I hire. I am almost persuaded if I have one to train up in my way from a child, I shall be able to keep them awhile. I am tired of changing ever few months” (300).

Frado becomes objectified. She becomes like a slave who works in and lives in the house. She is required to do the menial tasks around the house and the farmland. When she begins to mourn her mother by crying aloud, Mrs. Bellmont responds not with kindness but with “a symptom of discontent and complaining which must be ‘nipped in the bud’” accompanied by raw-hide to Frado’s hands (302). Worst than the verbal indifference and contempt that Frado received from Seth and Mag, is the physical and mental abuse endured from the mother-daughter. Frado cries to a visiting Aunt Abby that “I’ve got to stay out here and die. I ha’n’t got no mother, no home. I wish I was dead” (311). To the motherless child in the presence of cruel strangers, desiring death is befitting. The false surrogates include Mr. Bellmont, Aunt Abby and most importantly, Jack, the son who adored her. These false surrogates are powerless against Mrs. Bellmont’s rages and Mary’s taunts. There were numerous opportunities for the three to remove Frado, but they chose not. In many ways, they were enamored by her mulatto beauty but did not value her enough as a human to rescue her. This failure to protect and rescue serves as a prime example of a tortured child whose partial blackness renders her less than human and allows those outside of the family bond actively to torture her until her health can never rebound.

Wilson’s story echoes the horrors that will progressively surface in the late twentieth-century texts in this study. This text is an early reminder of the devalued nature of the black child even by her white mother perhaps, especially because of Mag’s lack of emotional attachment and mothering toward her black children and her outward express of loss toward her white child as detailed in the novel. It also shows that mothers make decisions often based on their own selfish survival that has nothing to do with the well-being of their offspring. Nowhere in Wilson’s text

does it say that Mag came to check on her child. The worst part of Mag's placement of Frado with the Bellmonts is that she knows the treatment that Frado will receive. This realization does not cause the birth mother to want to protect her child. Frado is failed not only by her birthmother but also by the numerous potential surrogates who give a false sense of hope in the midst of her abuse and trauma. The destructive bond of Mrs. Bellmont and Mary establishes new categories of mother-daughter relationships. Mary's behavior is based upon modeling her mother while Jack's is based on modeling the weak and ineffective Mr. Bellmont. *Our Nig* shows that the angry and evil "plantation wives" also live in the North. Mothers, regardless of their location, provide examples of how they do not always protect but sometimes act as guides and accomplices of their daughter's abuse. Also, mothers' means of protection do not make sense to those who gaze from the outside. As the novels progress, the decisions that mothers make cause different reactions to their respective forms of motherhood.

Toni Morrison's *Beloved* (1987), Shirley Ann Grau's *Keepers of the House* (1964), and Gayl Jones's *Corrigedora* (1975) shed light on the evolution of motherhood, the protection of children, and the need for surrogates. These novels help to investigate who owns the cradle and which stories should be retold and why and to what effect. The historical placements of the women characters in these novels also show how as mothers they chose to respond to the challenges that affected their agency in the midst of peril. These mothers illustrate the realities of those who are a part of the lower class and/or are of marginalized status. These three novels I place in the neo-slave narrative tradition. Each novel has a firm foundation within the institution of slavery. The three mothers make decisions based on what they feel will offer their children the most protection. I chose the novels based on the extreme form of protection that the mothers



attempt to offer. In their extremity, the outside community and often their own daughters judge the mothers for their decisions.

The saying “The hand that rocks the cradle rules the world” is tested in *Beloved*, *Keepers of the House*, and *Corregidora*. It is ironic that this often-used quotation to describe motherhood originally was published as a poem entitled “What Rules the World” (1865) by William Ross Wallace. This male interjection into the sphere of motherhood will be evident as part of the patriarchal imprint. Even though the poem itself is positive, it defines and prescribes a definite role for women as mothers. These texts about the past were published at a pivotal time as women looked to balance motherhood with their increased presence in the universities and the workforce. Each writer describes the marginalized placement of her female characters against the traditional backdrop of the patriarchal form of southern motherhood.<sup>24</sup> The historical scholarship describing the slave-mother relationship will also frame the discussion of how Sethe of *Beloved* dares to do the unthinkable – claim her own children. The *Corregidora* women dare to re-write – literally through birth of the generational rapes in *Corregidora*. Margaret of *Keepers of the House* dares to marry a southern town’s patriarch. I will also incorporate the historic fact of the numerous rapes that were endured by related slave women and created an incestuous foundation for a novel like *Corregidora* to emerge. The influence and lasting impression of the slave trade and its trauma on motherhood is illustrated long after slavery. The notion of owning one’s body is literally tested as the generations of *Corregidora* women struggle with bearing witness and forming their own identities. This circumstance serves as a negation of motherhood. It does not provide outside options or considerations to the women in the various novels. Also, it creates an added burden and recasting of black women as breeders. The last text

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<sup>24</sup> Black women have historically worked and been long standing members of the workforce. Women who were economically challenged have also always had to work.

to help illustrate this period will be Grau's *Keepers of the House*. The study will focus on the mother, Margaret, and her decision to marry a white man to give her children the legacy of being light enough to pass in order to have a *better quality* of life from the protection of whiteness. Analysis will focus on the mother's choice to protect her children and often negotiate with her body and her motherhood within a racist, traditional southern context. We will see the use of surrogacy as one form of protection that seeks to un-marginalize the women of the period. To add an unique dynamic to our focus texts and to illustrate the craft of the male writers, which a later study might use as a focus, I look at *Appalachee Red*'s use of Little Bit Johnson and Baby Sweets to show the force and trauma acted upon the female body and its effects on mothering.<sup>25</sup> Andrews creates a narration that fully realizes the female voice in a ritualistic rape scene. This feminization and humanization will elaborate this inclusion.

Morrison, Grau, and Jones depict a re-casting and re-writing of mothers' choices. The novels actively show mothers who claim the cradle and make daring decisions based on this ownership. The authors write against the various historical settings to allow their mothers agency. Issues of throwaway children and infanticide emerge in numerous texts as ways that mothers protect and do not protect their children within their marginalized slave positions. The mothers each attempt to mother in isolation or based on outdated constructions.<sup>26</sup> Their mother choices have an impact on the larger community. In many ways, the community does not act as a surrogate mother to protect these women or offer alternatives but as illustrated in Morrison and

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<sup>25</sup> Mark Twain's *Pudd'nhead Wilson* is the classic detective story that pokes fun at race by switching babies to test the nature vs. nurture theories of child development and race's impact on it. Black and white writers have long explored the notion of passing in American literature and the role of the mother in assisting in the passing narrative. Little Bit resembles Roxanne.

<sup>26</sup> The Corregidora women's distrust of written records becomes a generational model of procreation that makes no adjustment once the women are able to live outside of the institution of slavery. Their method of modeling keeps the sexual shackles on the women. For the women, procreation and their sexual identities remain focused on maintaining an oral historical record of the atrocities suffered through Corregidora's rapes and abuse.

Grau turns on them. The range of scholarship representing the neo-slave narrative period is vast and remarkable, but the scholarship does not fully explore the concept of mother modeling and the proliferation of lack of alternatives. The issue of surrogacy in neo-slave narratives, whether communal or individual, needs more discussion. Do the women own their bodies and have the agency to mother? Do these women provide their children with the only form of protection that they know? How do these women negotiate past these limitations?

Morrison transcends time by setting her novel, *Beloved*, in slavery. This looking back is a way to give voice to the voiceless. She epigraph her novel to “sixty million and more” and ends with “[i]t was not a story to pass on” or to be repeated ([vii], 275). Lucie Fultz compares how “[m]uch of the literature of slavery has focused on the external conditions of the slaves and patriarchal themes of the Southern plantation” but “*Beloved* evinces the ways in which personal interchange did more to heal and bind former slaves than did public, formulaic self-representations” (33). Texts that re-cast motherhood often suggest that the traumas should not be re-told. Morrison wanted to write a book that was not about the institution of slavery, but about “these anonymous people called slaves. What they do to keep on, how they make a life, what they’re willing to risk, however long it lasts, in order to relate to one another” (Angelo 257). This need to share a personal ownership of motherhood is what *Beloved* does, is a form of resistance since the family structure is held hostage to the racist and patriarchal confines of slavery. Marianne Hirsch argues that the text has “opened the space for maternal narrative in feminist fiction” (32). Family does not really exist in the traditional sense since the slaves have no ownership or legitimacy to claim family which Baby Suggs refers to as “the nastiness of life was that shock she received upon learning that nobody stopped playing checkers just because the pieces included her children” (*Beloved* 23). However, the notion of family existed. As framed

by *Beloved* and in many slave communities, the extended community functions as an extended/surrogate family which connects them to the model of family of African diasporas. Baby Suggs embodies this as the community matriarch figure that reunites with Sethe and her children in freedom. Motherhood is based on herd production, and the thought of owning one's children is dangerous because exercising this agency freed women from their objectification. Angela Davis reflects on the lack of agency that slave mothers had since "their infant children could be sold away from them like calves from cows" (7).

Marriage is a dismantled myth.<sup>27</sup> We are reminded that Sethe had "the amazing luck of six whole years of marriage," which was to one man who fathered all her children (*Beloved* 23). This represents a stolen legacy of a stolen people who are emotionally shut down and divorced due to loss and vulnerability. They must carve out small ways to create self-agency and resistance. The stories and tales of infanticide are throughout the text and time period. Even Sethe's mother threw away all her other children except Sethe since she was the only one conceived by a black man. Baby Suggs, Sethe, and Ella all lack models of motherhood and live with the dangers that loving can bring because motherhood can be stolen at any moment. We will later see in *Beloved* a role-reversal of the child, Denver, caring for the mother, Sethe. These will be examples of surrogacy as well the later mothering of Sethe by Paul D.

Morrison creates a character Sethe who becomes isolated based on a choice. Exercising the choice to kill her infant daughter will shape not only her life but the life of her mother-in-law, her daughter, and an entire community. Based on the public judgment from the murder, she is

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<sup>27</sup> Morrison in her depiction of Sethe and Halle provides an illustration of what marriage looked like during the times of slavery when it was often forbidden. The notion of marriage being dismantled is to show how the women in the text often did not have the protection of marriage when it came to support and to bearing their children. The period linked to Sethe's marriage and Baby Suggs' assumption of her husband's name illustrates the vulnerability of these unions in the midst of a destructive practice of slavery.

withdrawn from her living daughter, Denver and the larger community. She is unaware of the secret fear that Denver has of her, that her mother will eventually kill her also. The tales of infanticide are throughout the text but none is public and open for judgment like Sethe's. In the text, Ella is able to reflect and to realize her own choice to starve with her rape-conceived child. Her act of resistance through starvation remains private and un-judged. She acknowledges this to herself as she heads to help rescue Sethe after Denver's call for help: "[s]he had delivered but would not nurse, a hairy white thing, fathered by 'the lowest yet.' It lived five days never making a sound. The idea of that pup coming back to whip her too set her jaw working, and then Ella hollered" (258-9). As Morrison reflects on the creation of this story, she sustains that "the only person I felt had the right to ask her that question was Beloved, the child she killed. She could ask Sethe, 'What'd you do that for? Is this better? What do you know?' For me it was an impossible decision. Someone gave me the line for it at the time, which I have found useful. "It was the right thing to do, but she had no right to do it" (Moyers 272). The results of Sethe's actions cause isolation, and Denver even goes deaf as a result of the realization that she was in jail with her mother for the murder. It is later in the text that Denver saves Sethe by breaking-up the self-consuming mother daughter circle of Sethe and Beloved. Denver becomes the parental figure and surrogate. The initial trauma that brings Sethe to make the ultimate murderous decision is a result of the community surrendering its place as a surrogate. The community as the larger mother in the text abandons their daughters Sethe, Baby Suggs, and Denver by not warning them of schoolteacher's arrival (137,138,147,148,152, and 157). Morrison is able to use the framework of motherhood to look at individual's and community's responsibilities.

Sethe remains committed to protecting her children by removing them from their plantation life. Reconfiguring how she deals with the economics of the slave system is her path

to survival. She first removes them physically from Sweet Home. Economically, Sethe debits from the system—two girls out future value as producers, herself still young enough to produce as a breeder who could have countless more children like the majority of slave women, and the two boys who would be a loss of physical labor a labor at plantation. She wanted all her children to have a space called childhood.<sup>28</sup> As a slave mother, Sethe takes back her ownership physically and spiritually of her children. This method of taking them back leaves traumatic scars of fear. Sethe's killing of Beloved is the ultimate removal. Determined to give birth to Denver outside the confines of the Garner plantation, Sethe also removes them both from the Garner plantation ledger, and the later death of Beloved will void Sethe from the records of Sweet Home. Sethe meets an unlikely surrogate, Amy Denver, on her journey who assists her in birthing Denver.<sup>29</sup> This care and nurturing that she receives from Amy is an extension of motherlove from someone else in marginalized status as a white indentured servant. Sethe names her daughter after this sister-friend, Amy Denver, in the wilderness who is also fleeing. This connection with Amy is across-racial lines that women in the text make; however, Mrs. Garner remains problematic in her role by her failure to intervene on Sethe's behalf. Though Mrs. Garner is the slave owner, the plantation established at Sweet Home ironically sought to civilize slavery based on how they treated their slaves and allowing Sethe to pick Halle. Ms. Garner nurtured Sethe in many ways but surrenders to the overall patriarchy by being silent to Sethe's sexual abuse. She emerges as a false surrogate who does not protect Sethe from the abuses by her male relatives. When Mrs. Garner does not interact on behalf of her when her milk is stolen, the very sustenance of her motherhood, then Sethe knows that she as the mother,

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<sup>28</sup> I am using the term debit literally to show the economic value of Sethe's decision. She affects Sweet Home in terms of objects and production being removed from the ever so detailed list that Schoolteacher catalogues.

<sup>29</sup> There interaction is reminiscent of the relationship in Margaret Walker's novel *Jubilee*.

slave or not, must protect her children. It is the recognition of this that makes Sethe fly into action.

Like a bird swooping up its young, Sethe reacts to the final assault on her motherhood. Her mission to claim and to protect is put to the test as she recalls, “And if she thought anything, it was No. No. Nono. Nonono. Simple. She just flew” (163). This mythic bird image represents strength, powerfulness, and fearlessness. This fearlessness is a shift in Sethe who knows that she has limited choices, but that one must be made. She previously maintained her prescribed place at Sweet Home, but she now defies the system through escape and, in killing her child, alters her value in motherhood within the system forever.

This fearless desire to protect is missing from the birth mothers of the main subject texts. Due to her extreme act of protection, Sethe becomes an object and not a mother. Even the institution of slavery and Sethe’s previous relationship to motherhood could not have predicted this negation of her motherhood. Her act of murder reduces her value to the white culture, and her action becomes embedded with the other traumas of slavery that the black community endures. Once Sethe kills the baby, we are told:

Right off it was clear, to schoolteacher especially, that there was nothing there to claim. The three (now four – because she’d had the one coming when cut) pickaninnies they had hoped were alive and well enough to take back to Kentucky, take back and raise properly to do the work Sweet Home desperately needed, were not .... the woman ... besides having at least ten breeding years left. But not she’d gone wild, due to the mishandling of the nephew who’d overbeat her and made her cut and run. (149)

After this claim of agency, Sethe's placement is forever altered. Paul D associates her behavior as animal-like and non-human. Her value has been diminished. What do you do with the broken womb – the place of production that feeds and increases the value of the slave owner and plantation life? Schoolteacher realizes that “[t]he whole lot was lost now. Five. He could claim the baby struggling in the arms of the mewling old man, but who'd tend her?” (150). Sethe is no longer viewed as a viable mother figure that could care for her own child. However, Sethe's killing of Beloved leaves her womb sterile, destroyed in the eyes of the community of blacks and slaves. It also leaves her with unimaginable loss.

*Beloved* provides many illustrations of how slaves and free blacks are commodified, and as a result, how the value of motherhood was changed. As Erik Dussere points out, Morrison is “forced to alter and recreate the form and style of [her] narrative[s] in order to articulate...the economics of slavery” which recreates motherhood within the commodification of slavery, a social constraint like no other (331). The institution of slavery relied on a self-contained reproductive system that furnished slaves through the slave woman's womb.<sup>30</sup> The slave woman who could bear children represented a profitable possession. Paul D expresses this realization as he learns his own value that “he has always known, or believed he did, his value – as a hand, a laborer who could make profit on a farm – but now he discovers his worth, which is to say he learns his price. The dollar value of his weight, his strength, his heart, his brain, his penis, and his future” (226). His value as a person is further objectified by the references to him as “one.” Schoolteacher says, for “this here one,” and I could

’trade this here one for \$900 if he could get it and set out to secure the breeding one, her foal, and the other one if he found him. With the money from “this here

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<sup>30</sup> The station of the child followed the mother. This is one reason fleeing while pregnant was another motivator even though Sethe would still be considered a run away.



one” he could get two young ones, twelve or fifteen years old. And maybe with the breeding one, her three pickaninnies, and whatever the foal might be, he and his nephews would have seven niggers and Sweet Home would be worth the trouble it was causing him. (227)

The value within the slave system is on the slave women, the breeder. In the above quote, Sethe is nameless and reduced to an animal like Paul D. Later in the novel, Paul D will also reduce her to this animal like state. The bodies of slave women were used in a variety of ways. Morrison provides us with the images of “wife,” “mother,” “wet nurse,” “maid,” and “rape victim.” These uses of the black slave woman’s body produces something for the dominant white culture and slave owner, but slave women receive nothing in return, except with what Sethe dares to claim – her children.

Within the system of slavery, the notion of “wife and mother” does not exist in the same way it does for whites.<sup>31</sup> Sweet Home crafts imaginary and figurative myths of these roles. Sethe recalls her mother saying, “‘This is your ma’am. This,’ and she pointed. ‘I am the only one got this mark now. The rest dead. If something happens to me and you can’t tell me by my face, you can know me by this mark’” (61). Baby Suggs’s decision regarding her name reflects “all she had left of the ‘husband’ she claimed” (142). The image of Baby Suggs, a generational surrogate and example of motherhood for Sethe, exercising her right to claim is powerful, but it happens only after her son has purchased her freedom. Agency for her only exists in freedom. The image of her reflecting on the pact between her and her ‘husband’ is empowering since “whichever one got a chance to run would take it; together if possible, alone if not, and no looking back” again shows that Baby Suggs cannot harbor ill feelings towards those who

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<sup>31</sup> See Foster’s book, *Til Death or Distance Do Us Part: Marriage and the Making of African America* for a history of marriages in the context of slavery.

exercise choice and claim agency (142). These examples of the fragile establishment of marriage within the slave system shed light on Sethe's own compromised position. These relationships reaffirm the prescribed roles within a slave system.

The role of husband established by Garner shatters the family-like structure and ultimately, the mind of Halle. Like other mothers in the study, Sethe attempts to mirror the dominate white cultures' roles which prove to be false. The role of husband mimicked from the white patriarchal structure offers her no protection as a black woman. Halle is removed from production as a breeder, and he is useless as a slave since he can no longer produce anything nor work. Sethe even imagines, "how sweet that would have been: the two of them back by the milk shed, squatting by the churn, smashing cold, lumpy butter into their faces with not a care in the world. Feeling it slippery, sticky – rubbing it in their hair, watching it squeeze through their fingers. What a relief to stop it right there. Close. Shut. Squeeze the butter" (70). Sethe wonders, "other people went crazy, why couldn't she? Other people's brains stopped, turned around and went on to something new, which is what must have happened to Halle" and concludes with "but her three children were chewing sugar teat under a blanket on their way to Ohio and no butter play would change that" (70). This abrupt "but" signifies that for her, a mother, insanity would not protect and provide for her children. Providing for Sethe meant giving her children the nourishment that they need from the milk she had produced. For Sethe the sugar teat represents her form of resistance to engaging a wet nurse or surrogate. There will be a shift in later novels especially as black women are perceived to have more agency of their own, and their decisions become less about survival and about establishing resistance.

Sethe understands her placement as a black. She also understands how daring it is to claim her own motherhood. There is no need to explain this distorted placement to her as she re-

calculates her surroundings. Value becomes distorted as Sethe makes the ultimate decision – to debit her child from the tablet. This decision for Sethe is an emotional one. Prior to this decision, she successfully removed herself and her other children from the institution that marginalized and made her sub-human. She says, “I did it. I got us all out. Without Halle too...I birthed them and I got em out and it wasn’t no accident. I did that. I had help, of course, lots of that, but still it was me doing it; me saying, *Go on*, and *Now*. Me having to look out. Me using my own head” (162). The ability to claim the method of her freedom and acknowledgement of her own intellect is powerful at a time when she should have been a non-thinking breeder. Sethe acknowledges and claims her pride, saying,

it was a kind of selfishness I never knew nothing about before. It felt good. Good and right...Look like I loved em more after I got here. Or maybe I couldn’t love em proper in Kentucky because they wasn’t mine to love. But when I got here, when I jumped down off that wagon – there wasn’t nobody in the world I couldn’t love if I wanted to. You know what I mean?” as she describes to Paul D the feeling of being free to love her children. (162)

Even within Sethe’s feeling, Paul D knew like Sethe that “he wasn’t surprised to learn that they had tracked her down in Cincinnati, because, when he thought about it now, her price was greater than his; property that reproduced itself without cost” (228). The act of re-production is the other reason that Sethe sought to remove her children, especially her girl children first. The slave mother recognizes the increased value of her female child (future breeders), and the potential trauma to be endured. She had (some) models from her mother and Baby Suggs to recognize the precarious position black girls were in. The value is different from the value of the black child we will see later in the study, especially girl children.

Sethe refused to be re-enslaved and her motherhood re-appropriated. Sethe says: “Oh, no. I wasn’t going back there. I don’t care who found who. Any life but not that one. I went to jail instead. Denver was just a baby so she went right along with me. Rats bit everything in there but her” (42). Sethe actively protects and mothers Denver even in the midst of a rat-infested jail. Throughout the text, Sethe and slaves (including Sixo) struggle to claim their own agency by adding value to their lives as human beings and not possessed stock; however, Sethe maintains a distance that allows her to more easily remove herself from the position of a commodity. She maintains more of herself in her claimed motherhood. This removal of herself creates a choice for her and therefore, allows her to attain agency. Reflecting back on the actual space of the murder and her return from jail, Sethe notes that the fence was gone. She says, “that’s where they had hitched their horses – where she saw, floating above the railings as she squatted in the garden, schoolteacher’s hat. By the time she faced him, looked him dead in the eye, she had something in her arms that stopped him in his tracks. He took a backward step with each jump of the baby heart until finally there were none.” “I stopped him,”... “I took and put my babies where they’d be safe” (163-164). This sense of safety, fierce love, scared Paul D as he realized, “this here Sethe talked about safety with a handsaw. This here new Sethe didn’t know where the world stopped and she began. Suddenly he saw what Stamp Paid wanted him to see: more important than what Sethe had done was what she claimed. It scared him” (164). It was indeed dangerous for a black woman to claim anything, let alone her own children/flesh and for Sethe to see it as her job to protect her children in a system that did not allow her to be rewarded for her labor was unthinkable. In response to her love being “too thick,” Sethe proclaims that “Love is or it ain’t. Thin love ain’t love at all,” and that the love of her children succeeded since her children “ain’t at Sweet Home. Schoolteacher ain’t got em....It ain’t my job to know what’s

worse. It's my job to know what is and to keep them away from what I know is terrible. I did that" (164,165). She accepts full responsibility and offers no remorse/apology because with her agency, she is able to appropriate the power necessary to have the choice and to make the decision few could make. No man was present to offer any protection, and she as a black mother had to protect what was precious to her, her children. In this appropriation, she is reduced to the image of an animal by Paul D's statement, "You got two feet, Sethe, not four" (165). This statement Sethe knows is good-bye, and she does not seek to bring clarity to the situation since as Baby Suggs whose heart "pumped out of love, the mouth that spoke the Word" learns "they came in her yard anyway and she could not approve or condemn Sethe's rough choice. One or the other might have saved her, but beaten up by the claims of both, she went to bed. The whitefolks had tired her out at last" (180). This realization was enough for Baby Suggs who could not choose to go against Sethe's claim. The blame for Baby Suggs is transferred to the larger institution from which Sethe sought to protect her children. The resolution of Baby Suggs to acknowledge that there was no love thick enough to protect renders no judgment to Sethe and shifts the blame to the larger society and white folks who drove Sethe to this sort of extreme protection. In the later texts, the various situations of the mother highlights and questions the decreased desire to protect their children, especially their daughters when circumstances are not to an extreme as marginalized and traumatizing as slavery.<sup>32</sup> Why are these mothers not present and alert in their mothering? How does protection function outside of the needs of basic survival? In an early discussion with Paul D when the topic of her producing his child comes up, Sethe is "frightened by the thought of having a baby once more. Needing to be good enough,

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<sup>32</sup> The institution of slavery represents multi-layered horrors to which no other historical period in American literature can compare. The neo-slave narratives depicted here show that protecting children was innate. It was a core part of motherhood and mothering. The extremely marginalized and victimized slave mother recognized that claiming motherhood had a costly price which is not always illustrated in later works. Motherhood was a privilege.

alert enough, strong enough, *that* caring—again. Having to stay alive just that much longer” (132). She knows that no one will protect her children like her; one of the greatest challenges for the slave mother is actually being present to protect.

The novel *Beloved* bears witness and redefines survival under extreme circumstances. Sethe proclaims that “[n]obody will ever get my milk no more except my own children” (200). The very act of her milk being stolen symbolizes her final fall into production for the Garners. Sethe’s escape from Sweet Home is her only method of survival just as murder is the only method of protecting her children. She inverts the myth of the slave wife and mother to create her own form of motherlove that seeks no apologies and does not regret the choice that only she could make. It takes motherlove to make a choice like Sethe’s. It also takes motherlove to reappropriate your body for your children. The claiming of her physical breasts as sacred and not part of the experimental record of Sweet Home or the abuse of white men is dismantled as she “went and got you a gravestone, but I didn’t have money enough for the carving so I exchanged (bartered, you might say) what I did have and I’m sorry to this day I never thought to ask him for the whole thing: all I heard of what Reverend Pike said, Dearly Beloved, what is what you are to me and I don’t have to be sorry about getting only one word, and I don’t have to remember the slaughterhouse and the Saturday girls who worked its yard” (184). This choice in what she does choose to remember and what she is willing to let go in the name of honoring *her* child is powerful. Megan Sweeney’s notion that justice will entail taking the oppressors language to define a new justice is witnessed in this scene and the actual murder of Beloved. Sethe knows that the value within the slave system is her body and that the commodification of the black woman, sexually, is the foundation of the system. She uses her sex to barter for the tombstone since she did not have the money to pay for it.

The sexualized status of black women continues. This exchange becomes one of the only ways that black women have as a form of power to equalize their marginalization. However, the watching of the stonemason's son is a mirror showing the schoolteacher and the nephews, which makes Sethe's engagement more of a spectacle than a full equalization. It does get her the tombstone, and she does provide for Beloved the most important word that she heard. Though the "dearly" is omitted, Sethe has eternally internalized that her daughter was dear. The question of how much, in Sethe's eyes, has already been answered. She says,

I got a tree on my back and a haunt in my house, and nothing in between but the daughter I am holding in my arms. No more running – from nothing. I will never run from another thing on this earth. I took one journey and paid for the ticket, but let me tell you something, Paul D. Garner: it cost too much! Do you hear me? It cost too much. Now sit down and eat with us or leave us be. (15)

Sethe has paid her dues. As a result, she desires no forgiveness from the outside world.

Morrison has succeeded in her mission of having the only person who can hold her accountable appear to judge her. Within this judgment, it becomes clear that Sethe's all consuming love lead to her choice to remove her child from a system that would forever make her run. This is the fiercest form of motherlove.

The patriarchal structure which not only defines her placement within the society and her family but also dictates and judges her methods of mothering, is shattered. Her choice binds her to an unimaginable act. The description of the "pretty little slavegirl [who] had recognized a hat, and split to the woodshed to kill her children" totally contradicts the woman who is left after removing her children from slavery whose eyes were "the worst ones were those of the nigger woman who looked like she didn't have any. Since the whites in them had disappeared and since

they were as black as her skin, she looked blind” (157, 150). No one else was going to step-in to protect Sethe’s children. The community decided not to warn her and viewed her accomplishment of escaping Sweet Home with contempt, not in support and love.

The community mother fails since they do not warn them of the slave catcher coming. Sethe who is always aware of her placement even in her role as “wife and mother” knew that the role of the slave catcher is to avoid “killing what you were paid to bring back alive. Unlike a snake or a bear, a dead nigger could not be skinned for profit and was not worth his own dead weight in coin,” and she knows that in death her children’s value would dissolve in a system that needed them alive to work and to produce (148). Yes, Sethe makes a horrific choice, but within this choice, she establishes her own agency and is resistant to the market. In establishing her agency and mothering her daughter, Denver, Sethe provides a model to Denver who will provide Sethe with the initial motherlove that allows her to be saved. Denver has become more self-sufficient and as a result, she mothers and acts as the primary surrogate for her mother. She also is the live saver that connects Sethe back to the community. This is an example of the reverse mothering bond. The living daughter enters to mother the mother. Taking her daughter’s life is a reaffirming of her life, and the life that she wanted her children to live. Denver’s maturation gives Denver a resolve to exorcise the spirit of Beloved from her mother with the help of the community of women who release they were not without sin and were victims of a bankrupt moral system. Beloved drains Sethe to nurse her own life as an infant. It takes the community to appear and defiantly re-claim Sethe. The surrogates emerge to nurse and to nurture her to wellness. This represents a re-defining of legacy of the slave mother and embraces the community and surrogate as mother. Her resistance comes at a price, but by escaping the false placement in the family matrix, she can hear that “You your best thing, Sethe. You are” (273).



As Paul D utters these words to a saved but battered Sethe, he is her surrogate-caregiver. He reminds Sethe that she has value. She has lost so much by being the sole protector of her children that it is important that she is at the end allowed to surrender to the care of several surrogates. Throughout the novel, several surrogates exist. For Sethe in the end, the memory of Baby Suggs and the modeling that both Sethe and Baby Suggs provided allow Denver to protect and to nurture her mother. The community and Paul D re-enter Sethe's life after the establishment of Denver in the role of mother figure. All three, Denver, Paul D, and the community fulfill the role of surrogate to ease the trauma and help Sethe rewrite her own legacy. The legacy of slavery provided many models of survival; however, not all models will be nurturing to the women they seek to sustain.

Gayl Jones's *Corregidora* traces the story of incest through three generations of Corregidora women who struggle to right the original rape. This story, set in the 1960s, follows the experience of Ursa Corregidora who is the product of a series of rapes. The Spanish slave owner Corregidora raped Ursa's great-grandmother, his slave, who bore him a child, Ursa's grandmother. Corregidora then raped Ursa's grandmother, and she bore a child who will become Ursa's mother. The last direct product of Corregidora's rapes, Ursa's mother, will continue the tradition to pass down story of incest through the only tool that these women have had for generations: the power to make generations. By making generations, the Corregidora women have been taught that this becomes the only way to bear witness to the horrific rapes and to tell their stories. It also removes any sort of self-pleasure from the act of sex. The concept of the written word collapses into an oral tradition filled with reproduction. Ursa's life is entirely based on a rape that occurred during slavery, it imprisons her in a marriage of abuse and control. Her mother's marriage evolved only as a way to make generations. Love and companionship had no

influence. Her mother believed and followed the decree as the only method to bear witness against the abuse. Ursa's mother provides her with no concept of modeling nor alternatives outside of this physical-truth method. Ursa explains the tradition to Cat, her friend who is a lesbian and saving surrogate

My great-grandmother told my grandmamma the part she lived through that my grandmamma didn't live through and my grandmamma told my mama what they both lived through and my mama told me what they all lived through and we were suppose to pass it down like that from generation to generation so we'd never forget. Even though they'd burned everything to lay like it didn't never happen. Yeah, and where's the next generation. (9)

Her mother believes that protection from future abuse relates directly to keeping the horrific burden of Corregidora alive.

The interesting approach of Jones's historical commentary ends on an empowering note and breaks the cycle. All situations have a cycle – poverty, incest, and rape. Ursa, similar to Precious in *Push*, breaks out of the cycle because of the intervention of another woman who befriends her, a surrogate. Ursa's art form becomes her way to break the cycle and crippling effects of the Corregidora curse. After her husband, Mutt, throws her down a flight of stairs; she loses the baby she carries and becomes barren. So, what becomes of women whose primary existence is based on the ability to have children? She wonders about this after the hysterectomy “But I *am* different now, I was thinking. I have everything they had, except the generations. I can't make generations. And even if I still had my womb, even if the first baby *had* come – what would I have done then? Would I have kept it up? Would I have been like *her*, or *them*?” (60). For Ursa, encouragement from her friend Cat becomes her method to give birth to herself

through her songs and her voice. Like Precious whose art form of poetry and writing later becomes her voice and moment of self-definition, Ursa's singing allows her to create herself. Ursa experiences a re-birth. Jones cleverly weaves yet another narrative within their text: the narrative of the art form. Art becomes a lifeline for Ursa that provides her with purpose. It empowers her to acknowledge her past and to move on. Her cycle of abuse ends through this empowerment, and the resolve of the outsider, Cat, helps her evolve through love and nurturing.

This text mirrors the effects and damage caused by the historical implications of Jim Crow and the Jezebel on the sexual perception of Black women. The community and the women marginalize themselves by devaluing who they are as people. Due to the legal placements that began to emerge after the emancipation proclamation, black people in general were even more marginalized. During this time, many black women writers and activists commented on the lack of protection and agency that existed for black women. Anna Julia Cooper stresses that black women were often left alone without a father or brother to offer any type of protection (25). The placement of Black women on the plantation as either mammy, field hand, or houser also emerged in the images of the jezebel and tragic mulatto.

Black women as hypersexual and the victimization that occurs to the community begin to be explored in various periods of literature. The psychological effects of black men not being able to protect black women further victimized black women. The rapes of Corregidora function as an extreme and realistic depiction of the trauma upon the black female body. The male's lack of protection often based on their own marginalization becomes secondary as these writers become quite critical of the lack of protection that their mothers and the women in the community provide for them. The texts trace the history of sexual abuse of black women. The tale of incest is nothing foreign to the histories of slavery or to the fiction of the present. Early

within the novel of *Corregidora*, Ursa's great-grandmother sought isolation from the community as a method of not only protecting herself but also of protecting the community against the horrific violence of *Corregidora*. She acts as a surrogate to the community by thinking of them when they would have rather forgotten about her.

Jones's book is set, in the 1960s, responds to a growing acceptance of black culture and freer sexual behaviors. In her neo-slave narrative, Jones is able to trace and show the historical victimization and abuse that black women have endured because of being viewed as sexual commodities. The definition of black women as the Jezebel has followed them from the images of slavery into the future regardless of their environment.

The generational impact of the rapes are clearly outline in the novel. Even though Jones's Ursa develops in a household with a mother and father and is not a result of the rape, her existence and interaction with her mother are dominated by this duty. Her mother plays a pivotal role in the abuse of their daughter by insisting that Ursa bear witness to the original rape through her own procreation. She also reinforces that creating and having children is the only way to tell their story. Though she is not a product of incest, her generational descendant of the process and her sexual identification leave her just as entrapped and marginalized by it. It is not until Cat enters her life that Ursa is able to end this entrapment. Cat is a social deviant since she is a proud and independent lesbian. Initially, lesbianism threatens Ursa who ends up in another marriage. Cat's support remains consistent. Though not a mother herself, she enters Ursa's life as a mother-surrogate who helps to birth Ursa through her singing that allows her to create herself. These women experience re-birth. When an outside person comes in and assumes the role of protector and nurturer, the women are allowed to heal and to be nurtured; however, when no one comes forward to help, the women in this study are left with two choices, insanity or death. Cat

sustains and encourages Ursa; she becomes the mother who unlike the biological mother guides and protects through uplifting and nurturing Ursa's talents and gifts not through the lens of a distorted legacy. Also, Cat acts as a catalyst for Ursa. She enters Ursa's life a critical moment when suicide and insanity could have engulfed and destroyed Ursa. Jones successfully creates a multi-layer narrative. Two surrogates, her art and Cat help Ursa to reshape her experience and empower herself to move on with her life on her own terms.

In *Beloved* and *Corregidora*, failure at mothering surfaces, and the question remains – who fails these girls the most? The robbing of innocence of a child creates many places to point blame. Each text tells a story of how sexual abuse destroys the girlhood of women and the challenges it places upon them. Both novels are survivor narratives. They are part of a canon of literature within black women's writing that bear witness to the historical trauma endured by black women. This is not to say that black women are the only ones who write about incest and trauma and its effects on the victim, but it appears to be a larger analysis of a collective consciousness among black women writers who use these themes to bear witness to women's identities. *Beloved* and *Corregidora* show how women make survival choices that leave an impact on how they mother. The re-creation of the slave mother's experiences in these two neo-slave narratives allows the writer to re-cast the objectification of black women and their roles as mothers. I believe this is one reason for the popularity of neo-slave narratives because it provides an opportunity for the writer to give voice to the often unspeakable. By writing of rape and the female body, Morrison and Jones use the body as a vessel to claim self-agency and motherhood. Both writers also show the influence of the community and the motherlove that appears to save the women.

The last introductory text, a re-writing of a historical southern plantation novel, is Shirley

Ann Grau's *Keepers of the House*. This text features a unique mother-surrogate, Margaret, and the choices that she makes in the name of protection for her children and how she uses her body as a tool to create this protection. The Pulitzer Prize novel, *Keepers of the House* gazes at black maternity through the lens of the southern patriarchy. Grau, a white southerner, takes the story of legacy and race full-circle. Many images of motherhood are set against the backdrop of the southern identity of a family. Margaret's life is filled with mystery from her isolated beginning. Often feeling slighted that her mother abandoned her and that her white lineage did not result in her being light enough to pass, she establishes her mission in motherhood. By re-imagining the miscegenation story, Grau re-birth the notion of legacy to craft a story to show the hypocrisy of race during the height of the Civil Right's Movement. However, the novel is not a full neo-slave narrative; Grau traces the Howland's legacy to their setting on their rural land and their placement within the American Civil War. The granddaughter of William Howell is also one of the surrogates within the text. She is narrator as well as keeper of as she describes it "for them, for me. I feel the pressure of generations behind me, pushing me along the recurring cycles of birth and death...They are dead, all of them. I am caught and tangled around by their doings. It is as if their lives left a weaving of invisible threads in the air of this house, of this town, of this county. And I stumbled and fell into them" (11). This falling into is the falling into a world that Margaret, a black mother created.

Margaret sees whiteness and its ability to give her children the protection that they will need. Margaret represents an orphan in the text since her mother leaves her in the care of her grandfather. Her life parallels the life of Abigail, the narrator. Margaret's mother leaves her to find her white father and never returns. She leaves Margaret to develop in a rural isolated community with her grandfather who is her surrogate and caregiver. The chance meeting upon

the riverbanks brings William and Margaret's lives together. Their initial interaction is described casually: "She heard his words but she had not gotten herself used to this new situation, then she sharpened and focused on her ears again" (94). "I got to get myself a housekeeper...And I reckon it's got to be somebody young, account of it's no easy job. The house needs a lots of work, you can see that from what I been telling you" (94). To which Margaret responds nonchalantly, "Why you telling me?" and he answers that "You might want the job, seeing it's open" (94). When William inquires if she needs to speak to her family first, he is alerted to Margaret's past. She shares,

"Got none."

"Not a mama?" He frowned, unbelieving.

"She been gone."

"A while back?"

"She never come back from looking for my papa."

He chuckled. "I heard tell of things like that." (94-95)

Then Margaret says, "My papa was white" (95). This reference to a white father does not alarm William, but he concedes that "She did not raise her head the way a white woman might. She didn't act at all like a white woman. As for her having a white father, he didn't believe it, not with the color of that skin. But lots of gals said so, and you had to let them have the comfort of it, if there was any" (95). Margaret accepts the role of housekeeper that day on the riverbank. Prior to leaving her isolated community, she goes to tell her grandfather of her new role. Never one to give much affection, her grandfather seems unfazed when Margaret announces that she is leaving to be the housekeeper of William Howland. The role that Margaret goes to fill becomes the cross between the mammy figure and jezebel that we will later see in our study. This begins

the relationship of William and Margaret. The chapter ends describing their first physical encounter. William observes her, “But there was something – she had her hair pinned back and she was studying her own hands – that changed his mind. She seemed small and fragile again, and for the first time in his life, he wanted to hit a woman. It was the bend of the neck that did it. It was so exposed and patient. She bore him five children, all told. Three of them lived, two girls and a boy” (109). This scene surfaces again when Abigail, the main narrator and heir to the Howland legacy, leaves Margaret after William’s death some thirty years later.

Numerous images of motherhood, direct and indirect mothering, appear within the text. Margaret lacks a modeling of mothering herself. She directs her mothering through the lens of the ability to pass. This form of protection becomes the one that she assumes to give her children to afford them an unhampered life confined by blackness. Margaret also mothers others in the text such as both Abigails as well as William. William Howland has a daughter, Abigail, whose marriage ends and causes her to return to the family homestead. While at the family homestead, she and her daughter, Abigail, both get nurtured and mothered by Margaret. Abigail, the granddaughter, reflects, “Sometimes I feel that my grandfather was my father. And that Margaret, black Margaret, was my mother. Living in a house like this you got your feelings all mixed up.... She was his wife, only she wasn’t. She kept house for him and the law said they couldn’t marry, couldn’t ever. Their children took their mother’s last name, so though they were Howlands they all had the last name Carmichael” (113). This surrogacy that they provide Abigail protects and mothers her. In their death, she will become their surrogate to protect and honor their lives together.

Grau’s novel seeks to redefine protection and nurturing in the midst of southern legitimacy. When his only son is ill, William Howland calls the town physician, a cousin, to see



about him. When the cousin realizes it is for Robert, he exclaims “You got me out on a night like this for a nigger kid?” and to William responds, “To hell with them, ... I’m telling you you’re staying the night” (116, 117). Abigail’s mother helps to smooth the situation over by saying “Cousin Harry, you’re spending the night because your little cousin is so sick. Nobody would mind that” and “Margaret will be very glad to have you here. She’s worried frantic over the boy” (117). Abigail reflects on her mother by sharing “My mother liked Margaret. Maybe because Margaret had everything she hadn’t: size and strength and physical endurance. Maybe my mother was so sure of her own position that she couldn’t be challenged by her father’s Negro mistress. And maybe too, maybe as simple as this: my mother was a lady and a lady is unfailingly polite and gentle to everyone” (117). Margaret acts as a surrogate to both Abigails. She accompanies William to New Mexico when Abigail, his daughter, gets sick and dies. As the younger Abigail reflects after her mother’s death,

I got a hard frightened lump in my stomach and it stayed for a couple of days while I felt lonesome and confused. But it didn’t last. I hadn’t seen too much of my mother since we’d moved back; even when she was living in the house with us, she was mostly lying down or reading in the summerhouse. It was Margaret who took care of us. And it was Margaret I missed when they left. But that all passed too. After all they’d been gone a year, and that’s a long time to a child. You miss them and you wonder about them and you hurt—hard, for a while. But it eases and it’s over. (135)

This image of Margaret reinforces the later assertion by Abigail when she challenges Robert that “Don’t you remember even that much about her? When you all left here, you were gone forever. She didn’t have children anymore...She did what she could...and you wouldn’t have the sense

nor the courage to do the same” (190). She understands the great sacrifice that Margaret made as a mother to give her children a better life. The thought of losing Robert for Margaret and William years ago was too great and would have been the end of the Howland line.

The other image of motherhood is when Abigail, William’s daughter, is unable to fulfill her role of mother after her husband leaves her and then leaves the raising of her own daughter to her father (she is his only child) and to Margaret, the black maid. Margaret mothered not only the first Abigail but also her daughter. Margaret claims the granddaughter Abigail more than once as her own. Abigail does not receive any sort of sound mothering except from the occasional interaction with her own aunt who finds the fact that the father has not remarried unjust. The granddaughter, Abigail, grows up in the house with her grandfather and Margaret and their children. Abigail, like the outside world, interprets the children as illegitimate. The novel is full of images of motherhood and the choices that mothers make against the backdrop of southern fallacies of racial purity and heritage. Margaret believes that allowing her children to pass is a gift. She abandons her relationship with them to help them pass into the white culture. To Margaret severing her children’s ties to herself and ultimately to blackness becomes the best form of protection that she feels that she can offer. In her mind by removing the marker of blackness, Margaret feels that within the cultural confines of southern life, she has not only provided her children with education and freedom but also with opportunity. She ships them off to boarding school and does not allow them to come home. Their father is the only one who visits them while they are away. Disowning her daughter for accepting her blackness and marking herself with a dark husband causes Margaret to feel betrayed since Margaret herself did not have the chance to pass due to her pigmentation. The perceived illegitimate relationship between William Howland and Margaret becomes ironic since it dismantles the core myth of

miscegenation. The marriage also provides their children with the protection of legitimacy and lineage.

The life and survival of Abigail is a result of Margaret being her surrogate mother. After her grandfather's death and her husband's political ambitions quickly dominate their lives, Abigail finds herself faced with the truth behind the complex relationship between her grandfather and Margaret. She learns that their marriage was real and legitimate. She learns that the southern image of family does not include legitimizing bi-racial children and that she will be attacked based on the decisions of William and Margaret. Abigail learns that she is marked as well due to her grandfather's action of legitimacy and as a result, she must protect her children since she now lacks the historical protector, a white husband as a white woman. As Abigail reflects on her family after she visits Margaret after her grandfather's death, Grau interjects the image of William in the car with her, she sees why he chose Margaret. Abigail surmises that

He'd protected and cared for so many females in his life, that he just looked on us as responsibilities and burdens. Loved, but still burdens.....Sometimes he must have felt that he was being smothered in dependents. There hadn't been a man of his blood in so long. And that must have worried him too....All those clinging female arms....And then there was Margaret. Who was tall as he was. Who could work like a man in the fields. Who bore him a son. Margaret, who'd asked him for nothing. Margaret, who reminded him of the free-moving Alberta of the old tales. Margaret, who was strong and black. And who had no claim on him.

(173)

Abigail is able to draw the contrast between the white women in her grandfather's life and Margaret. She recognizes that he was able to give him an heir. She learns that they had equality

in their relationship and a genuine love that deserves protection similar to the protection that grandfather always provided. She absorbs the strength of her mother Margaret. Abigail assumes the role of dutiful daughter of Margaret. She makes it her mission to honor the name and spirit of Margaret as she lashes out at Margaret's birth children. She is unafraid that she will have to mother her children alone because she knows she has been given a great model of motherhood, Margaret.

Within this period of American literature, there is one text that is important to this study and incorporates the male perspective describing both trauma and motherhood. In *Appalachee Red*, Raymond Andrews uses a feminized voice filled with sensitivity to describe the trauma of ritualized rape. Andrews narrative and depiction of rape problematizes and complicates the notion of a strictly feminine lens.<sup>33</sup> He employs humor and wit to describe the issues of race and abandonment. Throughout the novel, Andrew's narrator confronts not only the horrific but also the unimaginable in the midst of the small southern town. Similar to the novels discussed earlier in this chapter, *Appalachee Red* functions as a continuation with an interjection of the male experience into the female sphere of violation and motherhood. Unlike the earlier novels of Faulkner (*Light in August*, 1932, and *Absalom, Absalom!*, 1936) or Twain (*Pudd'nhead Wilson*, 1884) of the mixed raced or bastard child or the trauma of race/rape, Andrews causes the reader to double check the gender of the writer since the narration so carefully and visually depicts the various traumas upon the female body.

Reading like a fairytale gone wrong, *Appalachee Red* tells of a bastard child who comes home to re-write his own history and ultimately that of his mother. The notion of choosing whiteness is illustrated in the three previous novels but unlike the other texts, *Appalachee Red* is

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<sup>33</sup> See Laura S. Patterson for a detailed description of the effects of gender on writing rape in southern novels.

full of social deviants who find their way into this town and must struggle to not only survive but also to expand in order to live to the fullest. Three instances within the text will be worthwhile to highlight. The relationships between Little Bit and John Morgan, Little Bit and Big Man Thompson, the products of these unions, and the rape of Baby Sweet all create a multi-layered examination of the ownership of the female body, motherhood, and abandonment.

Little Bit represents the image of the sensual black woman, wife and mother and the nanny. Like many black women and mothers before her, she is willing to do what is necessary to care for her man and to protect her children. Little Bit is a complex character and becomes a mythic illustration of the strength of the black southern woman. Throughout the novel, women especially the black women are depicted in the midst of chaos with strength. Little Bit Thompson does what she feels is necessary to survive and maintain her marriage. Her relationship with her husband is marked by her abuse, which occurs through her working relationship at the Morgan family home. Her initial interaction with young John Morgan is camouflaged in rape. She is told, “if she wanted to keep her job with his family, considered at the time by most town blacks to be about the best whites in the area to work for, then she would have to submit to his wishes“ (7). This ultimatum causes her to submit. Would no one believe that she had been raped or did she not have any other choice based on her own marginalized status? Could she have resisted and what would have been the cost of resistance? The act of a black woman working in a white man’s kitchen symbolizes many historical things for the black male/female relationships. It brings the historical baggage of trauma that could occur to black women at the hands of the white males of the house. The question remains – what way do black women who are viewed as valueless have to protect themselves against the advances of men, especially white men who were the law and enforcers? Little Bit submits to the advances of

John Morgan and continues her duties in her veil and mourning clothing years after the death of her husband, Big Man.

The devaluing of the black female body through the placement as a jezebel is viewed in several of the texts. The black women in the text are extremely sexualized by the gaze of outsiders which plays upon the stereotypes of the southern black woman. The typical encounter with them ends in sex or some sort of sexual contact. The savior image, re-written as the bi-racial bastard child, Red, represents the mixture of the two races. He reflects on his time in the army when no one knew what to do with him. He was an unwanted outsider. His mother sends him to live with his Aunt Cora who fulfills the role of surrogate for him. The child would not have been safe and the standing of the mother would have further been reduced. Little Bit Thompson recognizes that Big Man Thompson would not condone a white man's child in his home. This is historically different from the reality that many black men did embrace the products of rape from their wives and women. The product of rape, Red, rescues a young black woman from a similar fate. This young woman, Baby Sweets, starts out as a runaway and becomes the captive to the town's sheriff, Boots. Red witnesses Baby Sweets's abortion of Boots's child.

Baby Sweets is merely a child herself. Her mother is invisible in the narrative, and her father has the role of the overseer of the peach orchard. It is made evident that the father is powerless to protect Baby Sweets. As residents and workers at the Hard Labor Hole peach orchards, there is nowhere for her to either hide or protect herself. She and her dancing become the object of desire for not only the white owner but also the black men and boys in the fields. Her father forbids her dancing. A possible explanation could be a father protecting his daughter from the gaze of men. But based on his role as the overseer on the plantation, his objection

represents his desires to keep his position by controlling his daughter and keeping her in her prescribed place. The fateful evening when it is disclosed that she must report to the Alberta Orchard in the morning to assume her new role as the mistress of the plantation makes her flee. The ironic humor is that the orchard owner is infertile (32). Andrews also illustrates the ill-fated relationship of the plantation woman as the wife of the orchard looks on daily to witness her husband and his transgressions that parallels the later outburst of Mrs. Morgan regarding Mr. Morgan going to Little Bit's funeral. Andrews's ability to capture the fine line between black women and their illicit relations with white men is illustrated throughout the text. The historical love-hate relationship is evident in the interactions of Morgan and Little Bit as well as in the entrapment of Baby Sweets by the town's sheriff, after escape from becoming the sexual slave of Mr. Ed (served up by her own father). The black women's entrapment echoes the scene from *Beloved* of Ella's capture and detention. Because of enduring repeated rapes, both women become pregnant. Both women reject the products of their rapes: Ella forces the death of her own male child by her failure to nurse the baby while Baby Sweets aborts her child at the hand of a white doctor with the help of her surrogate and protector Red. He protects Baby Sweets from having to carry the child of white rapists as well as relieves her of the decision to abandon the child as his mother did him.

Red appears to have the answer for everyone. He becomes the mediator and savior of those who have been left behind. He himself is one of the undesirables who was abandoned by his mother and sent away. Her initial thoughts of reclaiming him subside to the fear or trauma it would cause to her relationship with her husband. The child who is abandoned mirrors the others who are considered socially deviant. Red's experience within the service becomes his rebirthing of himself. He assumes the visual name of the mixed race child from the military

classification. No other name is given to him throughout the novel. As far as the reader knows, he was a nameless baby passed on to a relative. Due to Little Bit's trauma of losing Big Man, Little Bit refuses to surrender her second child, Blue. He represents blackness and the impregnation by a black man (similar to Sethe's mother and Baby Suggs who keep only their children from black men). The bastard children or those considered half-breeds through rape are not offered a desired legacy. This form of abandoned motherhood is troubling in *Appalachee Red*; a surrogate family member removes the child from the mother, but not all children are as lucky.

These black men are powerless to the demands and power of the white men in charge, the plantation/orchard owner and Boots, the "law." After Boots's nightly ritualistic rape of Baby Sweets, she begins her own ritual of baptism and cleansing herself. Sam as her overseer/jailer/guard knows the ritualistic process as well as sharing in it. He lingers like a voyeur outside the door. Sam is also an isolated outsider who relinquishes space in the café to Boots. Sam due to his own fear and worry about his own well-being can serve no other role than overseer like the one Baby Sweets's own father did back on the peach orchard. Baby Sweets's father, Poor Boy Jackson and Sam succumb to the power of the white males and are rendered powerless and childlike to their demands. This emasculation causes the women around them to have to escape and to rely on their own methods of survival. Baby Sweets uses dissociation techniques to escape from her torturous reality. For example, she "squeezed her eyelids tightly together, bringing to her eardrums a whirring sound, though not quite strong enough to drown out the noise from those Nigger Stompers" (88).

The language used to describe the brutality mirrors the writing of women within the study. The abuse and trauma is described in such gentle feminine detail, especially the first rape



of Baby Sweets, so that the reader nearly forgets this is a male writer. The ability to write the scene with a female gaze makes the re-telling of abuse even more believable and empathetic.

The initial rape scene is described as

in a small room above Sam's Café where she lay in the dark with the hem of her new Sunday print dress pulled up above her waist, crying softly and hurting hard beneath the grunting and snorting body of Appalachee's Chief of Police and silently praying to the merciful and just Good Lord to please hurry up and let whatever was supposed to happen from all the burning action going on down below her belly hurry up and happen before she died from the pain and before those o'Nigger Stompers messed up the clean white sheets the nice Mr. Sam had given her for her bed morning. (85)

The trauma upon Baby Sweets's body mirrors trauma that the later protagonists will experience. Andrews's attention to the female psyche under the trauma of rape creates a trauma narrative that is sensitive to the female victim. The reader is able to see Baby Sweets for what she is a "fifteen-year-old runaway black gal, lying in the dark in a small knot on her back to the Man and her hands covering her tear-smearred face" which humanizes her as a child-victim and not merely an objectified sexual object (85). By resisting this classification, Andrews is able to examine the brutality that flourished in southern relationships often upon the body of black women. The mothers in the novel evoke the only agency that they can in the mist of victimization; they dissociate. This coping mechanism will be viewed in the subject novels of this study. Andrews gazes upon the historical period to provide a protector and a redefined savior for the black female. Red becomes the ultimate protector of Baby Sweets. However, he enters his role as protector through her only lens, her sexual identity.

The outlier novel of *Appalachee Red* provides an interesting twist since Little Bit has only male children. Her life as we are informed, begins with Big Man. This represents the shift within the male and female gender writer narrative. The focus of Andrews's story is the male protagonist and the women within the text are secondary to the male drivers and ultimately expendable. The expendability of women is problematic since even the deviant nature cannot offer them the needed protection or rescue. The judgment of the women stems most readily from those who should protect them, the men in their lives. In the end of the novel, *Appalachee Red* leaves the Sheriff's for Baby Sweets to find. In one respect, her tormentor is gone, but she is left to pick-up the pieces and to build a life with what she has as an utility, her sexuality. Baby Sweets's mother is described only briefly as peripheral to the stronger and more dominating figure of her father Thompson, who equates his daughter to a primitive animal similar to Paul D's assessment of Sethe. Baby Sweets's abortion is the rejection of the white child as well as proof of her trauma. The only surrogate who appears is the throwaway child, Red, the male social deviant with only his self-created legacy. Her surrogate, Red, leaves her when he knows that she has developed self-sufficiency and no longer needs his protection. This does not seek to excuse his abrupt departure or reduce the loss that she feels from his departure. Does this form of protection/motherlove, however, make him a false surrogate?

The deconstruction of the mothers' help books in twentieth-century American literature is clear in *Beloved*, *Corregidora*, *Keepers of the House*, and *Appalachee Red*. The notion of the neo-slave narrative is reconstructed to examine the choices that mothers make in the wake of slavery and reconstruction. Morrison, Jones, Grau, and Andrews place the burden of motherhood within the boundaries of racism and sexism. Each of the mothers must find her own path to claiming motherhood often by dismantling southern tradition. The destruction and trauma

caused to female of the body is evident throughout. The mothers also test and use their free will by making decisions under-distress, but they do actively decide how they will deal with motherhood. Surrogates surface in texts examined in this chapter primarily after trauma occurs. In the subject texts, the surrogates are typically in close proximity to the protagonist as they endure trauma. The later texts show more trauma and harsher decisions. The surrogates move from being outside of the nuclear family realm to be those that the dominate culture considers social deviants – hippies, gays/lesbians – social services, and spinsters. The southern ideals of womanhood in the neo-slave narratives and earlier novels are also deconstructed as the women in the texts seek to re-write their placement as black women and, in doing so, alter the placement of the white women as well.

By bearing witness to motherhood, the mothers sacrifice their very beings to claim their children. Each of the mothers fiercely embraces motherhood: Sethe daring to remove Beloved from the currency of slavery to claim her as her own within a system of slavery; the Corregidora women using their bodies to bear witness to horrific rapes committed by Corregidora by producing witnesses who are the story tellers; and Margaret who seeks to give her children what she did not have – the ability to pass. All of these women recreate the definition of the primitive calling that they were thought unworthy to own, motherhood. Does their desire to protect lead them to the horrific and traumatic? Yes, but the abandonment and abuse herein are different from that we witness in late twentieth-century novels whose authors seek to deconstruct the notion of motherhood and to rewrite the novel as the new help books. Motherhood distorts itself in the later novels. The mothers' desires to see their daughters reflected through them diminish as the mothers become increasingly distracted by the men in their lives and by their reliance on things outside of their maternal spheres.

The Lacanian concept of the mirror image shifts as the maternal sphere changes. Do the women depicted in the twentieth-century novels by women have a reflection for their children to see? Children desire the mirror image as a part of their own development. As we look at the modeling in the subject texts, it becomes evident that the grandmothers do not provide the modeling necessary to ensure that good mother behaviors can develop. The mothers appear to be products of possibly deviant women who could not nurture them; and therefore, they are incapable of providing models for their daughters to follow for their own children.

Throughout this study, the concept of motherlove and protection is explored in its relationship to surrogacy. The novels *Our Nig*, *Beloved*, *Keepers of the House*, *Corregidora*, and *Appalachee Red* that rewrite history question the role of mother in protecting her children and introduce people who assist with the protection, safety, and nurturing of the children at hand. These people have been considered the “other” by the white dominate culture. In *Beloved*, the community of women and Stamp Pad, who had initially abandons Sethe based on the public judgment of her crime, come to help exorcise the demon of the child who has come to claim her. Initially, these individuals are false since they did not intervene or seek to protect Sethe from the horrors of the slave catcher Schoolteacher. Each member of the community experiences private trauma relating to her/his experiences as slave. These traumas complicate their initial failure to help and their decision to reject Sethe. By recognizing the trauma that Sethe endured, they are able later to assist in her rescue from *Beloved*. Within the slave system, they each had been made the “other,” and in freedom, they each make Sethe the “other” by their non-communal reaction to her. By shifting back to the historical communal family, they act as a surrogate to Sethe though Denver whose role reversal of mothering saves Sethe. The African and later African American tradition speaks to the communal family and whole village. The members of the community

initially abandon this foundation in response to Sethe. The role reversal in the mother-daughter relationship also emerges in other texts.

The presence of the mother does not always guarantee love and nurturing for the child. In *Corregidora*, Ursa's mother and maternal grandmothers' decisions to use their physical bodies to bear witness to the horrors of the rapes of Corregidora causes Ursa to question her own role as a woman when she can no longer make generations. This failure to make generations decreases her value within the family. Until Cat emerges as Ursa's surrogate, Ursa remains paralyzed based on her previously-learned value. Cat is able to help nurture Ursa not only physically but also mentally. She establishes herself as the surrogate mother to help redefine the notion of protection inherited from the maternal line. This re-establishment removes Cat from the "socially deviant" role of lesbian to that of valued guide and protector. Several times Cat is seen as a false surrogate due to her sexual orientation, but in reality, she becomes the true saving grace that helps Ursa redefine her purpose and placement in life.

Like the Corregidora women, Margaret in *Keepers of the House* attempts to provide her children with protection by embracing whiteness. By marrying a white man, Margaret establishes her children's legitimacy. Margaret also acts as a surrogate to the granddaughter of her husband. This surrogacy allows Abigail to protect the legacy of Margaret and her grandfather. Margaret severs her relationship with her children as a means to allow them to fully integrate into white life through passing. Her method of protection causes a sense of rage and need for destruction in two of her children later in life. It also causes the children to violate their last remaining family bonds with their father's family. Margaret's desires to protect in fact destroy her position and connection as mother for her children. Her place is appropriated by Abigail who in the end remains the keeper of both sides of the family. Initially, Abigail might

appear as false protector based on the assumption that Margaret was her grandfather's mistress and the reality that she was not Abigail's birth mother. The opposite occurs. Abigail respects the legitimacy of her grandfather and Margaret's relationship and embraces protecting them as if they were her own parents. Abigail's husband and Margaret's children emerge at the novel's close as the false surrogates who seek to dismantle the family.

False surrogates emerge in the novels explored in this chapter and in the novels of the dissertation. In *Appalachee Red*, the protector for many people abruptly abandons his role. His unexplained departure would make him a false surrogate if those he protected had not established their own mother-love. Baby Sweets has grown under his protection to become self-sufficient, and her main threat, the sheriff Boots, has been eliminated by Red. Red resembles several of the surrogates in the main novels of this study who, if only for a short-time, offer some protection. Other false surrogates remain judgmental to the girls who need protection. These surrogates do not embrace their roles as potential protectors, but they often actively reject it. The false surrogate is important in terms of protection and nurturing especially when the mother proves to be incapable.

The writers' false surrogates are in some ways just as important as true surrogates. The surrogates become increasingly important when birth mothers' actions force their daughters into the roles of outsider or to abandon their childhoods to become caregivers themselves – a role reversal by assuming the role of the mother and caregiver. The mothers' help books do not account for the complexity of abandonment and trauma that challenge motherhood in the twentieth century. Morrison, Gibbons, Allison, and Sapphire illustrate these challenges and traumas of motherhood and of raising daughters. They do not replace mothers' help books of the nineteenth-century, but they do provide graphic portrayals of the bad mother and the result of

nonfunctional maternal modeling. The mothers' help books deal with the complex levels of motherhood once the cradle is claimed by those who did not possess whiteness and means. The novels discussed in this chapter, *Beloved*, *Keepers of the House*, and *Corregidora*, detail the trauma and the extreme decisions that mothers often made in protecting their daughters. *The Bluest Eye*, *Ellen Foster*, *Bastard Out of Carolina*, and *Push* present trauma, the mothers' relationships to these traumas, and both true and false surrogates. In one, madness results from the trauma. In the others, marginalized or socially deviant surrogates come to the aid of the girls.

**CHAPTER II: The Process Of De-Mothering – The Lens That Renders Invisibility and That No One Makes Visible In Toni Morrison’s *The Bluest Eye***

“We tried to see her without looking at her”

- Claudia MacTeer, *The Bluest Eye* (158)

The coming of age story is a key testimony to child neglect and to mothers who cannot and do not protect their children. In Toni Morrison’s *The Bluest Eye*, the challenges of the Great Depression (1929-1943), and the impact of the Great Migration on blacks are woven throughout the novel.<sup>34</sup> Like many narratives of this genre, *The Bluest Eye* is from a child’s point-of-view with an introspective reflective adult who allows us to turn a critical eye not only to a complex family, but also to a community who fails to fulfill the traditional concept of the whole village sphere of protection.<sup>35</sup> Morrison describes the concept of being put outdoors as the worst thing that could happen to an individual. Being put outdoors embodies being outside the norm for the community and society. This outside also shows how each of the potential surrogates exists in his or her own marginalized context. Pecola is an outsider. With Great Migration as a backdrop, the journey for creating a better life actually created outsiders of the blacks in their new cities and complicated the placement of mothers. This chapter explores the complexities of mothering away from one’s natural maternal sphere, the impact of the images of whiteness on mothering, and the various methods that false surrogates and mothers contribute to the dismantling of the black child, Pecola. First, the historical footprint of the novel’s setting as well as the disruption to traditional black motherhood as the movement away from the natural maternal sphere begins

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<sup>34</sup> Scholars dispute the duration of the Great Migration for blacks starting in 1910 until 1930 or 1940. For the context of my discussion, I will focus on 1910-1940. This is when over two million blacks moved out of the South to the Midwest, Northeast, and West. The Second Great Migration (1940-1970) saw blacks moving to various places. Many moved to cities. The New Great Migration (1963-2000) represents a reversed migration, blacks moving back to the South.

<sup>35</sup> This is the only focus text that does not have the main protagonist as the narrator. Pecola is voiceless until the end of the novel. Claudia MacTeer is the main narrator in the novel.



will be analyzed. Pecola's maternal sphere will be introduced to show the damage to the mother-daughter bond.

The Great Migration story could be argued as constituting the beginning of the destruction of black motherhood.<sup>36</sup> As black women moved further away from their maternal centers, their own mothers, their ability to embody extended forms of motherhood diminished. Community aid in the care and the protection of children and support of motherhood began to fade. This location disruption that promised opportunity and growth began to fester resentment and highlight a world of lack.<sup>37</sup> The physical disruption of the family sphere evolved from the desire and the perceived notion that urban cities had more to offer. During this time period as blacks left their rural and/or southern roots, they began to embrace the complexities of city life that were often filled with images imprinted by the dominate culture that highlighted ownership of material things and started to alter the definition of appropriate behavior and physical appearance. When Pauline, the primary mother in the novel, first comes to the city as the young bride of Cholly, she attempts to conform to the new standards of beauty by mimicking the other black women who mirror the look from the Hollywood sirens. Disruptions also result from urban centers that do not allow for a true sense of community as was known in the rural south. A family could easily isolate itself from others in the community.

Morrison's historical fictions bring to light the story that is often not addressed – the development of black children, especially girls. In *The Bluest Eye*, Morrison explores the trauma beneath the real world results of the Clark doll test and fictionalizes the trauma through the

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<sup>36</sup> The first migration caused many women to move away from their maternal structures. In the novels, I am interested in how this disconnect seems to complicate and add challenges to how black women mother but also the impact on the modeling of mothering.

<sup>37</sup> "Fester" alludes to Langston Hughes's poem "Harlem" where he writes of deferred dreams festering like sores. The dreams of many blacks festered into disappointment because of the migration.

desire for blue eyes in her main character Pecola.<sup>38</sup> From what started as a reflection on an innocent conversation about God, Morrison's childhood friend's prayer to God for two years for blue eyes, Morrison gives birth to the novel (Ruas 95-96). During the 1930s, the Shirley Temple phenomenon shaped the icon of beauty for little girls. The fantasy of an adorable orphan who is found and becomes a well-loved image in American culture becomes a tragic ideal in Morrison's *The Bluest Eye*. The main heroine, Pecola, is not an orphan literally, but resembles one in spirit. She is born into a household where she is subsequently rendered void and invisible and grows to represent the result of the neglected and forgotten black child. Raising children and loving children can often represent two different states of being. *The Bluest Eye* is presented to us through the child narrator, like the other texts, except Pecola is voiceless until the end of her story. It is in the end when madness has taken over her mind that Pecola is able to express herself.<sup>39</sup> Claudia MacTeer, a young girl about the same age, is critical to Pecola since she dismantles whiteness and the power that it appears to have over the characters. Claudia's voice guides us through this world of duality. The narration provides the dual aspects of Claudia, as a child and her reflections as an adult.

Additional disruptions to motherhood in *The Bluest Eye* include names, gender, false surrogates, feminization of male characters, and the gaze of the outsider. Many of the characters in the text exist not only in a marginalized status as blacks but also as outsiders both within and outside of their community and their individual identities. Minrose C. Gwin argues that "the site of Cholly's rape...merges with the space-time with the southern woods of Cholly's remembered youth, where, in the midst of his first sexual experience, he himself is sexually victimized by

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<sup>38</sup> The Clark Doll test was described on page 2 in the introduction.

<sup>39</sup> There are several different opinions regarding Pecola's multiple voices at the end of the novel. I assert that it is her friend while others suggest the dead child or Pauline. See Wilt for "the voice of her dead fetus" (146) and Hurley and Hurley resulting mental trauma without intervention (166).

white men. His act of sexual violence toward his daughter is haunted by his own victimization as “daughter” (58). This assertion that Cholly is ultimately unable to assume the role of father and protector since he is feminized and cast as the daughter during the symbolic rape by the white men’s weapons when he is in the woods with Darlene is problematic. This victimization is transferred to his love/hate relationship with his wife and later to his brutal, hazy rape of his daughter. As in Allison’s and Gibbons’s novels, Morrison provides a variety of images of men in the text. She uses Mr. Breedlove, Mr. Henry, and Soaphead Church as potential father figures/abusers against the backdrop of Cholly’s role as father. The lack of modeling is extended to the men since Cholly had no model of fatherhood, and his son Sammy lacks any form of modeling for fatherhood.<sup>40</sup>

Morrison provides three extreme examples of motherhood in Pauline, Geraldine, and Mrs. MacTeer. The backdrop of the Great Migration makes the role of the women pivotal as the intersections between race and gender collapse and make it increasingly challenging for women, especially black women, to have agency. Several things such as work, marital status, and association with others in the community complicate motherhood. The burden to work and to contribute financially often affects women of a certain class like Pauline and Mrs. MacTeer which is the opposite of Geraldine’s burden. Geraldine’s burden as a stay-at-home wife resembles the burden of the first white woman Pauline works for who robs her of the eleven dollars in wages.<sup>41</sup> A distancing exists in the forms of motherhood that reflects the distancing needed for survival from the times of slavery for these women. Even as the distance from slavery increases, the scars of the era and its impact on the black family linger. The

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<sup>40</sup> Though Cholly was raised by his aunt, there is the influence of Blue who provides a male influence from the community. Trudier Harris considers Blue a folk hero. (*Fiction and Folklore*, pages 21-22)

<sup>41</sup> I use the term burden to emphasize that when women do not have the stress or responsibility of work that they can occupy themselves with being bitter and belittling to others.

contemporary writer often picks key historical periods to view the impact and ongoing challenges on the black family and ultimately on the children to reveal these scars.

Nurturing and developing the child was not part of the mothering employed during this reestablishment period. Claudia describes her mother's actions when she was sick as "My mother's anger humiliates me; her words chafe my cheeks, and I a crying. I do not know that she is not angry at me, but at my sickness. . . And in the night, when my coughing was dry and tough, feet padded into the room, hands repined the flannel, readjusted the quilt, and rested a moment on my forehead. So when I think of autumn, I think of somebody with hands who does not want me to die" (14). This need to not own motherhood but to maintain the life of the child is evident in several scenes. The basics were provided for, but never to fully embrace or nurture the spirit of the child echoes the images in *Beloved* when the need to survive did not demand embracing children who could be as Baby Suggs recalled, "moved like checkers on a checker board" (23). As Morrison mentions in an interview with Anne Koenen, "Hannah [Sula] asks her mother, 'Why did you never play with us?' But, you know, it's problematic playing with children when you don't know how to stay alive. . . That kind of sentimental love for children is not possible, except in a certain kind of loving society, where you can relish it. Children are easy marks in aggressively oppressive societies" (69-70). Survival and numbness caused mothers to extract nurturing from their motherhood creates a community who cannot embrace or draw a child into a maternal sphere.

Morrison draws from the historical movie and novel *Imitation of Life* which confronts ideal motherhood, images of black women, and female ambition. The film originally based on Fannie Hurst's novel of the same name, published in 1933, was adopted into two different film versions in 1934 and 1959. In the book and film, the daughter who desires whiteness is named

Pecola. Morrison uses the name Pecola in her novel to illustrate desires of the daughter who inherits her love of whiteness from her mother. This is an inverted image of the mother of the Hurst text as well as the films. The black mother, who accepts her “place” in the society and possesses a sense of self-worth, wants the best for her daughter and wants her daughter to accept her blackness. In the films and novel, blackness is viewed as subservient, dirty, and ungratifying. Morrison inverts these images but is able to transfer these same themes of blackness as negation in her novel that takes place in the midst of the Great Migration to exemplify that though the period was quite hopeful for blacks and their core values, other components of black life including protective black motherhood were destroyed.

Numerous scholars note the disastrous impact during this period of the white ideals on the larger black community. Due to the community’s embrace of the standard form of beauty outside of blackness, Pecola represents an image that they would like to forget and not gaze upon. Her peering eyes that become witness to their inability to live without the shadows and constraints of race and gender echo Morrison’s own *Playing in the Dark*.

Throughout the novel, Morrison uses white European images to illustrate the crushing impact of the outside culture on the black community and ultimately on the Breedlove family. The black families provide their daughters with white baby dolls as a sort of value. The children embrace images of preferred movie stars, and early on, they place these images at the core of their definition of beauty. Morrison uses many women to illustrate the importance of European beauty and internalized racism/sexism among displaced Black women and its dismantling of the black maternal sphere. The first and most important woman to reject Pecola is Pauline, Pecola’s mother. Three women live above the Breedlove family in the apartment, China, Maginot Line

and Poland.<sup>42</sup> These three prostitutes are fallen women to the larger community and as a result are considered undesirable. On the other extreme of black womanhood is Geraldine who functions in a sterilized motherhood by withholding affection and casting judgment on all who are outside of her perceived classiest realm.<sup>43</sup> The last image of motherhood to be discussed in the relationship to Pecola is Claudia and Frieda's mother, Mrs. MacTeer. She plays an interesting role as a temporary surrogate who cannot fully see Pecola. She, as the strongest potential surrogate in the text, should see Pecola as a scared and abandoned child. Pauline's new education results in her abandoning Pecola.

Pauline, Pecola's mother, devours movies daily in a quest to fill a void in her own early-married life. This crushing impact causes the physical value of beauty to dismantle the potential of young black girls. This dismantling is actively portrayed in Pecola who wishes to become invisible due to her ingrained perception of ugliness. She feels that with blue eyes she will be seen and cherished like the white girls in films and the young Fisher girl her mother adores. The love affair with whiteness did not exist for Pauline in Kentucky that seems to have been a nurturing space for Pauline but becomes a dominate reality for her with their move to the city. Her absorption with whiteness and the dominate images of European beauty function as an escape from her reality. Initially, when the family moves to the city, Pauline is able to emulate a life of leisure by playing wife and not working. As the financial demands increase and Cholly's behavior deteriorates, Pauline must pick up the work mantel that was common for black women like herself, domesticity which Pauline had been prepared well for based on her ownership of her own mother's house. The desires for and fantasies of whiteness begin Pauline's escape from her

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<sup>42</sup> The continuation of the European modeling in their names will later be discussed.

<sup>43</sup> Geraldine is the mother of a school boy who lures Pecola in their home. Pecola meets her only once. Pauline decides to base her motherhood and persona in cleanliness and to banish anything related to blackness from her presence. Pecola's blackness was an assault of her space.

own personal reality that becomes more pronounced in the city. To cope and to escape from her loneliness and isolation within the city, Pauline finds a new fantasy escape of the movie theaters where begin her romantic interaction with whiteness and her love affair with its images of beauty. According to Andrea O'Reilly's article, "(Mis)Conceptions: The Paradox of Maternal Power and Loss in Toni Morrison's *The Bluest Eye* and *Paradise*," "Of interest to Morrison is how women become disinherited from the ancient properties of traditional black womanhood...and how this makes motherhood a site of disempowerment. Pauline Breedlove's disconnection from the ancient properties that make motherhood a site of power, though apparent throughout the text, is signified most powerfully by Pauline's inability to love her daughter upon her birth" (129). This disconnect of the ancient properties can apply to all the mothers in the novel perhaps based on their movement to new cities and their disconnect in attempting to create a mother sphere of support.

Each family in *The Bluest Eye* appears to be rootless in the traditional sense. Many of the characters have migrated to the urban area as portrayed in the description of the Breedlove's journey, or in the description of Geraldine's move like other southern women to the city with husbands. Many people migrated to the cities for opportunities and found themselves without family. The two extremes of this migration are Pauline and Geraldine. Both of these mothers are away from their families. Their roles in the community are different, one a housewife and one a domestic worker; however, both reject Pecola and blackness. Pauline and Geraldine can define themselves only by their desire for whiteness, perceived order, and perfection. Anything outside of these categories is rejected as filth or funk. If the relationships that these women have with their children reflect that of their own with their mothers, then their mother-daughter bonds ill-prepared them to be mothers. The novel does not give much detail concerning their mothers'

influences. Lack of bonding with their children makes Pauline and Geraldine experience further rootlessness in their maternal spheres. Morrison creates Geraldine and Pauline as false gatekeepers and extreme examples of what is good and proper based on the ideals appropriated from the white culture. Geraldine relishes being classiest while Pauline thrives as the ideal servant.

Pauline Breedlove's schizophrenic existence complicates the text. She is three distinct mothers: the young Pauline playing mother; Pauline imposed upon her family as Mrs. Breedlove, and Pauline remained Polly. Overall, Pauline's association with the fantasy that she has chosen to live centers on whiteness and its beauty and value. All non-white things, especially her family become grotesque and inverted to be cast as ugly and useless. This value is also seen in black characters Geraldine and Maureen Peal, and felt in the gaze of characters such as Mr. Yacobowski, the white immigrant shopkeeper who peddles Pecola her beloved Mary Jane candies. Images of this whiteness, Mary Janes, Shirley Temple, book-ended by Dick and Jane, and most importantly the consumption of black mother's milk never being nourishment enough nor quenching thirst<sup>44</sup> are all consuming as images of it are consumed throughout the text.

Pauline, leaves the comfort of her family home life when she meets her husband Cholly. Unlike Cholly who has grown to love the adventure of the unknown and a life without boundaries due to his orphan-like status, Pauline flourishes in a world of order. Her literal employment of order becomes one of the cornerstones to her creating a life within which she can live. Growing-up and leaving with her family as a young girl, Pauline played mother but did not receive any active modeling or input from her own mother. As her own personal life becomes more chaotic, Pauline clings to the outside world and the importance that it brings her sense of

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<sup>44</sup> Mary Janes candy (42-43); Shirley Temple cup with milk (19, 22), Dick and Jane (7, 8, 30, 34, 67, 88, 105, 130, and 150)



control and composure. In addition, she becomes more repulsed by her nuclear family and more isolated as a mother figure. The Breedlove family primarily functions in isolation from the larger community. Cholly's outward behavior and Pauline's inward behavior causes them to create separate worlds in order to survive. When Cholly becomes unemployed, Pauline, like many women, becomes the primary breadwinner and caregiver as a domestic.<sup>45</sup> Her life as a domestic allows her to be closer to her white aspirations by serving a white family. Pauline inherits the romanticized world of the movies from her gaze, which becomes the legacy that she passes on to her children, especially her daughter. By naming Pecola from the daughter in the film *Imitation of Life*, Pauline misses the main moral of the film or the "order" that emerges from it. The mother dies brokenhearted because of her daughter's abandonment of her black identity, and a grief stricken daughter regrets abandoning her mother in life at her funeral. Pauline absorbs a distorted version of the film, and like the other parts of her life, incorporates it as an inversion. Pauline abandons her daughter who lives heartbroken that she does not know love and feels that the only way that she can attain love is through the images of beauty that her mother models for her – whiteness. Pauline's education from the film life becomes subversive and affects the life of children. However, Pauline like the other mothers initially does not intend to reject her daughter as a mothering-pattern.

Morrison explores Pauline's life prior to motherhood and suggests the causes of the shift in her mothering. Pauline's life with her biological family was isolating since she was considered special due to her disfigured foot as a result of stepping on a rusty nail. Her family lived in Alabama and moved to Kentucky in hopes of more opportunity and a better life. The

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<sup>45</sup> Historically, black women have always worked. Jacqueline Jones details the challenges that existed for black men securing employment and the resentment that often emerges within the family structure. All black women did not neglect their children while they worked to support their families. Mrs. MacTeer is an example; however, Pauline, due to her love and desire for whiteness, allows her work to create a nightmare for her family.

perceived vulnerability attracts Cholly. In her youth, Pauline occupies the role of homemaker and keeper of the house. Since her family sees her foot as the reason she could not work in the fields, the house becomes her main domain. Morrison highlights Pauline's various forms of isolation even in her own family when she "played house and mother" for her siblings and parents, and her later isolation in the city with Cholly because she never develops anything outside of herself to conquer the loneliness. The narrator tells that at fifteen, Pauline was "still keeping house, but with less enthusiasm" (90). In youth, "the songs caressed her, and while she tried to hold her mind on the wages of sin, her body trembled from redemption, salvation, a mysterious rebirth that would simply happen, with no effort on her part... Fantasies about men and love and touching were drawing her mind and hands away from her work" (90). However, when the wandering Cholly appears from out of nowhere, his whistling catches her attention and as "the whistler was bending down tickling her broken foot and kissing her leg. She could not stop her laughter" (91). Pauline fondly reflects, "[h]e talked with her about her foot and asked, when they walked through the town or in the fields, if she were tired. [Cholly,] instead of ignoring her infirmity, pretending it was not there,...made it seem like something special and endearing. For the first time Pauline felt that her bad foot was an asset," something special (92). She had never felt that there was anything extraordinary about her, and she remarks about this fact in several spaces such as her later role is as a servant for the Fisher family.

Pauline's initial move to the North fulfills her youthful fantasy of love and happiness as described in the spring section of the novel. This parallels the newness of her young life as a wife and mother – her assumed role. Pauline describes their early move north as "everything . . . looking good. I don't know what all happened. Everything changed. It was hard to get to know folks up here, and I missed my people" (93). This is one of the few moments in the text where

Pauline mentions her family. She continues to confess that it was “the loneliest time of my life. I ‘member looking out them front windows just waiting for Cholly to come home at three o’clock. I didn’t even have a cat to talk to” (93). Cholly had no trouble making friends and began to “resist her total dependence on him” (93). Housework and creating order as she had done at home did not help alleviate her loneliness and isolation. Interacting with a new community of women, “Pauline felt uncomfortable with the few black women she met. They were amused by her because she did not straighten her hair. When she tried to make up her face as they did, it came off rather badly. Their goading glances and private snickers at her way of talking (saying ‘chil’ren’) and dressing developed in her a desire for new clothes” (94). This lack of female relationships drives her to work in order to afford clothing and a few things for the apartment, but this causes conflict in her marriage since Cholly was “not pleased with her purchases and began to tell her so....money become the focus of all their discussions, hers for clothes, his for drink” (94). Cholly was oblivious to the sad reality that “Pauline did not really care for clothes and makeup. She merely wanted other women to cast favorable glances her way” (94). These desires, seen and acknowledged, begin to create a wedge between Cholly and Pauline. Pauline begins to use work as her other escape and defense. She begins to transform her life according to the images of the movies, as well as the lifestyle lived by her main employer.

Several pivotal scenes help to shape Pauline into a woman and mother. Morrison humanizes all her characters and to illustrate how their various marginalized circumstances lead them to their fragmented and disjointed realities. Out of her loneliness in their small apartment during her first pregnancy, Pauline decides to go to the movies, and “[t]here in the dark her memory was refreshed, and she succumbs to her earlier dreams. Along with the idea of romantic

love, she was introduced to another – physical beauty” (97). This introduction on the silver screen is important for it begins to alter Pauline’s entire persona, and the narrator agrees that it “probably [was one of] the most destructive ideas in the history of human thought” (97). As a result “she was never able, after her education in the movies, to look at a face and not assign it some category in scale of absolute beauty, and the scale was one she absorbed in full from the silver screen” (97). Her disillusionment in her own life develops as she internalizes the films that began as a “simple pleasure”; “she learned all there was to love and all there was to hate” from the films (97). This initial escape from her dingy little apartment becomes the actual escape from the life she has as a black woman. Dorothy Allison in *Bastard Out of Carolina* (to be discussed in a later chapter) also provides critical background information that reveals the humanness of the mother characters.

In her absorption with white culture, Pauline learns “all there was to love and all there was to hate” from the images that surrounded her as “the black and white images came together, making a magnificent whole – all projected through the ray of light from above and behind” in the dark theater (97). These images surround her and cause her to acknowledge that

the onliest time I be happy seem like was when I was in the picture show. Every time I got, I went...White men taking such good care of they women, and they all dressed up in big clean houses with the bathtubs right in the same room with the toilet. Them pictures gave me a lot of pleasure, but it made coming home hard, and looking at Cholly hard. (97)

Pauline mimics the appearance of movie stars like Jean Harlow to complete her dressed-up fantasy. Pauline thinks “the end of her lovely beginning was probably the cavity in one of her

front teeth. She preferred, however, to think always of her foot” (88). The fantasy ends physically for Pauline when she loses her tooth, and it creates a gap.

I had taken a big bite of that candy, and it pulled a tooth right out of my mouth. I could have cried. I had good teeth, not a rotten one in my head. I don't believe I ever got over that. There I was, five months pregnant, trying to look like Jean Harlow, and a front tooth gone. Everything went then. Look like I just didn't care no more after that. I let my hair go back, plaited it up, and settled down to just being ugly. (98)

Her addiction to the escape at the movies does not end. She says, “I still went to the picture shows, though, but the meanness got worse. I wanted my tooth back. Cholly poked fun at me, and we started fighting again” (98). Cholly's lack of empathy reinforces what Pauline has learned through the education at the movies. He is not Clark Gable, and she is not Jean Harlow so, “the fights, once they got started up again, kept up, and I couldn't keep my hands off him. Well, I had that baby—a boy—and after that got pregnant again with another one. But it weren't like I thought it was gone be” (98). Pauline's fantasy life does not mirror her reality. As a result, her resentment begins to set-in and continues to transform her into her next stage of motherhood as Polly. In a confession-like state, she says, “I loved them and all, I guess, but maybe it was having no money, or maybe it was Cholly, but they sure worried the life out of me” (98). The “I guess” is telling. It is almost as if the lack of the material made the family-life less appealing, and the fantasy, the key thing to emulate and to hold.

Pauline's admission shows that she attempts to regain control of her maternal sphere. She says, “Sometimes I'd catch myself hollering at them and beating them and I'd feel sorry for them, but I couldn't seem to stop” (98). Her rage manifests itself as verbal and physical assaults

on her family members, but she tries to control it. She acknowledges that she chose to make her pregnancy and motherhood with Pecola different from her first pregnancy. Pauline says,

I don't recollect trying to get pregnant that first time. But that second time, I actually tried to get pregnant. Maybe 'cause I'd had one already and wasn't scairt to do it. Anyway, I felt good, and wasn't thinking on the carrying, just the baby itself. I used to talk to it whilst it be still in the womb. Like good friends we was....You know, just friendly talk. On up til the end I felt good about that baby. When I had the second one, a girl, I remember I said I'd love it no matter what it looked like. She looked like a black ball of hair. (98)

Her pregnancy with Pecola is nestled in Pauline's fantasy and desire for a new life. She admits that Cholly was "surprised her by being pleased" when she tells him of her first pregnancy (96). As a result, "he began to drink less and come home more often," and "they eased back into a relationship more like the early days of their marriage" (96). These memories reinforce that it was not Pauline's desire not to mother. The pregnancies had brought a positive feeling back to her now – so – turbulent relationship with Cholly that often centered on her feeling lonely and isolated.

Pauline's interaction with the outside white world marks another shift in her life. She decides to make her birth of Pecola different by having the baby in the hospital. The white doctor's gaze and suggestion that black women do not hurt like white women insults her. As she witnesses the different treatment, she comments, "I reckon that maybe I weren't no horse foaling (99). This animal reference and disregard by the physicians remind Pauline of the difference between black and white women. O'Reilly points out in her discussion of this scene that "While Pauline resists the denial of her subjectivity and the dehumanization of her birth experience by

forcing one doctor to look her in the eye...her self-perception is, nonetheless, structured through the degradation of her labour experience. So when her child is born, and it is both black and female, Pauline sees it as herself was seen while in labour” (131). This transference mirrors the adored value on whiteness. O’Reilly also illustrates the root of the later issue of hate within motherhood as “the theme of the need for the parents to love themselves if they are to love their children. At the movies and while in labour, Pauline learns that her blackness renders her undesirable; it therefore is not surprising that when Pauline holds her black daughter in her arms she perceives her as ugly” (132). With Pecola’s birth, Pauline was hopeful that her life would start to resemble that of the whites and with her disappointment that this has not become a reality, she begins to abandon her role as the mother of her black children and to resent her role as the wife to the black man whom she had staunchly defended when her first employer suggested that she should leave him. Pauline also has what the medical profession would consider a “failure to bond” which becomes “the central metaphor for the loss of maternal power, engendered by assimilation and the mother’s subsequent inability to nurture/empower her daughter” (O’Reilly129). This inability to nurture surfaces in Pauline’s mothering of Pecola and ultimately her resentment of her family as her only source of empowerment becomes rejection of the family unit and of what she perceives that her motherhood represents. Pauline’s life becomes a contrast in black and white. Her early desire to emulate the image of beauty of white life consumes her actual reality. This consumption complicates her mothering of both of her children but especially of Pecola as their home life grows more chaotic. With her resignation of her roles as the mother to black children and the wife of a black man, Pauline begins her life working for the Fishers where she assumes the new role and identity of Polly.<sup>46</sup> With Pauline’s

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<sup>46</sup> Paula Bennett highlights that the key to this resignation lies at poverty (129-133).

transformation into Polly, the more she clings to whiteness and the more she holds fast to her religious arrogance and places herself as a martyr against the cross she must bear, Cholly.

The transformation to Polly also entails her establishing her life in contrasts. She admires the Fisher home with “No zinc tub, no buckets of stove-heated water, no flaky, stiff, grayish towels washed in the kitchen sink, dried in a dusty backyard, no tangled black puff of rough wool to comb” (101). This contrast bathing her own children, laundering their cloths, and combing her daughter’s hair, all jobs more difficult in her black family. In her resentment, she soon “stopped trying to keep her own house. The things she could afford to buy did not last, had no beauty or style, and were absorbed by the dingy storefront” (101). She acknowledges without apologies that

[m]ore and more she neglected her house, her children, her man— they were like the afterthoughts one has just before sleep, the early-morning and the late-evening edges of her day, the dark edges that made the daily life with the Fishers lighter, more delicate, more lovely. Here she could arrange things, clean things, line things up in neat rows. Here her foot flopped around on deep pile carpets, and there was no uneven sound. Here she found beauty, order, cleanliness, and praise.  
(101)

Pauline’s admission of her neglect of her black family is especially evident in the two beatings she gives Pecola. The entrance into the Fisher home is her ultimate stage performance. She surrenders her role as Pauline, black wife of Cholly and mother of Pecola and Sammy, becomes “Mrs. Breedlove” to them and “Polly” to her beloved new family, the Fishers.

Pauline becomes, by choice, a mammy figure in the novel and then claims the role of martyr as Cholly’s wife and mother of two poor black children. Pauline’s work life with the



Fishers becomes an escape for her. Pauline mimics the black mother in the film *Imitation of Life* who mothers the white daughter while often ignoring her own. But unlike the character in the film and Hurst's text, Pauline grows to resent her own daughter and everything that her presence represents because, for Pauline, Pecola is a direct reflection of all that is negative and degrading in her black life. Fascination with the Hollywood movies leads Pauline to her self-destruction as a black woman and mother as she continues visually to digest the images of whiteness as beauty and appropriates the Fisher home as her own. Pauline relishes sharing that "Mr. Fisher said, 'I would rather sell her blueberry cobblers than real estate'" (101). She is able to alter her behavior as she appropriates the Fisher household as her personal domain by "reign[ing] over cupboards stacked high with food that would not be eaten for weeks, even months; she was queen of canned vegetables bought by the case, special fondants and ribbon candy curled up in tiny silver dishes" (101). By assuming the gracious life in the Fisher home, Pauline as Polly also limits her time with her own family. She recognizes her power when "The creditors and service people who [had] humiliated her [as Pauline] ... were even intimidated by her when she spoke for the Fishers. She refused beef slightly dark or with edges not properly trimmed. The slightly reeking fish that she accepted for her own family she would all but throw in the fish man's face if he sent it to the Fishers' house" (101). Her worklife is so different from her personal life that she recognizes that "Power, praise, and luxury were hers in this household" (101). Pauline surrenders her own household for that of a white family who can afford her the visual luxuries that she has long dreamt. In the novel, there are two times that Pauline feels special — when she first meets Cholly and being "indispensable" in the Fisher household.

Pauline reaches the pinnacle of her role as a black woman when whiteness embraces her. The Fishers "gave her what she had never had – a nickname – Polly.... [and praise:] 'We'll

never let her go. We could never find anybody like Polly. She will *not* leave the kitchen until everything is in order. Really, she is the ideal servant” (101). In her essay, “The Mother’s Part: Incest and Maternal Deprivation in Woolf and Morrison,” Paula Bennett interprets Pauline’s role as the ideal servant as significant in that

In caring for other people’s things, first in her own family of origin, then in the homes of wealthy whites, Pauline is able to bring order into her life and gain a sense of accomplishment....the greater satisfaction that Pauline feels in caring for what belongs to her white employers, the less she is able to care for herself, her own things, or, above all her daughter, whom she sees as the epitome of all she loathes most in herself, the qualities which make her – to her way of thinking – the deprived person she is: her “ugliness,” her blackness, her poverty, her disempowerment. (131-2)

This lens allows for the inversions in Pauline’s world. Pauline’s place for the Fishers is in the kitchen. It is the very source from which she nurtures the family. Trauma, anger, and regret fill the kitchen in her own home. As part of her new role and identity as Polly, “Pauline kept this order, this beauty, for herself, a private world, and never introduced it into her storefront, or to her children” (*Bluest* 102). For her children, she had a different world and method of mothering described as bending “toward respectability, and in so doing [teaching] them fear: fear of being clumsy, fear of being like their father, fear of not being loved by God, fear of madness like Cholly’s mother’s. Into her son she beat a loud desire to run away, and into her daughter she beat a fear of growing up, fear of other people, fear of life” (102). Pecola internalizes this fear. Pauline is unaware of the impact of her methods on her family because

All the meaningfulness of her life was in her work. For her virtues were intact. She was an active church woman, did not drink, smoke, or carouse, defended herself mightly against Cholly, rose above him in every way, and felt she was fulfilling a mother's role conscientiously when she pointed out their father's faults to keep them from having them, or punished them when they showed any slovenliness, no matter how slight, when she worked twelve to sixteen hours a day to support them. And the world itself agreed with her. (102)

Pauline embraces the role of the matriarch by fulfilling the role of the martyr. She finds power and a false sense of completeness in this role.

Pauline's black family becomes the afterthought, but also, the source of her rage. She distains all things black including her daughter. As a consequence, Pecola must seek love from an invisible mother whom she knows only as Mrs. Breedlove. The narrator establishes that "Pecola, like Sammy and Cholly, always called her mother Mrs. Breedlove"(38). The name Breedlove is ironic since the family breeds many things, but not love, happiness, nor life.<sup>47</sup> An early description of Pecola's family home is in direct contrast to the Fishers' luxury that Pauline enjoys:

the only living thing in the Breedlove's house was the coal stove, which lived independently of everything and everyone, its fire being 'out,' 'banked,' or 'up' at its own discretion, in spite of the fact that the family fed it and knew all the details of its regimen: sprinkle, do not dump, not too much . . . The fire seemed to live, go down, or die according to its own schemata. In the morning, however, it always saw fit to die. (33)

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<sup>47</sup> See Gillian, Gwin, and Hurley and Hurley for naming character naming references and novel structure.

Pauline admits that she transfers this bleak image to her family interaction and outlook. The mother role in the household is abandoned and is replaced by the self-authoritative figure of Mrs. Breedlove: the black mother is dead. We learn early in the narration that the term mother is not bestowed upon Pauline Breedlove (38). It is a forbidden term.

The new dual identity for Pauline Breedlove is as Mrs. Breedlove and Polly. Polly, restricted to the white fantasy world, never joins the family unit of the Breedloves. The initial desire to create a home has been replaced by the reality that “There were no memories among those pieces. Certainly no memories to be cherished” (32). The following description of their home as the novel opens illustrates the choices and convictions that the family projects:

Breedloves did not live in a storefront because they were having temporary difficulty adjusting to the cutbacks at the plant. They lived there because they were poor and black, and they stayed there because they believed they were ugly. Although their poverty was traditional and stultifying, it was not unique. But their ugliness was unique. No one could have convinced them that they were not relentlessly and aggressively ugly. (34)

This ugliness is birthed through the actions of Mrs. Breedlove. She places it on her family as one of her many forms of abandonment. The relationship of the loving couple disintegrates to its current state where no happy memories will be created. Pecola’s home life created by Mrs. Breedlove is filled with fear and dominance. Mrs. Breedlove takes her frustrations out on her family in their small domain. No one is free from Mrs. Breedlove’s rants. She nurtures the fear that consumes her daughter, and she fuels the rage that causes her son to run away.

The mother as creator and foundation within the black household is fully dismantled. Mrs. Breedlove becomes a model of the bad mother based on her own reaction and desire to

abandon her role and selfish need to create a new one. The early description of the family, related to their ugliness, is they all possess part of their core existence. The group belief that they, as a family unit, are ugly is not so much about their poverty but about how they choose to act out their inner rages and disappointments. This is the reason for everyone's ugliness except "for the father[']s],... whose ugliness (the result of despair, dissipation, and violence directed toward petty things and weak people) was behavior" (*Bluest* 34).<sup>48</sup> The destructive demise of the family structure consumes. Cholly needs Pauline because "She was one of the few things abhorrent to him that he could touch and therefore hurt. He poured out on her the sum of all his inarticulate fury and aborted desires. Hating her, he could leave himself intact" (37). The relationship that Pecola develops with her parents is wrought with destruction and rage. Pauline says in reference to Cholly as a provider and father, "[i]f it was left up to you, we'd all be dead..." (36). The parents' survival as their reformed selves depends on acting out their aggressions and life disappointments on the family unit. The destruction of the family unit becomes secondary due to the necessity of cruelty that Pauline and Cholly must exercise on each other for these new identities to remain intact.

Cholly's identity is a result of years of abandonment, most importantly by his own birth mother who attempts to kill him as an infant, the subsequent death of his surrogate figure, and his rejection by his birth father. These traumas distort Cholly's sense of family. His relationship to his wife and to other women reflects the trauma experienced from his first sexual experience as a teenager when he is symbolically raped by two white men's pistols while forced to continue his sexual act. He is told by the white man, "'Go on,' ... 'Go on and finish. And nigger, make it good.'" The flashlight did not move. For some reason Cholly had not hated the white men; he

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<sup>48</sup>See Byerman for a discussion of the difference between Cholly Breedlove and Mr. MacTeer. See Harris for discussion of Mr. MacTeer's protection of his daughters.

hated, despised the girl” (37). Cholly transfers his rage to the black girl, Darlene, because to transfer it elsewhere would have been death/madness for a young black boy. The narrator reminds the reader that “Even a half-remembrance of this episode, along with myriad other humiliations, defects, and emasculations, could stir him into flights of depravity that surprised himself – but only himself. Somehow he could not astound. He could only be astounded. So he gave that up, too” (37). While Mrs. Breedlove’s identity is a result of her own life’s disappointments, she wore the ugliness and disappointment as a cloak. Morrison uses a metaphor of the theatre: “Mrs. Breedlove handled her[s] [ugliness] as an actor does a prop: for the articulation of character, for support of a role she frequently imagined was hers – martyrdom” (34-5). The narrator also place blames for the digesting of ugliness and despair on the larger community and culture.<sup>49</sup> As if spoken from a high authority,

the master had said, “you are ugly people.” They had looked about themselves and saw nothing to contradict the statement; saw, in fact, support for it leaning at them from every billboard, every movie, every glance. “yes,” they had said. “You are right.” And they took the ugliness in their hands, threw it as a mantle over them, and went about the world with it. Dealing with each according to his way.

(35)

Learning to deal with their various interpretations of ugliness was the task that Mrs. Breedlove and Cholly model for their children with destruction and violence.

Pecola develops a crippling identity due to her fragmented homelife and motherless reality. She desires invisibly because she deals with her ugliness by hiding. She stayed “Concealed, veiled, eclipsed – peeping out from behind the shroud very seldom, and then only to

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<sup>49</sup> See Byermam, 186 and Vickroy, 85.

yearn for the return of her mask” (35). Pecola’s mask suggests and reinforces the shame cast upon her. She is unlike her brother, Sammy, who wears his shame as “a weapon to cause others pain” (35). Mirroring Cholly’s behavior and acts of violence, Sammy “adjusted his behavior to it: people who could be fascinated, even intimidated by it” (35). Pecola who was “restricted by youth and sex” does not run away like her brother (38). She hides. Her absent black mother Pauline teaches her no coping skills, but more glaringly, she does not seek to provide her with an alternative view of herself.<sup>50</sup>

Lacking the skills to adjust and manipulate the legacy that she has been given, Pecola seeks to employ the only tool she can imagine: invisibility. Pauline provides no source of protection and does not seek to protect or shield her child. Mrs. Breedlove’s embrace of Christ the Judge manifests itself in her creativity against her black existence – focusing on fighting with her husband. As Alice Walker talks about mothers without an art form, it is doubtful that it encompassed the

tiny, undistinguished days that Mrs. Breedlove ... identified, grouped, and classed by these quarrels. They gave substance to the minutes and hours otherwise dim and unrecalled. They relived the tiresomeness of poverty, gave grandeur to the dead rooms. In these violent breaks in routine that were themselves routine, she could display the style and imagination of what she believed to be her own true self. To deprive her of these fights was to deprive her of all the zest and reasonableness of life. (36)

Mrs. Breedlove never considered how her behavior affected her daughter since Mrs. Breedlove’s only imaginative potential had been reduced to violent outbreaks and not used to

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<sup>50</sup> Pauline’s interpretation and visual rejection of Pecola begins at Pecola’s birth. Because of this rejection, Pecola becomes motherless and is without any modeling for survival.

create a nurturing and safe environment. During one graphic outburst, Pecola watches and whispers, “Don’t, Mrs. Breedlove. Don’t” (38). This plea by Pecola is ignored as is her ability to better deal with her situation and one of her “methods of endurance” (38). Methods of endurance become coping mechanisms for Pecola, although “the pain was as consistent as it was deep. She struggled between an overwhelming desire that one would kill the other, and a profound wish that she herself could die” (38). The wish for death of the family unit or herself is never disclosed to her family who is too oblivious to see her. When her parents do not see her, Pecola interprets this lack with her ugliness. She absorbs her parents’ behavior along in her interactions with others. Being alone leads Pecola to pray to god. In the midst of her parents’ outburst, she exercises the only agency that she can by praying,

“Please, God,” she whispered into the palm of her hand. “Please make me disappear.” She squeezed her eyes shut. Little parts of her body faded away. Now slowly now with a rush. Slowly again. Her fingers went, one by one; then her arms disappeared all the way to the elbow. Her feet now. Yes, that was good. The legs all at once. It was hardest above the thighs. She had to be real still and pull. Her stomach would not go. But finally it, too, went away. Then her chest, her neck. The face was hard, too. Almost done, almost. Only her tight, tight eyes were left. They were always left. (39)

Though this agency is tragic and destructive, it is logical to Pecola. Her association with her eyes as witness becomes even more evident in her realization that “Try as she might, she could never get her eyes to disappear. So what was the point? They were everything. Everything was there, in them. All of those pictures, all of those faces” (39). Pecola pinpoints that her eyes reinforce the places of trauma in her life. She also “had long given up the idea of running away to see new



pictures, new faces, as Sammy had so often done. He never took her, and he never thought about his going ahead of time, so it was never planned. It wouldn't have worked anyway. As long as she looked the way she did, as long as she was ugly, she would have to stay with these people. Somehow she belonged to them" (39). Pecola is very perceptive of her placement in her family, although it is distorted. She refers to her family as "them"; she acknowledges that Sammy is not a protector nor dependable, and she bases her looks on the ownership to this clan of Breedloves.

Like her mother, Pecola develops several rituals as she attempts to carve out a life to survive in chaos. Since Pauline no longer holds the place of mother and nurturer for Pecola, Pecola must resort to her own methods of making sense of her position. No modeling or engagement exists between her and her mother outside of her witnessing these outbursts, feeling them or being used as part of her mother's manual labor. The narrator reports the "Long hours [Pecola] sat looking in the mirror, trying to discover the secret of the ugliness, the ugliness that made her ignored or despised at school, by teachers and classmates alike" (39). The narration reinforces that Pecola is an outsider in every aspect of her life. Neither home nor school offers safe a haven for her to develop as a person or to even to be visible. Pecola's invisibility or lack of desirability is marked in the physical school space because "She was the only member of class who sat alone at a double desk. The first letter of her last name forced her to sit in the front of the room always. But what about Marie Appolonaire? Marie was in front of her, but she shared a desk with Luke Angelino" (39). She resolves this treatment as "Her teachers had always treated her this way. They tried never to glance at her, and called on her only when everyone was required to respond" (40). She recognizes that she is used as a tool to express unsavory things or cruelty. "She also knew that when one of the girls at school wanted to be particularly insulting to a boy, or wanted to get an immediate response from him, she could say, 'Bobby loves Pecola

Breedlove! Bobby loves Pecola Breedlove’ and never fail to get peals of laughter from those in earshot, and mock anger from the accused” (40). In a quest to escape the demeaning reality of her existence, Pecola prays for a different set of eyes and hopes for them to be blue.

The Clark study enters Pecola’s world as she prays for a new pair of lenses – her blue eyes.<sup>51</sup> The introduction to the image of Pecola and her displacement as a black child even within her own family is painful. Pecola through her inherited outlook from her mother, documents that it occurs “to [her]... that if her eyes, those eyes that held the pictures, and knew the sights – if those eyes of hers were different, that is to say, beautiful, she herself would be different” (40). To be different is nestled in her desire to be loved and to be seen without scorn. She relates to her strong attributes that are culturally acceptable since “Her teeth were good, and at least her nose was not big and flat like some of those who were thought so cute“ (40). But most importantly, couched in this desire to be different is the reality according to Pecola is “If she looked different, beautiful, maybe Cholly would be different, and Mrs. Breedlove too. Maybe they’d say, ‘Why look at pretty-eyed Pecola. We mustn’t do bad things in front of those pretty eyes’” (40). The beauty of blue eyes would stop the numerous assaults that she endures on her childhood existence. Morrison interjects another childhood chant to reinforce that Pecola’s education and entire existence has been geared towards embracing whiteness and blue eyes. Pecola interprets this mention of storybook eyes as her only path for beauty and visibility

*Pretty eyes. Pretty blue eyes. Big blue pretty eyes.*

*Run, Jip, run, Jip runs, Alice runs. Alice has blue eyes.*

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<sup>51</sup> The Clark study was performed by the psychologist to test the preference of black children using white dolls. The black children preferred and chose the white dolls to represent beauty and goodness. Pecola believes that blue eyes will cause her to be beautiful and, as a result, valued and seen. She resembles the black girls in the study as well as Morrison’s childhood friend who prayed for blue eyes for two years (Ruas 95). Also, see hooks (*Talking* 116 and 179).

*Jerry has blue eyes. Jerry runs. Alice runs. They run  
with their blue eyes. Four blue eyes. Four pretty  
blue eyes. Blue-sky eyes. Blue-like Mrs. Forrest's  
blue blouse eyes. Morning-glory-blue-eyes.  
Alice-and-Jerry-blue-storybook-eyes. (40)*<sup>52</sup>

Like her mother, Pecola incorporates a ritual of praying in hopes that the fruition will bring her what she observes that others have – love and beauty. For Pecola love and acceptance could only be obtained by physical beauty that was clearly marked for her in her culture and her home as embracing whiteness; therefore, “Each night, without fail, she prayed for blue eyes. Fervently, for a year she had prayed. Although somewhat discouraged, she was not without hope. To have something as wonderfully as that happen would take a long, long time” (40). The narrator then foreshadows the destruction that will evolve around this child that “Thrown, in this way, into the binding conviction that only a miracle could relieve her, she would never know her beauty. She would see only what there was to see: the eyes of other people” (40). Being seen through the eyes of others is a traumatic experience that makes Pecola “other” by no fault of her own. She is a black girl without any motherlove and nurturing to alter her self-perception.

Pecola attempts to live in a world that wishes she does not exist. Even when she tries to experience a simple pleasure of going to the store for candy, she is treated as undesirable. To combat the glare of outsiders, Pecola lives in her own world, as does her mother. Her secret world is disclosed as she goes to the store: “she moves down an avenue gently buffeted by the familiar and therefore loved images,” and she admires “The dandelions at the base of the telephone pole” and wonders why “do people call them weeds? She thought they were pretty....

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<sup>52</sup> See Gwin, Bennett, Hurley and Hurley for discussion of storybook, fable references and Morrison’s usage of the primer in the novel.

Nobody loves the head of a dandelion. Maybe because they are so many, strong, and soon” (41). Pecola through the innocent lens of a child embraces what others find ugly. Weeds have no value other than annoyance, and dandelions are powerful weeds since they spread. Pecola can recognize and accept them as treasures until experience teaches her otherwise. The narrator shares that

These and other inanimate things she saw and experienced. They were real to her. She knew them. They were the codes and touchstones of the world, capable of translation and possession. She owned the crack that made her stumble; she owned the clumps of dandelions whose white heads, last fall, she had blown away; whose yellow heads, this fall, she peered into. And owning them made her part of the world, and the world a part of her. (41)

The things that are part of her world represent the flaws and undesirable things that others around her say are valueless. The cracks and the dandelions are also markers of blight and poverty. She embraces them and accepts them.

Pecola’s fragile nature is disclosed as she encounters another assault on her existence. Mr. Yacobowski is an immigrant who runs the candy store. The narrator describes first Mr. Yacobowski’s gaze on Pecola’s innocence and, subsequently, Pecola’s reduction and alteration of her identity because of the gaze. Pecola’s child-like enjoyment of selecting candy is shared after deliberating, “All Mary Janes, she decides. Three for a penny. The resistant sweetness that breaks open at last to deliver peanut butter – the oil and salt which complement the sweet pull of caramel. A peal of anticipation unsettles her stomach” (41). However, this moment is altered and becomes unpleasant as “The gray head of Mr. Yacobowski looms up over the counter. He urges his eyes out of his thoughts to encounter her. Blue eyes. Blear-dropped ... At some fixed

point in time and space he senses that he need not waste the effort of a glance. He does not see her because for him there is nothing to see” (41-2). This desire not to waste the effort of a glance is painful; the narrator comments, “How can a fifty-two-year-old white immigrant storekeeper with the taste of potatoes and beer in his mouth, his mind honed on the doe-eyed Virgin Mary, his sensibilities blunted by a permanent awareness of loss, *see* a little black girl? Nothing in his life even suggested that the feat was possible, not to say desirable or necessary” (42). This interjection seeks to lessen the blow of his behavior on Pecola, but his non-gaze like the others is all that she has known. She acknowledges that the non-gaze is not foreign as “She looks up at him and sees the vacuum where curiosity ought to lodge. And something more. The total absence of human recognition – the glazed separateness. She does not know what keeps his glance suspended” (42). Pecola attempts to bring logic to this separateness by wondering if it is “Perhaps because he is grown, or a man, and she is a little girl. But she has seen interest, disgust, even anger in grown male eyes. Yet this vacuum is not new to her. It has an edge; somewhere in the bottom lid is the distaste” (42). This distaste is familiar to her because “She has seen it lurking in the eyes of all white people. So. The distaste must be for her, her blackness. All things in her flux and anticipation. But her blackness is static and dread. And it is the blackness that accounts for, that creates, the vacuum edged with distaste in white eyes” (42).

This familiar distaste causes a shift and silence in Pecola who can only point at the “Mary Janes – a little black shaft of finger, its tip pressed on the display window. The quietly inoffensive assertion of a black child’s attempt to communicate with a white adult,” and in great effort to assert, she says, “‘Them.’ The word is more sign than sense” (42). Since Mr. Yacobowski is unable to recognize her as a child, he intimidates her and grows impatient in his mannerisms: “His lumpy red hand plops around the glass casing like the agitated head of a

chicken outraged by the loss of its body and his questions “‘What? These? These?’ . . . ‘Christ. Kantcha talk?’”(42). He leaves Pecola to wait until his fingers brush the desired Mary Janes, and he blindly questions her with “‘Well, why’nt you say so? One? How many?’” (42). Pecola is unable to articulate her desires in words. This interaction, like others, renders her mute.

Pecola can only use her gestures to express her desires. Unable to say the words, she instead “holds the money toward him. He hesitates, not wanting to touch her hand. She does not know how to move the finger or her right hand from the display counter or how to get the coins out of her left hand. Finally he reaches over and takes the pennies from her hand. His nails graze her damp palm” (43). The hesitation that he shows creates a shame in Pecola. The moment of happiness that had originally surrounded her outing is now changed. The narrator tells that “‘Outside, Pecola feels the inexplicable shame ebb” (43). This embedded shame follows her throughout the novel. This shame should not consume her but does leave her isolated and alone. Her world has been altered yet again by the cruel and unknowing outside world. On her way home, she observes that “‘Dandelions. A dart of affection leaps out from her to them. But they do not look at her and do not send love back. She thinks, ‘They are ugly. They are weeds’” (43), casting the gaze of the immigrant storekeeper on her previously beloved dandelions. To add further insult to her experience, Pecola, “[p]reoccupied with that revelation, . . . trips on the sidewalk crack. Anger stirs and wakes in her; it opens its mouth, and like a hot-mouthed puppy, laps up the dredges of her shame” (43). To cope with her anger which is never fully expressed in the novel, Pecola must self-mother herself and pacify her pain. As she reflects on the interaction, she concludes, “[a]nger is better. There is a sense of being in anger. A reality and presence. An awareness of worth. It is a lovely surging. Her thoughts fall back to Mr. Yacobowski’s eyes, his phlegmy voice” (43). Anger for Pecola is all she has been taught from her homelife and mother.

Paula Bennett asserts that “Pecola’s inability to hold anger is a direct result of Pauline’s similar inability. The art of protecting oneself against intrusion, of knowing how and when to say ‘no,’ is not, after all something an ‘ideal servant,’ anymore than an ‘ideal’ wife or mother, does well to learn....But if the mother cannot say ‘no,’ she cannot defend herself or her daughter” (133). This lack of modeling is evident several times as Pecola passively confronts anger. As she attempts to embrace her anger, it “will not hold; the puppy is too easily surfeited. Its thirst too quickly quenched, it sleeps. The shame wells up again, its muddy rivulets seeping into her eyes. What to do before the tears come. She remembers the Mary Janes” (43). To relieve herself of the pain and the physical emotion of pain, Pecola pacifies herself by devouring the young, white, childhood beauty, the Mary Janes.<sup>53</sup> The seductive description lures Pecola into a better place to avoid a mini-breakdown. Her eyes first consume the image of the Mary Janes and then her body enjoys the false nourishment that they bring:

Each pale yellow wrapper has a picture on it. A picture of little Mary Jane, for whom the candy is named. Smiling white face. Blond hair in gentle disarray, blue eyes looking at her out of a world of clean comfort. The eyes are petulant, mischievous. To Pecola they are simply pretty. She eats the candy, and its sweetness is good. To eat the candy is somehow to eat the eyes, eat Mary Jane. Love Mary Jane. Be Mary Jane.

Three pennies had bought her nine lovely orgasms with Mary Jane. Lovely Mary Jane, for whom a candy is named. (43)

Pecola has learned to self-sooth herself. She has consumed the Mary Janes that appease her spirit for the moment. Pecola spends a lot of her time alone due to her mother’s claim of

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<sup>53</sup> Keith E. Byerman considers Pecola’s consumption of the Mary Janes as “popular-cultural Eucharist.” (186)

working long hours to support the family. During these periods of trauma, Pauline or Mrs. Breedlove is absent. There is no mention in the text of Pecola sharing her experiences with her mother who probably would not give any credence to Pecola's pain.<sup>54</sup> This would make her even more invisible. Pecola's rejection from her own mother is inexcusable, but it makes later rejections from others in the community less glaring. The novel encompasses several false surrogates who accept the judgment of the mother and reject the black girl, Pecola. These false surrogates reinforce that Pauline's behaviors are not unique.

*The Bluest Eye* depicts several extremes of motherhood and surrogacy. Several women who engage with Pecola when she is most vulnerable could offer Pecola some visibility and comfort based on the notion of community mothering or the historical backdrop of othermothering. For Pecola, there are several potential surrogates; most are false surrogates, however, due to their marginalization or inability to see the child fully. Their falseness is rooted in the same self-hatred and migration complications that make Pecola invisible. Pauline represents a working class domestic while Geraldine represents the extreme example of the black women who closely mimic the privilege of white womanhood.<sup>55</sup>

Geraldine is a false surrogate. Her story is told in the winter section of the novel. Cold, harsh images illustrate her treatment of her own child, Louis, Jr., and later Pecola. Geraldine is the type of woman described as "sugar-brown Mobile girls [who] move through the streets without a stir. They are as sweet and plain as buttercake" (68). She has instilled in her son an inner hatred of blacks. She makes sure that he understands the "difference between colored

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<sup>54</sup> The later rejections of Pecola will be accompanied with severe beatings from Mrs. Breedlove with no questions asked of Pecola. These two instances are the spilled pie and beating in the Fisher kitchen and after Cholly's rape and beating in Pauline's kitchen.

<sup>55</sup> The use of Pauline, Geraldine, and Mrs. MacTeer deliberately highlights the class strain that often accompanied the resettling process of blacks post-migration. See Harris for discussion of control and the sexual identity of these women as well as their method of motherhood for their children (*Fiction* 33).



people and niggers. They were easily identifiable. Colored people were neat and quiet; niggers were dirty and loud. He belonged to the former group” (71). Similar to Pauline’s ritualistic methods of maintaining order in her life, Geraldine follows a ritualistic routine to keep Louis Junior within a certain class of colored people such as putting “Jergen’s Lotion on his face to keep the skin from becoming ashen. Even though he was light-skinned, it was possible to ash. The line between colored and nigger was not always clear; subtle and telltale signs threatened to erode it, and the watch had to be constant” (71). This constant conscious choice against blackness or anything that could reduce her child to being a nigger is Geraldine’s way of rejecting her own blackness and potential association with lower classes of blacks. What Geraldine does not fully understand or embrace is that her disconnect and lack of nurturing of her child creates a cruel and inverted spirit who tortures not only her cat, but also a poor, unsuspecting, vulnerable black girl, Pecola. Pecola and the cat are both vulnerable and powerless to Louis Junior’s rage. Instead of raising a well-adjusted child, Geraldine has raised an imitation of a young colored gentleman who learns to play his prescribed role and lash out due to the lack of nurturing and love bestowed upon him. Louis Junior embraces his perceived superiority and his male privilege by indiscriminately “bullying girls” (72). Louis evolves with the guiding hand of his mother.

Geraldine’s form of motherhood is problematic and illustrates several things. She represents a certain black southern woman who desires to be cut from the cloth of white southern womanhood. In the general sense and based on the white mothers in the novel, such women see their families as fixtures that are not to be nurtured. Morrison describes how the body and emotion are also seen as nastiness that reduces the standing of women like Geraldine and makes them like the common multitude, “niggers.” Geraldine serves to dismantle the arrogance and

supremacy that often existed within the black community of color and class.<sup>56</sup> Morrison skews the success of DuBois's educated talented tenth, blacks who were to lead the downtrodden, uncultured, and uneducated masses into the light against the racism. Geraldine's form of motherhood is just as destructive and isolating as is Pauline's.

Like Pauline, Geraldine transfers her emotions and motherlove from her child as she attempts to mother in isolation. In Geraldine's case, the closest transference is, ironically, to her black cat. The cat provides her with a safe nonjudgmental being on which to directly lavish her affection, similarly to Pauline's glorification of the Fisher household. Her husband, like black men of a certain class, believes that Geraldine's type of black woman is a "prize" who deserves to stay at home, kept, and pedestalized. These highly-prized girls "go to land-grant colleges, normal schools, and learn how to do the white man's work with refinement...Here they learn the rest of the lesson begun in those soft houses with porch swings and pots of bleeding heart: how to behave" (*Bluest* 68). As women, they become a tool of the dominate culture who help model the virtues of the white culture within the black community. Appealing to men aspiring for a certain lifestyle, such women learn "the careful development of thrift, patience, high morals, and good manners. In short, how to get rid of the funkiness. The dreadful funkiness of passion, the funkiness of nature, the funkiness of the wide range of human emotions" (68). This need to maintain high morals and good manners represents the cornerstone of white womanhood. These initially appealing characteristics to the men they marry will later become vices because such a woman "will build her nest stick by stick, make it her own inviolable world, and stand guard over its every plant, weed, and dolly, even against him" (69).

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<sup>56</sup> This same dismantling happens to Maureen Peal who is the fair-skin black girl from the school who appears as a false surrogate to Pecola. She offers a temporary friendship, kindness, and protection to Pecola but turns on Pecola as others do. Other surrogates, Claudia and Frieda, come to Pecola's rescue.

The distorted interpretation of her cultural training and her excessive expectations focus Geraldine's main affections on her cat. Her mothering style evolves as an inverted representation of meeting the basic needs of the child for "Geraldine did not allow her baby, Junior, to cry. As long as his needs were physical, she could meet them – comfort and satiety. He was always brushed, bathed, oiled, and shod" (71). However, Geraldine, "did not talk to him, coo to him, or indulge him in kissing bouts, but she saw that every other desire was fulfilled" (71). Junior soon "discovered the difference in his mother's behavior to himself and the cat. As he grew older, he learned how to direct his hatred of his mother to the cat, and spent some happy moments watching it suffer" (71). Geraldine does not equate her role in this abuse of the cat as a result of her withholding of affection and love from her son, nor does she recognize that the cat torture is his method of retaliation and resentment. Regardless, the "cat survived, because Geraldine was seldom away from home, and could effectively soothe the animal when Junior abused him" (71). Geraldine's closeness to the home highlights her lack of involvement with the community and the working world in a meaningful way. This isolation enforces and limits her mothering skills. Again, this is another example of minimal mothering for only the basic survival of the child. This transcends class for the black women in the novel. Similar to Pauline's transference of her motherlove to her white charge, Geraldine has transferred her motherlove and all of her affection to her cat and the things that she can control. There is also no suggestion that she is aware of Junior's resentment or seeks to modify it. She accepts the role of wife and mother but keeps a safe distance from engaging with the two males in her life, her husband and son. She dictates and shapes how her son will see the world: anything resembling blackness must be banished and pushed away.

Geraldine and Pauline, in effect, dismantle the black matriarch. Their two households through subversion of the image of the black supportive and embracing mother become gatekeepers to what is right and appropriate within the black family but subverted. Unlike, Mrs. MacTeer, Claudia and Freida's mother who takes Pecola in after Cholly burns the family home, whose steady interaction with others in the community results in embracing Pecola (discussed later in this chapter), Pauline and Geraldine reject Pecola for her blackness. Pecola is an undesirable or throwaway black child because she can never conform to Pauline's and Geraldine's ideals of beauty. Pecola, considered ugly, is rebuffed by the majority of people in her community, and most importantly, by her own mother. After a passive aggressive Junior lures Pecola into Geraldine's pristine home, he torments and traumatizes Pecola along with Geraldine's precious black cat. As Junior violently slings the cat against a wall, Geraldine appears. What should have been a scene of a black women intervening and saving an innocent child (Pecola) becomes one of fury and resentment against the child. Geraldine hisses, "Get out....You nasty little black bitch. Get out of my house" (75). After this verbal assault, "Pecola turned to find the front door and saw Jesus looking down at her with sad and unsurprised eyes, his long brown hair parted in the middle, the gay paper flowers twisted around his face" (76). Witnessing Geraldine's hatred, Pecola witnesses the image of Jesus as being sad and not surprised. The image reinforces that there is no comfort for Pecola. As she is expelled, "Outside the March wind blew into the rip in her dress. She held her head down against the cold. But she could not hold it long enough to avoid seeing the snowflakes falling and dying on the pavement" (76). Like the vulnerable cat, Pecola is again compared to something non-human. She is dying like the snowflakes, and no one cares to intervene. She is not even a child of God in front of Geraldine who calls her a "bitch" in the presence of Jesus. Her mother will later use the same

word to express her disdain for Pecola. In *The Bluest Eye*, this bitterness is most startling because it comes from the outsider, Geraldine, who represents a false surrogate for Pecola.<sup>57</sup> Geraldine's repulsion of blackness reinforces Pecola's desire for blue eyes. Geraldine's inability to see Pecola or her son's sinister jealousy toward the cat causes Geraldine to push her mothering potential on to an animal and lash out at anything that does not reinforce her image of appropriateness.

Typically, Pecola's traumas occur in solitude, but her mother's resentment becomes public when Pecola creates chaos in Mrs. Breedlove's treasured, white world. The repulsion and assault that Pecola endures in the presence of Louis Junior cannot compare to the physical and mental torture from her mother. Throughout much of the narrative, Pecola functions in isolation. It is not until child welfare services place her in the home of the MacTeer family as a "case" that she meets Claudia, the main narrator, and Frieda, her older sister. Claudia and Frieda will act as surrogates for Pecola several times in the novel, and they often witness attacks on Pecola. The sisters form a sister-surrogate relationship with Pecola who attends their school and lives in their community. Pecola is wedged age-wise between the sisters. The MacTeer sisters grow up in a two-parent household where both parents work. They understand the delicate balance between survival and their place as children enough not to question adult authority.

Unlike the MacTeer girls' relationship with their mother, Pecola assists her mother with the Fishers' wash. A scene in the Fishers' kitchen becomes a key marker in the type of modeling that the black mother does for her young child. By fulfilling this expectation, she learns a skill that she will use later. Though not explicitly stated in the text, black girls readily assisted their

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<sup>57</sup> The other girls in the main novels are also called "bitches" by those closest to them who should be considered within their familial realm.

mothers with the wash and other domestic tasks to obtain household income.<sup>58</sup> Claudia and Frieda seek out Pecola in hopes that she will assist them with obtaining liquor from one of Pecola's prostitute surrogates. The scene that they (Claudia and Frieda) witness scolds black girls everywhere. Claudia reminds the reader of the reason that even their black mothers place value on blond hair, blue-eyed little white girls. This value stems from deprivation that surrounded their mother's own childhoods. The three girls enter the sterile space of Mrs. Breedlove's employer.

The Fishers' white kitchen becomes another place of trauma for Pecola. As she accidentally causes the hot freshly baked pie to fall on the pristine white floor in Polly's kitchen, Pecola meets the rage of her mother. Claudia describes Pecola's mother, Mrs. Breedlove's violent reaction. Mrs. Breedlove seems unconcerned that "Most of the juice splashed on Pecola's legs, and the burn must have been painful, for [Pecola] cried out and began hopping about just as [she] entered with a tightly packed laundry bag" (86). Claudia depicts the rage and the unmerciless public flogging that occurs to a burned Pecola as "In one gallop [Mrs. Breedlove] was on Pecola, and with the back of her hand knocked her to the floor. Mrs. Breedlove yanked her up by one arm, slapped her again, and in a voice thin with anger, abused Pecola directly, and Frieda and me by implication" encompassing all three black girls into a collective punishment and resentment. Mrs. Breedlove continues to scold and reduce Pecola: "Crazy fool...my floor, mess...look what you...work...get on out...not that...crazy...my floor, my floor...my floor" (87). Claudia captures Mrs. Breedlove's indignation by describing that the "words were hotter

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<sup>58</sup> General knowledge detailed through numerous biographies, literary works and oral discussions. Black girls like black women were often expected to work in the domestic sphere. This is another example of the lack of childhood afforded to black girls. Based on needs for survival and prescribed by race and gender roles, childhood becomes a luxury often withheld based on economic necessity and training for the future. Jacqueline Jones details historical relationships of black women and work in *Labor of Love, Labor of Sorrow*.

and darker than the smoking berries, and we backed away in dread” (87). As the three black girls escape, they witness the typically undisclosed and reserved only for her white reality, Polly, who softly speaks to the white Fisher child, “‘Hush, baby, hush. Polly will change it.’ She went to the sink and turned tap water on a fresh towel. ‘Don’t you worry, none, baby’” (87). The girls witness this transformation and the white child’s question, “‘Who were they, Polly? ... You gonna make another pie?’” to which Mrs. Breedlove “whispered, and the honey in her words complemented the sundown spilling on the lake, ... ‘Course I will ... Hush. Don’t worry none’” (87). Claudia notes, however that “Over [Mrs. Breedlove’s] shoulder she spit out words to us like rotten pieces of apple ‘Pick up that wash and get out of here, so I can get this mess cleaned up’” (87). It is a startling contrast between the treatment of her own black child and her white charge. Polly embraces the frightened little girl as she wonders who the three blacks are in her white kitchen. Mrs. Breedlove does not utter one word of comfort to Pecola or ask how she is. All that matters is that she is a “crazy fool” who has disrupted the order of her workplace, and she must pay. Payment for Pecola is a beating in front of her peers but more importantly in front of the gaze of the little white girl. Mrs. Breedlove throws away and banishes Pecola while she hugs and calms her little white girl. She disregards the three black children even being present by “Don’t worry none.”<sup>59</sup> The treatment of Pecola by her mother, Mrs. Breedlove, and by Geraldine, the previously -described false surrogate, represent a full negation of the black child. Both without a questioning of the situation punish Pecola and the rage that the women unleash is brutal. More startling is that neither one is concerned with the potential aftermath. Pecola has been fully abandoned.

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<sup>59</sup> See Harris (*Fiction* 49) and Bennett (132) discuss Pauline’s open erasure of the black girls in front of her white charge who is effectively her superior as an extension of her white parents, the Fishers.

*The Bluest Eye* also gives birth to several other types of surrogates who all represent nontraditional fractions of the community. Some of these surrogates will prove to be false because they are too powerless in their own marginalized states to truly intervene and help protect Pecola by exerting their agency and presence, or they mimic the larger community's fascination with white beauty and fail to see Pecola. The community's adoration of whiteness becomes telling when the institution of social service must intervene on behalf of the black child whom her mother abandons. The text establishes Geraldine, Mrs. MacTeer, and the larger black community as false surrogates. The other surrogates or the ones who are socially deviant or too powerless are the prostitutes China, Poland, Maginot Line who live in Pecola's building, and Soaphead Church, the self-proclaimed community healer and known pedophile. Based on their marginalized placement within the community, they are not able to rescue Pecola but only offer her comfort. Every sphere of Pecola's life is unpleasant. School, which should have some agency or desire for a child's well-being, is no different. The teachers at the school seem not to respond to Pecola. This indifference is also apparent in the various community members who witness the destruction of the family. The only apparent social intervention results after Cholly burns the family home down, and the family is literally "outdoors." Sammy goes to stay with a family member, Mrs. Breedlove stays with her beloved employers the Fishers, and Pecola is put "outdoors" of the familial realm and placed with the MacTeers through a white social worker. Claudia notes her arrival as "She came with nothing. No little paper bag with the other dress, or a nightgown, or two pair of whitish cotton bloomers. She just appeared with a white woman and sat down" (19). Pecola's time in the MacTeer household will reveal multiple aspects of Pecola's development.



Mrs. MacTeer, Claudia and Frieda's mother, is a potential surrogate for Pecola, but is also one of the most powerful commentaries of a failed surrogate-mother. She represents the hard working black women who learn to keep their emotions restrained and assist others in the community. She must balance the economics of family life, taking in Pecola who has been put outdoors, and later the welcoming and unwelcoming of the boarder, Mr. Henry, into the MacTeer household. She willingly offers nurture and shelter to Pecola but does not inquire or seek to get to know Pecola. She fails to see Pecola's trauma and does not understand Pecola's desires for invisibility. After she discovers Pecola has started to menstruate, she takes Pecola into her maternal sphere and bathes her. Prior to this discovery at the confession of Rosemary the white female neighbor that the girls are playing nasty, Mrs. MacTeer beats Frieda and prepares to beat Pecola, claiming her as "child of mine or not" (28). This claiming of Pecola shows Mrs. MacTeer's inclusion of her in her maternal realm. She actually reinforces the "whole village" mentality or community othermothering that Patricia Hill Collins describes and establishes as a cornerstone to black motherhood:<sup>60</sup>

Othermothers often help to defuse the emotional intensity of relationships between bloodmothers and their daughters...Nurturing children in Black extended family networks stimulates a more generalized ethic of caring and personal accountability among African-American women who often feel accountable to all the Black community's children. This notion of Black women as community othermothers for all Black children traditionally allowed African-American women to treat biologically unrelated children as if they were members of their own families. (128-9)

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<sup>60</sup> See hooks' essay "Homeplace" in *Yearnings* for additional community mothering.

Mrs. MacTeer's claiming Pecola falls short since she accepts Pecola temporarily into her home but does not seek to permanently intervene to maintain protection of Pecola. As Minrose Gwin explains will explain this is one of the rare instances in *The Bluest Eye* where the motherline is extended to Pecola. Gwin does not identify Mrs. MacTeer as a surrogate but acknowledges her that claiming Pecola as her own daughter when the girls are accused of playing nasty was not legitimate that Mrs. MacTeer fulfills the role of community mother.<sup>61</sup> She reverses her role from punisher to a role of nurturer. She embraces Pecola and bathes her. Claudia shares that "We could hear water running into the bathtub....The water gushed, and over its gushing we could hear the music of my mother's laughter" (28). Later, Mrs. MacTeer misinterprets Pecola's consumption of milk as she misinterprets her daughter's attempt to assist their friend during her transition to womanhood.

The Shirley Temple cup is offered to Pecola when she first comes to the MacTeer household with graham crackers as a snack. Claudia describes that Pecola spent "a long time with the milk, and gazed fondly at the silhouette of Shirley Temple's dimpled face" (19). Mrs. MacTeer does not understand this adoration and in response to this misunderstanding, she rages, "Three quarts of milk. That's what was *in* the icebox yesterday. Three whole quarts. Now they ain't none. Not a drop. I don't mind folks coming in and getting what they want, but three quarts of milk! What the devil does *anybody* need with *three* quarts of milk?" (22). Claudia explains, "We knew that she fond of the Shirley Temple cup and took every opportunity to drink milk out of it just to handle and see sweet Shirley's face. My mother knew Frieda and I hated milk and assumed Pecola drank it out of greediness" (22). The assumption of greediness, severs Mrs. MacTeer's good intentions with Pecola.

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<sup>61</sup> See Harris's discussion of the community as wasteland and Mrs. MacTeer and her family as exceptions.

Mrs. MacTeer's continuous rants include some critical information on how she sees her role in the community and offers a commentary on others, especially the Breedloves. Mrs. MacTeer questions the role her family, which struggles financially, has in caring for Pecola saying,

I don't know what I'm suppose to be running here, a charity ward, I guess. Time for me to get out of the *giving* line and get in the *getting* line. I guess I ain't *supposed* to have nothing. I'm *supposed* to end up in the poorhouse....I got about as much business with another mouth to feed as a cat has with side pockets. As if I don't have trouble enough trying to feed my own and keep out the poorhouse, now I got something else in here that's just going to *drink* me on in there. (23)

During her rant, she also defends her decision to help even though they struggle, "I'm willing to do what I can for folks. Can't nobody say I ain't. But this has got to stop, and I'm just the one to stop it. Bible say watch as well as pray. Folks just dump they children off on you and go on 'bout they business" (23). She is also critical of the other members of the community as well as the social service institution when she says, "Ain't nobody even peeped in here to see whether that child has a loaf of bread. Look like they would just *peep* in to see whether I had a loaf of bread to give her. But naw. That thought don't cross they mind" (23). Finally, Mrs. MacTeer is most critical of the ones who should care the most, the parents. She questions why the family has been put outdoors as well as the odd lack of response from the mother with "[t]hat old trifling Cholly been out of jail *two* whole days and ain't been here yet to see if his own child was 'live or dead. She could be *dead* for all he know. And that *mama* neither. What kind of something is that?" (23). Claudia and Frieda know better than to interrupt their mother and explain why Pecola consumes the milk since "it was certainly not for us to 'dispute' her. We

didn't initiate talk with grown-ups; we answered their questions" (22). Mrs. MacTeer abandons Pecola after questioning Pecola's intent in consuming the milk. She relates this consumption to greed/gluttony and not to the need to consume "whiteness" in hopes that it will give her what she needed to feel. Mrs. MacTeer does not seek any revelation from her daughters on Pecola's intent. Claudia (the narrator) and Frieda, both fulfill surrogate roles as the sisters act to mother and protect Pecola. Most important is Mrs. MacTeer's critical eye toward Pauline and Pauline's blatant abandonment of her daughter. Within these various images of motherhood and surrogates, Morrison's novel shows the challenges not only of motherhood for black women but also of surrogacy.

In addition to Mrs. MacTeer and Geraldine as potential surrogates, Morrison provides two extreme concepts of potential surrogates. One of the false surrogates is Soaphead Church who emerges as a combination of God and mother figure for Pecola. His assumption of whiteness as an ideal as well as his pedophilia complicates this role. In addition to Soaphead, Morrison places the prostitutes Miss Marie, Miss Poland, and Miss China (as Pecola regards them) as potential surrogates. Morrison uses these characters to show the variety of individuals who could help Pecola but also for consideration of how the community sees people as appropriate or inappropriate for aid. Each of the potential surrogates represents a critique on different segments of the community to highlight the new dysfunctionality plaguing the black community. The three main images of black motherhood (Pauline, Geraldine, and Mrs. MacTeer) do not represent mothers who fully embrace their black children which is a left over residual of the fragmentation and distancing from slavery. Also, left over from the legacy of slavery is the judgment that accompanies black women who exercise sexual agency and the limitation that the jezebel marker leaves on the black female identity.

The three prostitutes: China, Poland, and Maginot Line (Miss Marie) who live above the Breedlove family are important figures in Pecola's development.<sup>62</sup> They are viewed by the community as "the other" and are considered "ruined"; however, they are able to provide Pecola with what no one else in the community can – active, non-judgmental interactions. Their time with Pecola represents genuine care. The women are able to see past the surface image of Pecola as being ugly and undesirable to seeing her as part of the forgotten and less desirable within the community. Pecola addresses them with respect and adoration. She comes to them with her most pressing questions and desires for acceptance. What should be asked of the birth mother, Pauline, is put to the ruined members of the community or her peers. These women, for Pecola, become surrogates and replacements for Pauline. They provide a space of safety for Pecola. When she is with them, Pecola appears most like the innocent young girl that she is. She also fiercely defends them against the insults of others such as Claudia and Frieda's negative references (84). At no time does Pecola assert any sort of agency except when she interacts with these women and defends them. Though she is respectful of the three women, others see her relationship with them as inappropriate. The women in the community have cast them as outsiders, but as Morrison carefully constructs their brief stories, the prostitutes do not see themselves as fallen women. This sense of self-definition provides them with a greater agency than the women already discussed. They are able clearly to define themselves and their roles. The path to this agency and self-sufficiency costs them legitimacy in the larger community's eyes.

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<sup>62</sup> See Ágnes Surányi, "*The Bluest Eye* and *Sula*: Black Female Experience from Childhood to Womanhood" for additional details on the use of the prostitutes' names signifying Asian and European fronts and Aryan ideals (12). Also see Gillian (159-178).

Miss China, Miss Poland, and Miss Marie do not represent any stereotype of prostitutes as fallen women. Nothing is romanticized about them, nor do they have a dependence on a pimp or drugs. The narrator reveals that

Except for Marie's fabled love for Dewey Prince, these women hated men, all men, without shame, apology, or discrimination. They abused their visitors with scorn grown mechanical from use. Black men, white men, Puerto Ricans, Mexicans, Jews, Poles, whatever – all were inadequate and weak, all came under their jaundiced eyes and were the recipients of their disinterested wrath. They took delight in cheating them. On one occasion the town knew well, they lured a Jew up the stairs, pounced on him, all three, held him up by the heels, shook everything out of his pants pockets, and threw him out the window. (47-8)

Because of this claimed and embraced identity, the women have more agency than do the other women in the community. They assume no false identity or pretense to make themselves visible or needed. Due to this agency, the women can see Pecola and do not seek to shun her as others do in the community. Nor do they need to dismantle who she is since they do not absorb her blackness or physical appearance as an attack on their own identities or denial of their own blackness.

The women respect Pecola as a person. When Pecola experiences some trauma or recognizes that she is outside of the ideal, she enters the space above the storefront for interaction with the prostitutes who act as surrogates for her. Pecola must venture outside of her own home to find comfort. For example, after her humiliating experience with Mr. Yaobowski, and after her highly sexualized eating of the lovely Mary Janes, Pecola heads directly to the home of the prostitutes, the social deviants. This is only the second scene in the novel where her

emotion is actively described. The other is the consumption of whiteness by devouring the Mary Janes. Outside of her consumption of whiteness, Pecola is empty and devoid of emotion and energy. Also, ironically, she must self-soothe outside of her own maternal home. In order to continue to put herself back together, she must enter the only maternal-like space that she knows.<sup>63</sup> The narrator describes the women as the “Three whores who lived in the apartment above the Breedloves’ storefront. China, Poland, and Miss Marie. Pecola loved them, visited them, and ran their errands. They, in turn, did not despise her” (43). The language used to describe their relationship mirrors the sexual exchange the women have with their customers. No judgment exists in this barter system except when the men are cruel to their “good” wives. Pecola, who lacks friends and companionship, establishes her place within the three women’s home. They greet her not with contempt but with kindness and affection, “Hi dumplin’. Where your socks?’ Marie seldom called Pecola the same thing twice, but invariably her epithets were fond ones chosen from menus and dishes that were forever uppermost in her mind” (44). There are no other notions in the text where kind, affectionate names are used to refer to Pecola nor does anyone else take interest in her lacking socks or clothing. This was previously evident in her status as a “case” at the MacTeer house when she arrives with no belongings (17). These slight additions make Pauline’s neglect of mothering even more glaring.

The women do not seek to protect or sugarcoat any realities for Pecola or for themselves. Pecola has learned how their interactions will proceed when she acknowledges, “The women were friendly, but slow to begin talk. Pecola always took the initiative with Marie, who, once inspired, was difficult to stop” (44). In this environment, Pecola has no problem conversing. Unlike many of the other characters in the novel, the three prostitutes are not pretending to be

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<sup>63</sup> For greater discussion on material space in the novel, see Gwin (81). She describes every material space Pecola enters as “dangerous.”

anything but what they are – prostitutes. Morrison does, however, according to Ágnes Surányi, create an emphasis with their names to denote again the European dominance throughout the novel. Though they represent a socially deviant element of society, they do not attempt to hide or manipulate it as others do, such as Geraldine or Soaphead Church. The narrator discloses the reality of how the prostitutes see themselves:

Nor were they protective and solicitous of youthful innocence. They looked back on their own youth as a period of ignorance, and regretted that they had not made more of it. They were not young girls in whores' clothing, or whores regretting their loss of innocence. They were whores in whores' clothing, whores who had never been young and had no word for innocence. With Pecola they were as free as they were with each other. Marie concocted stories for her because she was a child, but the stories were breezy and rough. If Pecola had announced her intention to live the life they did, they would not have tried to dissuade her or voiced any alarm. (48)

This ability to see past Pecola as a child and place her within an adult realm is evident in their interactions with her. They do not however seek to intervene by protecting Pecola from the brutality of others or look to motivate or to prepare her for an independent life as a young woman. These women are isolated in the community as we later learn when Claudia and Frieda seek a remedy to prevent Frieda from “being ruined” by the inappropriate touch of Mr. Henry and from the community’s anointed “ruined women” (83). The three prostitutes view the other women in the community with a critical eye. They did not “have respect for women, who, although not their colleagues, so to speak, nevertheless deceived their husbands – regularly or irregularly, it made no difference. ‘Sugar-coated whores,’ they called them, and did not yearn to



be in their shoes” (48). They see the judgment from their customers’ wives as camouflaging who they really are or as Geraldine would call it the “funk.” There was one group of women who they respected and who “they would have described as ‘good Christian colored women.’ The woman whose reputation was spotless, and who tended to her family, who didn’t drink or smoke or run around. These women had their undying if covert, affection. They would sleep with their husbands, and take their money, but always with a vengeance” (48). This is their method of acting upon the hypocrisy that surrounds most women in the community and their method of agency for redeeming the women with spotless reputations. China, Marie, and Poland admire and respect women who are honest and openly accept who they are. In terms of potential modeling, this is strength. Their methods of acknowledgment are deviant and sexually subjective but powerful. Unlike the other women of the novel, they claim their sexuality. They are the closest to witnessing the Breedloves’ dysfunction. They witness Pauline’s lack of compassion and nurturing in her motherhood as Mrs. Breedlove and establish themselves as being a compassionate maternal realm for Pecola.

In the prostitutes’ highly sexualized space, Pecola begins to question what love is and how you get someone to love you. This reoccurring question again happens when she is outside of her natural maternal sphere of Mrs. Breedlove. Pecola had first asked Frieda and Claudia asks how does one get someone to love them and she later explores the same topic with the socially deviant prostitutes (46-48). In both spaces, Pecola is comfortable enough with the females to ask important questions in order to piece together the void that has dominated her life, the lack of love and nurturing. As a sheltered and forgotten child, she equates the women not as prostitutes but as being popular. Pecola asks, “I never seen nobody with as many boyfriends as you got, Miss Marie. How come they all love you?” As Marie opens her root beer, she tells Pecola,

“What else they gone do? They know I’m rich and good-lookin’. They wants to put their toes in my curly hair, and get at my money” (45). The response from Marie is not nestled in appropriate language, but it is direct and truthful. Pecola feels safe to inquire about an intimate question. While she is in the ladies’ space, her mind drifts to her own parents. Pecola reflects on her parents, the lack of physical privacy in their home, and hearing and witnessing their intimate acts.<sup>64</sup> She does not refer to them as mother and father but distances them to their known names of Cholly and Mrs. Breedlove. In her attempt to piece together what love actually is, she thinks “of Dewey Prince and how he loved Miss Marie. What did love feel like? she wondered. How do grown-ups act when they love each other? Eat fish together?” (48). When Pecola tries to transfer what she observes in the home of the three surrogates to her own life,

Into her eyes came the picture of Cholly and Mrs. Breedlove in bed. He making sounds as though he were in pain, as though something had him by the throat and wouldn’t let go. Terrible as his noises were, they were not nearly as bad as the no noise at all from her mother. It was as though she was not even there. Maybe that was love. Choking sounds and silence. (48-9)

Her reflection on the sounds that Cholly makes foreshadows her own first sexual experience when he rapes her. During the rape scene when fear paralyzes her, she symbolically assumes the description of her mother during sex with Cholly. Pauline later discloses her deliberate refusal and repression of her own sexual desire and feelings for her husband by her silence (103-104). Pecola’s education about sex, sexuality, and womanhood result from piecing together fragments obtained through her various surrogates: the prostitutes, Claudia, and Frieda. Pecola starts to associate love with sex and the ability to create life, a baby. The need to be loved

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<sup>64</sup> Children are abused when they hear or see sexual acts by adults. See Champagne (130) and Comer and Poussaint (45 and 91).

remains critical to Pecola's logic with love and babies. There is no adult mother-figure to actively deconstruct this illogic for Pecola.

Pecola's confusion as a result of many interactions and issues causes her to be constantly on edge. In her interaction with the prostitutes, Pecola gazes on them as if they are not real. This doubt of their real presence stems from the rare kindness they afford her. In addition, the women are different from everyone else that she interacts with in the community. The women treat her as an adult. As she watches, "Marie sat shelling peanuts and popping them into her mouth. Pecola looked and looked at the women. Were they real? Marie belched, softly, purringly, lovingly" (49). The comparison of these women to cats is sexually charged. Pecola associates cats with love and comfort. Her earlier incident in Geraldine's home with the cat mirrors this scene since she associates love with the prostitutes the same way she did initially with the black cat prior to being expelled by a hateful Geraldine. Pecola must question if the prostitutes are real since no one deals with her as directly as they do. Within their home, trauma does not find Pecola.

Pecola can only find sense and acceptance in herself through assimilation into whiteness. After the rape by her father, Pecola's grasp on reality begins to deteriorate. There is no marker of comfort for her in this traumatic experience as her drunken father watches her doing dishes in the kitchen. His conflicted feelings toward her emerge as "revulsion, guilt, pity, then love. His revulsion was a reaction to her young, helpless, hopeless presence. Her back hunched that way; her head to one side as though crouching from a permanent and unrelieved blow" (127). Cholly finally sees Pecola as the outside community has seen her. He then questions, "Why did she have to look so whipped? She was a child – unburdened – why wasn't she happy? The clear statement of her misery was an accusation. He wanted to break her neck – but tenderly" (127). By finally

seeing Pecola as the wounded girl and wondering about the burden that she carries, Cholly becomes emotionally involved with her for the first time. The narrator continues to describe the missed emotions and quest for reasoning in Pecola's demeanor. Gazing at his dejected daughter, Cholly ponders, "What could he do for her – ever? What give her? What say to her? What could a burned-out black man say to the hunched back of his eleven-year-old daughter?" (127).

Wedded deeply in Cholly's logic and reflections about his daughter is his ever-present rage at Darlene (his first sexual experience that white men interrupt) and his wife.

The actual rape of Pecola is described in relationship to Pauline. Cholly thinks, "the rigidness of her shocked body, the silence of her stunned throat, was better than Pauline's easy laughter had been. The confused mixture of his memories of Pauline and the doing a wild and forbidden thing excited him...Surrounding all of his lust was a border of politeness...He wanted to fuck her – tenderly" (128).<sup>65</sup> The language used describes Pecola's physical reaction to the rape: "tightness of her vagina," "the only sound she made – a hollow suck of air in the back of her throat. Like the rapid loss of air from a circus balloon," "her wet, soapy hands on his wrists, the fingers clenching, but whether her grip was from a hopeless but stubborn struggle to be free, or from some other emotion," "the dry harbor of her vagina," and "she appeared to have fainted" graphically depict her trauma (128). This robbing of her innocence scars and cripples Pecola's mind. After this violence is acted upon Pecola's body, Cholly can only gaze at her. He could only see "her grayish panties, so sad and limp around her ankles. Again, the hatred mixed with tenderness. The hatred would not let him pick her up, the tenderness forced him to cover her" (129). This covering of Pecola is also symbolic of the shame that Cholly has associated with this

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<sup>65</sup> See for additional discussion of incest in African American literature: Hurley and Hurley and Liddell and Kemp.

“forbidden act” (128). The mental trauma that Pecola has long suffered is now a physical trauma for her mother to witness.<sup>66</sup>

Mrs. Breedlove’s reaction to Pecola kills her motherhood. It can be assumed that Mrs. Breedlove was working during the time of this attack and that Pecola was playing her role of trying to tend to the house that Pauline had abandoned. What is unconscionable is Mrs. Breedlove’s reaction. Mrs. Breedlove, blind to the trauma, inflicts all she knows upon her black child – pain through a brutal inhumane beating.<sup>67</sup> The narrator describes, “when the child regained consciousness, she was lying on the kitchen floor under a heavy quilt, trying to connect the pain between her legs with the face of her mother looming over her” (129). The larger community’s gaze later explains this act of looming.

Pecola’s trauma is pieced together in fragments within the community. Claudia and Frieda appear to frame the story based on the community’s gaze and Pecola’s horrific reality. The girls feel Pecola’s trauma and question the “secret, terrible, awful story” whose key elements reflect the distain that the community has not only for Pecola but her family: “Pregnant?...They say it’s Cholly....Her daddy?...That dirty nigger...Member the time he tried to burn them up? I knew he was crazy for sure then....What’s she gonna do? The mama? Keep on like she been, I reckon. He taken off” (147). Claudia and Frieda overhear through conversation the horrific, and how the community looks at the parents to find logic. The community then shifts their need for logic to the outside institution by “County ain’t gone let her keep that baby, is they?” (147). This outside dependence on the social service institution resolves them of any blame and

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<sup>66</sup> Bennett relates the rape scene to poverty and racism as symbolic rapes for the Breedlove family and that “Pecola unable to separate from the mother she never had, stays to become the scapegoat of her father Cholly’s self-hatred and despair” (134).

<sup>67</sup> See hooks (*Yearnings* and *Talking Back*) and Comer and Poussaint for greater detail on physical violence toward children in black communities.

responsibility. The community seeks to further distance itself with excuses: “None of them Breedloves seem right anyhow. That boy is off somewhere every minute, and the girl was always foolish...Don’t nobody know nothing about them anyway. Where they come from or nothing. Don’t seem to have no people” (147). The Breedloves emerge again as rootless with no one to assist, and Pecola is not seen as a victimized child but as a foolish one. There is no community intervention into why Pecola appears simple or Sammy constantly runs away. The community just gazes and continues passing judgment. “Just nasty...Well, they ought to take her out of school. Ought to. She carry some of the blame. Oh, come on. She ain’t but twelve or so. Yeah. But you never know, How come she didn’t fight him. Maybe she did. Yeah? You never know” places Pecola not in the role of victim but vixen (147).<sup>68</sup> The community robs her of her position as a traumatized child and her motherless reality almost all of her life. It was reported that the baby

probably won’t live. They say the way her mama beat her she lucky to be alive herself...She be lucky if it don’t live. Bound to be the ugliest thing walking...Can’t help but be. Ought to be a law: two ugly people doubling up like that to make more ugly. Be better off in the ground...Well, I wouldn’t worry none. It be a miracle if it live. (148)

Mrs. Breedlove’s reaction seeks to remove Pecola and punish her. Pauline beats Pecola and then moves with Pecola to the outskirts of the community. The family has been labeled as socially deviant, and the mother as vicious abandoner, but also perhaps an unacknowledged savior. The desire for the community to want the baby not to live and the questioning of Pecola’s role as victim makes the added trauma of Pauline’s beating seem justifiable in their eyes. The

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<sup>68</sup> Similar condemnation is settled on Ellen, Bone, and Precious.

community wants the family to disappear because they are a reminder of their own fragmented selves. The community continues to hold on to false images of beauty by not expressing any empathy or concern for the raped and battered child and by suggesting that she will birth an ugly black baby.

Claudia and Frieda hear the trauma and seek to provide Pecola with a miracle in her fragmented existence. Claudia describes how, “I believe our sorrow was the more intense because nobody else seemed to share it. They were disgusted, amused, shocked, outraged, or even excited by the story. But, we listened for the one who would say, ‘Poor little girl,’ or, ‘Poor Baby,’ but there was only head-wagging where those words should have been. We looked for eyes creased with concern, but saw only veils” (148).<sup>69</sup> Claudia describes what should have been the collective outrage of the community, but the reality is that their community’s collective inner shame would not allow them to produce it. Again, the agents for Pecola become the sister-surrogates, and the narrator, Claudia, says, “more strongly than my fondness for Pecola, I felt a need for someone to want the black baby to live – just to counteract the universal love of white baby dolls, Shirley Temples and Maureen Peals. And Frieda must have felt the same thing” (148). The sisters become the empathetic collective conscience of the community and the ultimate surrogates for Pecola in the role of sister-mothers. They are able to interpret Pecola’s self-hatred and what she represents for the community as a whole. Claudia brings full-circle the dismantling of Pecola and ultimately the black child:

We thought of only this overwhelming hatred for the unborn baby. We remembered Mrs. Breedlove knocking Pecola down and soothing the pink tears of the frozen baby doll that sounded like the door of the icebox. We remembered the

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<sup>69</sup> Echoes Paul Laurence Dunbar’s “We Wear the Mask.” The veils that the girls describe mirror the veils that Dunbar depicts in his poem as part of the role that blacks must play for survival.

knuckled eyes of schoolchildren under the gaze of Meringue Pie [Maureen Peal] and the eyes of these same children when they looked at Pecola. Or maybe we didn't remember; we just knew. We had defended ourselves since memory against everything and everybody, considered all speech a code to be broken by us, and all gestures subject to careful analysis; we had become headstrong, devious and arrogant. Nobody paid us any attention, so we paid very good attention to ourselves. Our limitations were not known to us – not then. Our only handicap was our size; people gave us orders because they were bigger and stronger. So it was with confidence, strengthened by pity and pride, that we decided to change the course of events and alter a human life. (148-9)

This desire to fix and to alter Pecola's life is previously uncharted territory and means that Pecola's sister-surrogates see her. Claudia and Frieda not only gaze on Pecola, but they feel her pain in a limited way. They express their empathy throughout the novel as they try to bring logic to the disdain that marks Pecola. Their decision to engage in altering life is as important as the offering that they make to give all they have – their money and their seeds. Theirs is the only active community intervention. Frieda as the older sister directs that "We'll bury the money over her house so we can't go back and dig it up, and we'll plant the seeds out back of our house so we can watch over them, And when they come up, we'll know everything is alright" (149). This watching over the seeds illustrates their continuous watching over Pecola.

The reality is that Claudia and Frieda desperately want Pecola's black baby to live. They, like Pecola, recognize the disdain that accompanies their blackness. Claudia does not pass judgment but closes the first introductory paragraph of the novel with "[t]here is really nothing more to say – except why. But since why is difficult to handle, one must take refuge in how"



(9).<sup>70</sup> The how is also a complicated explanation in light of all the complexities that shape the text. The historical placement of the characters, as well as their relationships with each other and their home lives/upbringings makes them invisible. Many of the characters' primary focus is survival in new cities and new homes. It takes the innocence of a child who must grow-up during this period to pose the question of "how." Claudia understands the "how" because she is a black girl around the age of Pecola but with a more stable family. She is also a member of the community who talks about the Breedlove family. Claudia is too young to have the adoring fascination with the white dolls like her sister and Pecola. She has developed a healthy self-image mainly due to her older sister Frieda who provides modeling, who is able to shield her and also accompany her through her journey of development.

Claudia MacTeer's narration is important for Claudia seeks not to place direct blame for the fate of Pecola on one individual.<sup>71</sup> Pecola's state becomes the end of innocence for Claudia and her sister. Pecola's demise is symbolically the end of innocence for all girls, especially black girls. Claudia says, "Our innocence and faith were no more productive than his lust or despair. What is clear now is that all of that hope, fear, lust, love, and grief, nothing remains but Pecola and the unyielding earth. Cholly Breedlove is dead; our innocence too. The seeds shriveled and died; her baby too" (9). This is also a larger statement of failed motherhood. The death of Pecola's child in the midst of hope is revealing since there were many who could have intervened to help protect Pecola when her own mother could no longer recognize her own daughter. This is also an unconscionable trend within black motherhood. The inability to see one's child, especially one's daughter's promise, potential, and beauty is a critical flaw in black

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<sup>70</sup> For more discussion on the structure of the novel and language used, see Hurley and Hurley, Gillian, and Gwin.

<sup>71</sup> See McKay's interview with Morrison concerning *Beloved*, and who has the right to question the mother.

motherhood, and calls to question the generationally inherited hatred of black children and the need to erase/sterilize their presence as a legacy of the internalized racism begun in slavery.

The sisters consistently assume the role of surrogates. When Pecola first comes to stay with them after “old Dog Breedlove had burned up his house, gone upside his wife’s head, and everybody, as a result, was outdoors,” it is the MacTeer family who accepts Pecola in their home when her family members scatter elsewhere (17). Claudia explains the implication of being outdoors which was the “real horror of life” that

surfaced frequently in those days. Every possible excess was curtailed with it. If somebody ate too much, he could end up outdoors... To be put outdoors by a landlord was one thing—unfortunate, but an aspect of life over which you had no control, since you could not control your income. But to be slack enough to put oneself outdoors, or heartless enough to put one’s own kin outdoors—that was criminal. (17-8)

The mention of family here is pivotal because it is the direct action of Cholly that leads to the family’s destruction and in the words of the collective community, the unforgivable, “to be put outdoors.” The collective community functions as the judges and nonsupporters. Claudia as the narrator is able to weave all accounts into the narrative, but provides a child’s neutral innocence in her commentary. Pecola has been put outdoors literally by her family on multiple levels but especially by her mother. Pauline goes to stay in the home of the Fishers but does not dare bring her daughter. The entire family abandons Pecola and literally leaves her outdoors.

Having no place to go or no one to claim her except the white-controlled social system further marks Pecola as an outsider and undesirable, yet being an outsider makes her vulnerable and likeable to the other girls. Claudia describes that “when we discovered that she clearly did

not want to dominate us, we liked her” (19). Pecola’s openness and acceptance creates a sister-maternal bond that allows the two sisters to focus on Pecola in a way that she has before experiences as a welcomed guest, like member of a family. In her community, Pecola has always been an outsider who hopes to become invisible even in her own home. She is welcomed within the MacTeer home as a charity case by the family, but as a sister by Claudia and Frieda.

There are several pivotal scenes where Claudia and Frieda consistently fulfill the role of sisters-mother and surrogates to Pecola. Already explored are several instances where the sisters witness various traumas and mistreatments of Pecola. In the winter chapter, they actively protect Pecola. The appearance of Maureen Peal introduces the community’s adopted standard of beauty in the flesh. Peal is a “high-yellow dream child with long brown hair braided into two lynch ropes that hung down her back. She was rich, at least by our standards, as rich as the richest white girls, swaddled in comfort and care” (52). Peal reinforces certain class and privilege based of the dominate culture’s value of the ideal. Claudia further describes the different treatment that Maureen receives from everyone at school:

She enchanted the entire school. When teachers called on her, they smiled encouragingly. Black boys didn’t trip her in the halls; white boys didn’t stone her, white girls didn’t suck their teeth when she was assigned to be their work partners; black girls stepped aside when she wanted to use the sink in the girl’s toilet, and their eyes genuflected under sliding lids. She never had to search for anybody to eat with in the cafeteria – they flocked to the table of her choice, where she opened fastidious lunches, shaming our jelly-stained bread with egg-salad sandwiches cut into four dainty squares, pink-frosted cupcakes, stocks of

celery and carrots, proud, dark apples. She even bought and liked white milk.  
(53)

This description of Maureen Peal's treatment at school is in direct contrast to Pecola's earlier treatment at school and the perception of her even by her teachers (39-0).

Maureen, like Pecola, becomes an inversion since she initially appears as a surrogate. People do not recognize the true personalities of both girls because one is hidden by "enamored beauty" and the other by "perceived ugliness." The initial kindness of Maureen is ironically set against the jealousy that Frieda and Claudia seek to resolve. Claudia describes how they "were bemused, irritated, and fascinated" by Maureen (53). She says, "We looked hard for flaws to restore our equilibrium, but had to be content at first with uglying up her name, changing Maureen Peal to Meringue Pie" (53). Later discoveries of a dog-tooth or her being born with six fingers on each hand empowered the sisters to feel that they had "small triumphs, but we took what we could get – snickering behind her back and calling her Six-finger-dog-tooth-meringue-pie. But we had to do it alone, for none of the other girls would cooperate with our hostility. They adored her" (53). This adoration is recognized even in Claudia and Frieda when Claudia admits that

[m]y sister and I both suspected that we were secretly prepared to be her friend, if she would let us, but I know it would be a dangerous friendship, for when my eye traced the white border patterns of those Kelly-green knee socks, and felt the pull and slack of my brown stockings, I wanted to kick her. And when I thought of the unearned haughtiness in her eyes, I plotted accidental slammings of locker doors on her hand. (53-4)

The “haughtiness in her eyes” draws the reader back to Claudia’s destruction of the white dolls. The actual/perceived arrogance of Maureen Peal emerges twice in the revelation of the colorline and class. Within this interaction, Pecola believes she finds herself a savior who is later revealed as one of the false surrogates. Maureen Peal’s presence in the text has a two-folded meaning. She exists to provide a real-life illustration of the coveted white doll and to introduce the connections between a popular film of the time *Imitation of Life* and the black communities’ love affair with the coveted white doll. As Maureen, Claudia and Frieda exit school and walk home, they encounter “a group of boys. . . circling and holding at bay a victim, Pecola Breedlove” (55). Seeing and describing Pecola as a victim is not new.<sup>72</sup> The attack that Pecola endures mirrors her earlier self-reflection on her ugliness. This time her abuse, “justified by” her ugliness, is acted out for others to see. Pecola suffers several things in this scene. Claudia describes that the group of boys, “heady with the smell of their own musk, thrilled by the easy power of a majority, . . . gaily harassed” Pecola (55). This harassment included the chant “Black e mo. Black e mo. Yadaddsleepsnekked. Black e mo black e mo ya dadd sleeps nekked. Black e mo . . .” (55). Claudia sheds light on the damaging nature of this torture since “[t]hey had extemporized a verse made up of two insults about matters over which the victim had no control: the color of her skin and speculations on the sleeping habits of an adult, wildly fitting in its incoherence” (55). This again brings Pecola into an unsafe realm for which she has no control and no means to protect herself. She is targeted again by the dysfunction of those around her since she is an easy victim due to her own desire to disappear, or as earlier wished, to die. Claudia reflects back to this scene to conclude that the boys’ torture of Pecola was a stand-in for their own self-rejection of “their own blackness.”

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<sup>72</sup> Throughout the text, Pecola is framed repeatedly as a defenseless victim (9, 19, 23, 34, 39-40, 42, 55, 60-61, 73, 75-76, 87, 148, 153, 158-160). See Parker interview with Morrison (61).

That they themselves were black, or that their own father had similarly relaxed habits was irrelevant. It was their contempt for their own blackness that gave the first insult its teeth. They seemed to have taken all of their smoothly cultivated ignorance, their exquisitely learned self-hatred, their elaborately designed hopelessness and sucked it all up into a fiery cone of scorn that had burned for ages in the hollows of their minds – cooled – and spilled over lips of outrage, consuming whatever was in its path. They danced a macabre ballet around the victim, whom, for their own sake, they were prepared to sacrifice to the flaming pit. (55)

Pecola's victimization continues as she "edged around the circle crying. She had dropped her notebook, and covered her eyes with her hands" (55). Covering her eyes is important as she attempts to protect herself by limiting the images that she will later replay to reinforce her reality as a scorned and unloved child. It is Frieda who comes to Pecola's rescue. Claudia describes that they had "watched, afraid they might notice us and turn their energies our way," acknowledging that this male rage was non-contained, and its source could cause a lashing out at anyone in its path (55). However, Claudia reports, "Frieda, with set lips and Mama's eyes, snatched her coat from her head and threw it on the ground. She ran toward them and brought her books down on Woodrow Cain's head. The circle broke" (55). This well-choreographed production of torture and terrorizing of Pecola is broken by one of her surrogates, Frieda. Frieda is described in terms of her mother, Mrs. MacTeer, who represents female strength. Drawing on this sense of female channeling empowers Frieda who says, "You cut that out, you hear" (55). Placing herself within the line of fire, Frieda protects Pecola. Claudia, in awe, comments that she had "never heard Frieda's voice so loud and clear" and that "Woodrow looked frightened

just long enough to give her more courage” (55, 56). Witnessing this allows Claudia to pipe in with, “You shut up, Bullet Head.” (56). This also allows Maureen Peal to take part in the Pecola’s rescue which is ironic since the torture scene begins hinting that it was a false spring.<sup>73</sup> Later Maureen Peal is false in her role as a surrogate. The breakup of the macabre circle occurs as Claudia describes how “Maureen appeared at my elbow.” “The boys seemed reluctant to continue under her springtime eyes so wide with interest. They buckled in confusion, not willing to beat up three girls under [Maureen’s] watchful gaze. So they listened to a budding male instinct that told them to pretend we were unworthy of their attention” (56). This scene takes place in the winter chapter since the deceiving spring symbolizes the manipulative and false nature of potential surrogates.

Maureen Peal’s gaze is presented as powerful enough to call the boys off and to make the boys retreat. She has been established as greater than the others and worthy to be praised. In her goddess like status, “Maureen, suddenly animated, put her velvet-sleeved arm through Pecola’s and began to behave as though they were the closest friends” (56). Claudia gazes at this interaction and her language hints that it is false, but she is willing to try to embrace the outsider that Maureen represents. After Maureen introduces herself to Pecola, she also introduces Pecola to the source of her name: “Pecola? Wasn’t that the name of the girl in *Imitation of Life*?” (57). The novel never mentions Pecola going to the movies unlike her mother, so it is fitting when Pecola replies, “I don’t know. What is that?” (57) Again, an outsider enters Pecola’s realm to shed light onto her very existence by supplying the story of her name. Maureen provides a description of Pecola in the picture show: “Where this mulatto girl hates her mother ‘cause she is

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<sup>73</sup> The false spring foreshadows the horrific personality of Maureen Peal and the hateful/hurtful attack on Pecola. Also, in this section of false happiness is the class-based false surrogate Geraldine. Morrison later comments that she regrets her attack on the child character of Peal in her interview with Gloria Naylor (203).

black and ugly but then cries at the funeral. It was real sad. Everybody cries in it....Anyway, her name was Pecola too. She was so pretty. When it comes back, I'm going to see it again. My mother has seen it four times" (57). Pecola's mother Pauline probably watched the movie several times too, based on her attempts to escape her life through cinema and would have found it important to have the actual name of the character whose beauty shaped her notions of a perfect existence incorporated into part of her life. Ironically, Pauline's life with her daughter is the one that she regrets; thereby, she lives a true imitation of life in her assumed role as Polly with the Fisher family. The rejection depicted in the film is reversed since Pecola's blackness causes her to be rejected by her mother and her community. Unlike the film depiction of women working together for the well-being of their children, *The Bluest Eye* offers no community of cooperating women. Pecola also will feel the rejection by Maureen who becomes a false surrogate like others in the novel.

Maureen Peal not only reinforces the classical definition of a subjugated white female beauty, accepted as the best of "black beauty," but she also expands the class dynamic in the novel.<sup>74</sup> When Maureen Peal acknowledges Pecola, by saying, "You're in my gym class, aren't you?," Pecola answers, "Yes" (57). Maureen's equalizing question is important since Maureen appears to see Pecola and connect with her. That Pecola has been offered equal status to Maureen is signaled as Frieda and Claudia "walked behind them" (57). The sisters observe that they are "surprised at Maureen's friendliness to Pecola, but pleased. Maybe she wasn't so bad, after all" (57). Claudia's acceptance is short-lived as Maureen separates herself from the three

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<sup>74</sup> In many historical writings and novels, the black community places cultural value on the image of the mulatto figure. It has been a popular literary trope. The values placed on light skin, the myth of "good hair," genteel in looks and fashion are embedded in the characters Maureen Peal and Soaphead Church. Geraldine's separatist ideas and values also echo this value. Morrison mentions this issue in several interviews, see Ruas (95), LeClair (121, 127), Naylor (203), and C. Davis (228).



girls and their lower class status by invoking money and the concept of lawsuits as a family value into the conversation. Maureen educates her young classmates by explaining suing as “when you can beat them up if you want to and won’t anybody do nothing. Our family does it all the time. We believe in suits” (57). This belief in lawsuits and in the potential to bully lies behind Maureen Peal’s remarks. She also disregards that perhaps Claudia and Frieda have no money to partake in the purchasing of ice cream. This introduces Maureen’s potential to bully and her thoughtless classism. Claudia confesses as

Frieda looked placidly down the street; I opened my mouth, but quickly closed it. It was extremely important that the world not know that I fully expected Maureen to buy us some ice cream, that for the past 120 seconds I had been selecting the flavor, that I had begun to like Maureen and that neither of us had a penny... We supposed Maureen was being nice to Pecola because of the boys, and were embarrassed to be caught – even by each other – thinking that she would treat us, or that we deserved it as much as Pecola did. (58)

This lack of inclusion foreshadows Maureen’s future cruelty to Pecola. Claudia dismisses her hurt and Maureen’s lack of graciousness by focusing on Pecola and her needs.

As Maureen continues to flaunt her superiority to Pecola, she inquires about the act of menstruation. When Pecola says she has gotten her period, she uses this innocent opportunity of feminine interaction to gather more information regarding what it really means and what is it for. Maureen replies, “For Babies” and then asking Pecola “Did you ever see a naked man?” Pecola blinks, “then look[s] away. ‘No. Where would I see a naked man?’” (59). The exchange that follows is a continuation of earlier teasing and verbal abuse. Maureen says, “I don’t know. I just asked” (59). Pecola responds, “I wouldn’t even look at him, even if I did see him. That’s dirty.

Who wants to see a naked man?' Pecola was agitated. 'Nobody's father would be naked in front of his own daughter. Not unless he was dirty too'" (59). Maureen answers back, "I didn't say 'father.' I just said 'a naked man'" (59). The single word response by Pecola "Well..." is met with Maureen inquiring further by asking, "How come you said 'father'?" (59). This type of legal-like question and inquiry crosses the line for not only Pecola but also for the sisters. Pecola's blinking and looking away represent a part of the gaze or witnessing with which she is not comfortable and draws negative images to her. Maureen's questioning casts as a communal gaze on Pecola's life and is one of judgment. Tired of witnessing the judgmental gaze of Maureen, Claudia acts as Pecola's protector again and attacks Maureen by saying, "Who else would she see, dog tooth?" (59).

Claudia reflects on this reaction as multi-faceted, thinking, "I was glad to have a chance to show anger. Not only because of the ice cream, but because we had seen our own father naked and didn't care to be reminded of it and feel the shame brought on by the absence of shame" (60). The attack on Maureen that pursues is punctuated with back and forth attacks by the girls and later with Pecola shouting, "I never saw my daddy naked. Never" and the challenge response from Maureen of "You did too... Bay Boy said so" (60). After several denials, "Pecola tucked her head in—a funny, sad, helpless movement. A kind of hunching of the shoulders, pulling in of the neck, as though she wanted to cover her head" (60). What Claudia observes but does not understand is that Pecola is seeking to make herself disappear as she attempts to do when her parents fight. Pecola's evolving escape mechanism is to disappear, to become invisible. Maureen introduces the term black into the discourse and argument. After witnessing Pecola's body language, Claudia commands her to "stop talking about her daddy" (60), but Maureen responds, "What do I care about her old black daddy?" (60). When Claudia questions, "Black?

Who you calling Black?,” and Maureen says “You!” and then Claudia swings. (60). Based on Maureen’s estimation, the association of blackness belongs to the lower class people such as Claudia, Frieda, and Pecola. The next assault on Maureen is based on how she looks. Claudia says, “You think you’re so cute!” as she swings but misses Maureen and hits Pecola in the face. The hit to Pecola’s face is ironic as simultaneously Maureen picks up the boys’ taunt that Frieda had stopped: “I am cute! And you ugly! Black and ugly black e mos. I am cute!” (61).

This exchange again, is an inverted image that Morrison provides to reveal the false surrogates surrounding Pecola. Maureen’s words cut the three girls and leave Pecola silently struggling to disappear. Claudia acknowledges that “the weight of her remark stunned us, and it was a second or two before Frieda and I collected our thoughts to shout” (61). In retaliation to Maureen’s reference to their color, Claudia and Frieda chant, “Six-finger-dog-tooth-meringue-pie!” (61). Claudia and Frieda exercise agency in their ability to throw insults to protect themselves. Morrison provides Maureen as an inverted image of what should be beautiful but is in actuality vile and bitter. The previously described conflicting image of “a high-yellow dream child with long brown hair braided into two lynch ropes” (52) and the fleeing image of “wild of the dandelion stems that had somehow lost their heads” (61) illustrate Maureen’s vicious and senseless act of lynching Pecola as Maureen emerges as a false beauty and a false surrogate. Pecola’s perception of beauty shifts as a result of the assault from Mr. Yackowski, and the voice of Maureen both of which wound the fragment of Pecola self-identity.

Maureen’s poisonous words infect all three young black female characters. After this episode, two critical things occur: the MacTeer girls begin to process and to question how others see them (Claudia and Frieda had not questioned their beauty), and Pecola begins to attempt to disappear again, but this time her surrogates witness it. The three girls are the ones who receive

the scorn of onlookers, not the fleeing Maureen Peal who is actually a representation of a destructive weed that seeks to destroy the well-being of others based on her own over-valued elevation as a marker of black beauty. Morrison describes the other girls' faces as "angry faces knotted like dark cauliflowers" (61). Claudia shifts her attention to Pecola who "stood a little apart from us, her eyes hinged in the direction in which Maureen had fled. She seemed to fold into herself, like a pleated wing. Her pain antagonized me. I wanted to open her up, crisp her edges, ram a stick down that hunched and curving spine, force her to stand erect and spit the misery out on the streets. But she held it where it could lap up into her eyes" (61). Pecola's eyes absorb the negativity of the never-ending torture that she endures as Maureen Peal, the false friend and surrogate, flees. Frieda brings closure and shields her younger sister by directing her, "Come on Claudia" (61). She bids, Pecola "Bye," and the two MacTeer sisters leave Pecola in her paralyzed like stance to fend for herself in this winter season and false spring. As they walk together, the MacTeer sisters turn a critical eye to how their own concept of self was destroyed, metaphorically lynched, by Maureen Peal.

The sisters had never before had an assault committed against them that made them question their own value as black girls. Claudia contemplates,

We were sinking under the wisdom, accuracy, and relevance of Maureen's last words. If she was cute—and if anything could be believed, she *was*—then we were not. And what did that mean? We were lesser. Nicer, brighter, but still lesser. Dolls we could destroy, but we could not destroy the honey voices of parents and aunts, the obedience in the eyes of our peers, the slippery light in the eyes of our teachers when they encountered the Maureen Peals of the world. What was the secret? What did we lack? Why was it important? And so what?

Guileless and without vanity, we were still in love with ourselves then. We felt comfortable in our skins, enjoyed the news that our senses released to us, admired our dirt, cultivated our scars, and could not comprehend this unworthiness. Jealousy we understood and thought natural—a desire to have what somebody else had; but envy was a strange, new feeling for us. And all this time we knew that Maureen Peal was not the Enemy and not worthy of such intense hatred. The *Thing* to fear was the *Thing* that made *her* beautiful, and not us. (61-2)

Claudia's reflection clarifies that the two sisters had something that helped them call the "*Thing*" that lessens their value as human beings/as children to attention. They had the love, support and protection of a mother and father. The "*Thing*" that made them feel unworthy was the value placed on beauty. It made everything else in their lives an illusion because the images of this ideal beauty surrounded them, and their families bought into the images.

Claudia dismantles her white dolls, symbolically dismantling the enforced love of whiteness. Earlier in the novel, Claudia had introduced her hate of Shirley Temple, saying, "Not because she was cute, but because she danced with Bojangles, who was *my* friend, *my* uncle, *my* daddy, and would to have been soft-shoeing it and chuckling with me. Instead he was enjoying, sharing, giving a lovely dance thing with one of those little white girls whose socks never slid down under their heels" (19). To offer some participation in the adoration conversation of Temple between Pecola and Frieda, she says that "I like Jane Withers" (19). Claudia, unlike the adults and girls around her, confesses her conflicted angst toward the images of whiteness and beauty. She says,

What I felt at the time was unsullied hatred. But before that I had felt a stranger, more frightening thing than hatred for all the Shirley Temples of the world. (19)

I had only one desire: to dismember it. To see of what it was made, to discover the dearness, to find the beauty, the desirability that had escaped me, but apparently only me. Adults, older girls, shops, magazines, newspapers, window signs – all the world had agreed that a blue-eyed, yellow-haired, pink-skinned doll was what every girl child treasured. “Here,” they said, “this is beautiful, and if you are on this day ‘worthy’ you might have it.”.... I could not love it. (20)

When Claudia dismantles the white doll, she is scolded by grown people with “You-don’t-know-how-to-take-care-of-nothing. I-never-had-a-baby-doll-in-my-whole-life-and-used-to-cry-my-eyes-out-for-them. Now-you-got-one-a-beautiful-one-and-you-tear-it-up-what’s-the-matter-with-you?” (21). She is able to absorb this message and questions the strength of “their outrage. Tears threatened to erase the aloofness of their authority. The emotion of years of unfulfilled longing preened in their voices,” because she recognizes that they too have been trained to value the beauty of the dolls (21). Claudia rejects this adoration and as a result of her rejections, she proclaims,

I destroyed white baby dolls.

But the dismembering of dolls was not the true horror. The truly horrifying thing was the transference of the same impulses to little white girls. The indifference with which I could have axed them was shaken only by my desire to do so. To discover what eluded me: the secret of the magic they weaved on others. What made people look at them and say, “Awwwww,” but not for me?

The eye slide of black women as they approached them on the street, and the possessive gentleness of their touch as they handled them. (22)

In her description, Claudia also recognizes who is valued in real life. Her witnessing the passers-byers' judgment casts on her and Frieda as they insulted Marueen Peal, or as they witnessed Mrs. Breedlove's rejection and punishment of Pecola and embrace of her white charge, or even at the hands of their own mother when they suffered an unjust spanking at the unverifiable word of the white child, Rosemary. Black motherhood as established in the text does not give Claudia the space to even dare to ask what she would like for Christmas. If someone had seen Claudia as the black girl, they would have know that she desired nothing materialistic or representative of the dominate culture in her vision for an ideal. Claudia, powerless to express her desires, thinks to herself,

I did not want to have anything to own, or to possess any object. I wanted rather to feel something on Christmas day. The real question would have been, 'Dear Claudia, what experience would you like on Christmas?' I could have spoken up, 'I want to sit on the low stool in Big Mama's kitchen with my lap full of lilacs and listen to Big Papa play his violin for me alone.' The lowness of the stool made for my body, the security and warmth of Big Mama's kitchen, the smell of the lilacs, the sound of the music, and, since it would be good to have all my senses engaged, the taste of a peach, perhaps, afterwards. (21)

Being in her Big Mama's maternal realm and kitchen is a place of nurturing and comfort. Her grandfather would adore her as black men should adore little girls and all would be well for her as a little black girl.

The Great Migration brands these images of beauty into black life as suggested in the novel. The Great Migration was a time to reclaim, to rebuild hope, and to reaffirm desires unfulfilled in southern cities. Yet, the migration is the other reason that the girls have the ability to serve as surrogates to Pecola. Their communal position as children renders them powerless, but their ability to see the situations of community's disintegration and self-rejection for what they (black girls) are within their own realm helps them recognize and witness Pecola's vulnerability and marginalization due to the new community standards. In part, because of the new values infused during the migration, no one else sees Pecola and her various attempts to disappear when she cannot achieve those standards. Pecola attempts to live in the carved out space that the world has offered her as an undesirable. Her destruction serves as the community's sacrificial lamb. Her mother's illusions had fueled her hope that Pecola's visual image would provide a different fate. When it does not, Pauline chooses to escape into her own form of survival, the created life and identity of Polly. If Pecola "disappears," from her current visual identity, she would no longer be defenseless and powerless because others would gladly rush to protect her. Most importantly, she would be admired for her beauty and the gaze upon her would be forever altered. Pecola encounters one final surrogate who falsely allows her to believe in the magic of blue eyes.

Pecola finds sense and acceptance in herself after the rape by her father only through assimilation into whiteness. This make-believe world that her mother passed to her through the very breast milk that should nurture her becomes the desire about which she obsesses that will bring her beauty and acceptance. Her mother's ideals will be the only thing that can save her.

Soaphead Church, the pedophile, acquires god-like qualities to grant Pecola her one wish, blue eyes. The life of Soaphead Church, detailed in the text, illustrates and reinforces how he is



an outsider to all communities. His rejection of adult activities but his pleasure in the company of little girls is important. Pecola ventures to him based on his reputation as a miracle worker. He is the first male who provides her with something that no one else does; he sees her. In Pecola's world as shaped by her mother, beauty is the possession of whiteness and blue eyes. She once thought that if she were "pretty-eyed Pecola," her parents' violent behavior would cease. She critiques herself in the mirror many times and believes that her life would be beautiful if she were considered beautiful (40). Soaphead is a social deviant. He does not molest Pecola, but he recognizes and sees her vulnerability and sincere desire to have the thing that will bring her peace – blue eyes. With a family legacy based on a worship of whiteness and the embrace of the perceived beauty of white genes, Soaphead Church identifies with Pecola's desire for beauty.

His entire existence and family legacy has been formed by whiteness and inbreeding in the quest of whiteness. Soaphead responds to Pecola when she asks, "Maybe you can do it for me....I can't go to school no more. And I thought maybe you could help me....My eyes.... I want them blue" (137).<sup>75</sup> He interprets this request as it has been embedded in Pecola's existence since her gestation period in her mother's womb. Soaphead Church becomes emotionally involved with Pecola's request because

He thought it was at once the most fantastic and the most logical petition he had ever received. Here was an ugly little girl asking for beauty. A surge of love and understanding swept through him, but was quickly replaced by anger. Anger that he was powerless to help her. Of all the wishes people had brought him – money, love, revenge – this seemed to him the most poignant and the one most deserving of fulfillment. A little black girl who wanted to rise up out of the pit of her

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<sup>75</sup> As foreshadowed in the conversations of the community that Claudia and Frieda overhear, the institution of school has expelled Pecola after her rape, subsequent pregnancy, and belief in having blue eyes.

blackness and see the world with blue eyes. His outrage grew and felt like power. For the first time he honestly wanted the true and holy power – only the power to make others believe he had it. It seemed so sad, so frivolous, that mere mortality, not judgment, kept him from it or did it. (137-8)

Soaphead Church writes to God to describe in detail not only his own sins, but also God's sin of forsaking Pecola. In his own madness, Soaphead believes that he has given Pecola the one thing that will bring her happiness, blue eyes. The blue eyes symbolize many things. That they appear to be a gift from Soaphead is important in the novel. As a surrogate to Pecola, he drives her trauma into madness through the gaze of a pedophile who confesses to God that he did not touch her, but is able to give her what God has not, blue eyes. This assumption of blue eyes resembles a religious conversion for Pecola. Soaphead Church's interaction with Pecola resembles confession and communion. He tells her "We must make, ah, some offering, that is, some contact with nature. Perhaps some simple creature might be the vehicle through which He will speak. Let us see" (138). In this instance, Soaphead Church decides to use Pecola similarly to the way the community has used her. She will help ease his contempt for the dog Bob that he despises. He directs Pecola to "mark well how he behaves. If nothing happens, you will know that God refused you. If the animal behaves strangely, your wish will be granted on the day following this one" (138).

Pecola seeks a miracle like Claudia and Frieda's marigold miracle to save her baby. Instead of seeking a miracle for her baby who is the product of an incestuous rape, Pecola seeks to live for herself by the only way that she knows how. Lacking guidance or community support, Pecola approaches the ultimate community outsider. Soaphead Church like the other members of the community manipulates Pecola for his deep desire to feel powerful. As Claudia

will describe in the last few pages of the novel, the community as a whole robbed Pecola of her potential and her last false surrogate helped to rob her of her remaining grasp on reality.

Soaphead Church needed to remain feeling powerful, useful, and desired to transfer the removal of Bob, the dog, to someone else. By camouflaging his offering to Pecola, he retains his sense of power as well as distancing himself from a distasteful act. Hurley and Hurley comment that the “abuse of a helpless child by both Cholly and Soaphead is related to their awareness of their own powerlessness in relation to society as a whole. And this aspect of the abuse forms an essential element in the story to be told” (162-163). Throughout the novel, Pecola, the identified victim, has no agency or protectors. These extreme deviant behaviors function as extensions of the overall community. The false surrogacy of Soaphead is important. His desire to help her reflects the community’s desire to get rid of her presence. Pecola becomes an object to be used and to transfer the false surrogates’ and the community’s fears and weaknesses. So, Soaphead uses her as a utility to regain his own sense of power and well-being. He uses his own distorted perception of beauty as justification but similarly to the other members of the community, he does not see her. Her lack of visibility and the lack of an agent to set forth and offer visibility kill the child Pecola and make the death of her infant even more powerful. The community offers no safety or fertile foundation for either to exist.

Judith Wilt suggests in her article “Black Maternity: ‘A Need for Someone to Want the Black Baby to Live’” that black babies are the continuation of “a dream deferred, a fertility appropriated, hauntingly incomplete” (133). The sisters answer Wilt’s call as they were the somebodies who wanted the black baby to live by planting their seeds. The notion of maternal choice is explored throughout the article. Within maternal choices are also maternal realities like Pecola’s suggested conversation with her dead child as an illustration of how no surrogate

appears to form any modeling or protection and how Pecola like many children who experience trauma also surrender to MPD, dissociative disorder and total psychosis. I disagree that it is her dead child that several critics have imposed from the reading. Wilt's discussion of the maternal rejection that Pecola experiences on many levels is critical (148); however, I do not believe that Pecola desired this possession of maternity through the means in which it occurred. Wilt also explores the concept of motherlove within Morrison's *Beloved*. The argument that Pecola wanted motherhood through any means is not logical to the text. The fact that Pecola resorts to Soaphead Church at the end as a way to self-mother is my main closing argument even though she is totally delusional based on trauma at this point.<sup>76</sup>

A shift occurs when Pauline is unable to express motherlove and reinforce the toppling notion that Julia Kristeva says occurs within human maternity (157, 162). What happened to the maternal link between Pecola and Pauline? Why is Pauline able as the renamed Polly to comfort the white child but scold her lonely and motherless black one? Pecola is no longer viewed as "mine" within the maternal frame work and shifts to be left alone as other by her own mother and the potential surrogates within the novel and reframed as the "foolish other."

Morrison uses the tool of inversion in *The Bluest Eye* as do the other authors in this study. In several of the subject texts, the stereotype for the ideal little girl enters. Sometimes these little girls are viewed as extremes, but there is a unique value placed on the ideal. In *The Bluest Eye*, there is Maureen Peal; in *Ellen Foster*, Dora is the ideal. The authors establish these other extremes to be compared to the female protagonists that have been labeled as other. The desirable young women represent what society deems acceptable and precious. What we find by closer inspection of the anointed desirable ones are that they are foul spirits who tend to lash out

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<sup>76</sup> Several critics make this assertion, see Hurley and Hurley in particular.

at others to make themselves more desirable, or that they are just as damaged and marginalized as the protagonists.

In *The Bluest Eye*, Morrison provides the extreme backdrop of womanhood to incorporate the role of mothering and surrogacy. The impact of the historical period and the absorbed and valued images of whiteness are poison to the black child. Pecola adopts the ideal with which she has been nursed. In her psychosis at the end of the novel, she adopts something that she never thought she really had – a friend. This sister friend knows of all her pain and the way to comfort her. This sister friend also knows of the second rape that she silently endures. Pecola can render this sister-friend mute when the interjections are too painful unlike those of her family and community who cast her out as foolish and valueless. The numerous false surrogates in *The Bluest Eye* cannot protect Pecola even though some true ones like her sister-mothers, Claudia and Frieda, try. They were too powerless and not socially acceptable to do so.

**CHAPTER III: The Process of Re-Mothering: Claiming the Mother in Kaye Gibbons's *Ellen Foster***

“I had just about given up on what you expect. I just lived to see what would happen next.”

– Ellen Foster, *Ellen Foster* (72)

Kaye Gibbons's novel *Ellen Foster* provides a glimpse into the complex life of a young girl and the various places she searches to find a home and, ultimately, a new mother. Gibbons uses Ellen's silences and perspective to bring the narrative full circle to illustrate a child's abandonment. Set in the mid-to-late 1970s, the novel incorporates a changing historical period marked with newly integrated structures and the rise of family services from outside of the family of origin to support families as a safety-net that complicates the ability for a surrogate to surface within the traditional family structure. Ellen's biological family is trapped within an earlier southern discourse of the plantation tradition. Her grandmother, the matriarch, establishes and maintains dysfunction with which all the family struggles. Thus, the trapped family is unable to actually see Ellen for a child who needs protection and love. The literary image of an earlier time when a family embraces the orphan who is white, young, and female is displaced by Ellen's reduction in class. Ellen's birth mother falls from grace and as a result is cast as an outsider similar to Faulkner's Caddy Compson. Though the novel is post-civil rights, many of the novel's characters are entrenched in sentiments of previous decades where racial biases linger, and the dysfunctional characters invert representations of traditional southern plantation images of separate realities for blacks and whites. Ellen's mother is seen as a less than an appropriate white, southern mother and is ruined due to her marriage to Ellen's father, a man of a lesser social standing with no ambition. Some characters collapse into mere representations of a previous historical time and leave the characters themselves flat, weak and one-dimensional. Evident in these trapped identities is also lack of formality surrounding names. The only

member of the immediate family who has a last name is Ellen's aunt, Nadine Nelson, who throws Ellen out on Christmas Day. In *Ellen Foster*, the influences outside of the traditional family structure are evident and sufficiently powerful to intervene. Gibbons creates in Ellen a female narrative voice who maintains primary control over her own narrative. Yet within her narrative are several silences. Structurally, Gibbons crafts the traumatic events as flashbacks that are typically framed with Ellen's interaction with a surrogate. Deep within these silences the horrific and unspeakable occur.<sup>77</sup> These silences are memorials to the loss of childhood and innocence. These sacred-like spaces reveal how Ellen developmentally does or does not have the sufficient skills to self-mother, to heal, and thereby to cope with the pain in silence. These silences mostly occur during the reflection on the abuse suffered at the hand of her father. To a child's mind, some acts are still unthinkable, and the actual utterance of them provides them a place in reality and causes the trauma to be acknowledged. For Ellen as for other victims of such abuse, the silence is a way to help slip into a past where the affected can wonder if the abuse is actually real. Bone in *Bastard* wonders if she imagined the initial rape by her stepfather, and Precious in *Push* wonders why destructive behavior consumes her relationship with her parents.

Ellen copes by dissociation, referring to herself as – “Old Ellen” – which helps her sever the biological familial bond and distance herself through a third person reference as well as allowing herself to accept society's surrogates who come to her aid. Gibbons uses the subversive differently than does Morrison in *The Bluest Eye* since in *Ellen Foster* the outsiders who are more socially acceptable actually want to offer Ellen protection and have the ability to do so without being challenged.

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<sup>77</sup> Silences in *Ellen Foster* are key places where abuse occurs. These are often highlighted silences that mirror the disjointed flashback structure of the novel. The flashbacks and silences further illustrate the trauma. An outside narrator typically steps in during these traumas. See Minrose Gwin and Sharon Monteith

Race plays a pivotal role in the depiction of trauma and healing in *Ellen Foster*. The black characters provide Ellen with the needed modeling and safety, but are ill-prepared and disempowered by the culture to protect her against the southern whiteness. The outsiders in Gibbons's text are also more within the normal socially acceptable range, but they are still viewed as social deviants and outsiders. They still do not measure up to the traditionally acceptable surrogates as is evident when Ellen is removed from Roy and Julia's home. In other southern novels, outside the image of the mammy, the black women are viewed as incapable mothers and black fathers as nonworking drunks who mirror Ellen's father. Gibbons invests in these images of black men and women. Understanding Ellen's biological family is critical in the inverted narrative that Gibbons constructs.

Similar to the other writers in this study, Gibbons interjects historical social perspectives as her protagonist seeks through surrogacy to find a path to love and protection. Her maternal sphere has been damaged due to her mother's inability to protect and to her defiance to place Ellen's protection before her own (93). Ellen lost her childhood long before her mother's death. The self-abandonment of her childhood is the result of her choice to survive. This begins the role reversal of Ellen playing mother and caretaker to learning how to depend upon and trust others. Ellen's existence is on the periphery of all she encounters except for those outside of the traditional family who recognize Ellen as a child and allow her to re-claim a portion of her childhood. They also create and fester damaging stories about Ellen. Ellen gains some sense of control over her life only by depending on those outside of the traditional family structure. Outside of the paradigm of southern legacy, she escapes the abuse and ultimately, the trauma inflicted by her family. These are experiences and qualities that she takes with her on her journey as she seeks to claim someone for the role of mother in her life. Gibbons's rebirth of



Ellen into a pure, white girl can only occur once she has been removed from the trauma of her immediate family. Ellen acknowledges that her past experiences and her self-mothering will be useful tools.

On the surface, *Ellen Foster* leads readers to believe that Gibbons's flashback format is a method that mirrors the old traditional fairytale genres, but we are quickly lured out of the fairytale setting by the opening lines. The majority of critics of *Ellen Foster* do not recognize how Gibbons reconstructs the discourse of the southern text and motherhood. Linda Tappmeyer quotes Ralph Wood in his assertion that “[t]he novel’s real concern [...] is not [only] race relations but the nature of Ellen’s reconstruction: how is such a life restored, redeemed?” (87). Tappmeyer goes further in her analysis to assert that “Ellen’s story is full of her dual attempts both to decipher truth from lies but also at times to hide the truth through her own stories to others” (88). Missing in this analysis, however, is the revealing and repetitive nature of Ellen using the name distinction of “Old Ellen.” The creation of the new ironic identity of “Old Ellen” and Ellen’s assumption of the family name Foster become additional ways for her to reconstruct her own life. Renaming is part of Gibbons’s deconstruction of nostalgia for the past. The reconstruction of Ellen’s life is left to nine-year-old Ellen, hence the ironic start of her self-reliance. Ellen’s quest becomes not to understand necessarily the trauma that she has survived, since questioning only brings more violence and blame such as her grandmother’s slapping, but to carve out a new space so that she can be a child after being self-reliant and resilient. The image of an innocent child, in particular girls of this study, being displaced from “home” as a haven is ironic. Home no longer provides the traditional safety.

Initially, the novel hints at generational issues of motherhood. The damaging father-daughter relationship is highlighted in the opening lines: “When I was little I would think of

ways to kill my daddy” (1). This initial line along with an Emerson quotation reinforcing self-reliance draws attention to the reality that the child must learn to be self-sufficient when adults prove to be incapable.<sup>78</sup> Ellen looks to find her place within a world of dysfunction. The story opens with her reflections on her past life and present situation. She says at the start of the novel, “All I did was wish him dead real hard every now and then. And I can say for a fact that I am better off now than when he was alive,” yet she evolves to accept that her legacy from her father represents an ill-suited one for her development and well-being (1). She severs her ties to the paternal bonds at the very moment that she greets the audience of her life story on the first page. Her journey from a fragile nine-year-old who witnesses her mother’s suicide to a self-aware and introspective young girl at age of twelve reveals that she transcends the racism of her surrounding entrapment. Gibbons also uses race discourse against a traditional southern discourse to illustrate newly evolved social changes of the 1970s. Her use of race as the core context for Ellen’s story bears witness to the roles of potential surrogates who will be considered unacceptable and socially deviant. The first chapter establishes the contrast between Ellen’s prior life as she moves from flashbacks to present time. This use of flashbacks reinforces how her present home life within the foster home is ideal in contrast to her previous biological family “home.” Ellen tells us “[t]wo years ago I did not have much of anything. Not that I live in the lap of luxury now but I am proud for the schoolbus to pick me up here every morning. My stylish well-groomed self standing in the front yard with the grass green and the hedge bushes square. I figure I made out pretty good considering the rest of my family is either dead or crazy”

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<sup>78</sup> Ralph Waldo Emerson’s *Self-Reliance* was published in 1841. The novel’s introduction connects to various images of Ellen’s nuclear family through the Emerson inscription ([ix]). Ellen had her mother who “suckle him with the she-wolf’s teat” when she was young, but had to learn to from the hawk and fox in the winter that it was her own “power and speed” that would bring her to a home. It almost suggests that Ellen’s mother would have proved inept as a mother even if she had lived.

(2). The two experiences, living in her biological home and in her foster home, provide the startling contrasts of a childhood reborn as Ellen is allowed to embrace fully childhood outside of the biological family structure. Her biological structure was anything but a nurturing maternal sphere.

Gibbons dismantles the historically-pictured southern mother with her description of an incapable white woman. The image of the white mother on a pedestal is replaced by a sickly, weak woman who cannot protect herself from the abuses of her husband and her mother; and who, therefore, cannot protect her daughter from her destructive family and society. The nameless mother's choice to kill herself, adds another layer to the narrative search undertaken by Ellen who is riddled with the childhood guilt as the caregiver who failed her patient for Ellen had to play mother in this serious drama. After her mother takes her heart pills with the intent to overdose, Ellen attempts to command her like a child to "[v]omit them up mama. I'll stick my finger down your throat and you can vomit them up. She looks at me and I see she will not vomit. She will not move" (9). This inability to coax her mother to save herself becomes a defining moment in Ellen's life, for her attempts trying to save her mother fail because as a child, Ellen is essentially powerless. As Ellen lies with her dying mother, she says, "I always want to lay here. And she moves her arm up and I push my head down by her side. And I will crawl in and make room for myself. My heart can be the one that beats" (10). The desire to have her heart beat for both of them is god-like. It is as though Ellen wishes she could climb back into the womb to give her mother life and perhaps purpose again. This is one example of the inverted mother-child relationship in the novel. Gibbons uses religious imagery and motherhood against a southern backdrop to bring a story of growth, redemption, and triumph that can emerge outside of the traditional nuclear family.

Ellen's father fosters a non-nurturing, unsafe environment. Through Ellen's interactions with her father, the reader learns of her survival and coping mechanisms. Her father establishes a home that quickly leads to Ellen's physical victimization. He has resigned his life to drinking with his friends. Late one evening, Ellen overhears one of her father's black friends saying, "[y]ours is just about ripe. Your gots to get em when they is still soff when you mashum" (37).<sup>79</sup> Ellen waits to hear her father's response but none comes in the form of assuring her of being protected from sexual abuse. Her father does not even know her name and cannot provide an accurate response which revealing of her father. Ellen decides to stay in her closet which becomes a frequent hiding space for her. The closet is a metaphor marking physical safety but is also where her prized belongings rest when she is with her various biological family members. Ellen concludes that her hiding place is logical because "[w]hat else do you do when your house is run over by colored men drinking whisky and singing and your daddy is worse than them all put together?" (37). Ellen sheds light on her other reality of how she must maneuver to get out of the house when it is filled with drunken men: "You pray to God they forget about you and the sweet young things that are soff when you mashum and how good one feels when she is pressed up by you. You get out before one can wake up from being passed out on your floor. You get out before they start to dream about the honey pie and the sugar plums" (38). This image is inverted into a fairy tale except nothing in Ellen's current reality resembles a fairytale. As she tries to "[s]tep over the sleeping arms and legs of dark men in shadows on your floor," she describes how "[y]ou want to see a light so bad that it comes to guide you through the room and out the door where a man stops you and the light explodes to a sound that is your daddy's voice"

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<sup>79</sup> The mention of the friend's race is important since later in the discussion, Ellen's grandmother, mama's mama will attempt to cast Ellen into blackness and suggest that she engages in inappropriate sexual relations with these men and could be the mother of a bi-racial child.

(37-8). Ellen's recognition that she is in danger causes her to assume an adult role, saying, "Get away from me," but "he does not listen to me but touches his hands harder on me" (38). In his drunken state, Ellen's father confuses Ellen with her mother. Ellen attempts to denounce his behavior by saying, "That is not me. Oh no that was her name. Do not oh you do not say her name to me. That was her name. You know that now stop no not my name" (38). The reaffirmation and attempt to replace her self in her role as a child is illustrated in "I am Ellen I am Ellen" which causes him to pull[s] the evil back into him self and Lord I run" (38). After this traumatic scene, Ellen runs down the road to her safe surrogate home of Starletta. As "I gather my head and all that is spinning and flying out from me and wonder oh you just have to wonder what the world has come to," she knows that her father's behavior and home are no longer safe for her (38). This pivotal scene is the end of innocence for Ellen.

Her mother's name still remains unknown to the reader, but the fact that her father has confused her with the mother as well as acted out on the advice that Ellen is "just about ripe" snatches her out of the world of childhood (37). This scene is introduced as a flashback after Ellen describes the love and safety that her new mama (foster mother) provides when washing her hair and is framed with her fleeing her biological house to go to Starletta's. When she rethinks the horrific event of New Year's Eve with her father, Ellen is in the safety of the surrogate, the new mama. This is one of the nurturing and intimate scenes where Ellen is physically handled in a motherly way. Ellen says,

It is the best when she washes my hair. Not that I could not do it myself but it has got so long that it is just easier for her to manage. When it was warm she would sit with me on the back steps and comb out the knots for me. Where did you get this pretty hair? You have such pretty hair she would say to me....I put my head

into the water and it is warm over my whole body even on the places the water does not flow. She rubs and I feel her long fingers on my head and pray that it takes a long time for me to be clean. Does that feel good? Oh yes that feels very good...I see the mirror from the bed. No matter how I turn my head when I look I still seem like a stranger in my own self. (35-6)

Being safe in the maternal realm allows Ellen to reflect back on the horrific. The realization that she still feels “like a stranger in her own self” is important since she is no longer the child-like Ellen after experiencing her trauma. Similar to the other female protagonists, Ellen is able to process her trauma only when she is within the safe presence of one of the surrogates. The fact that following the traumatic attack by her father, Ellen is back in Starletta’s home is also telling of places that she feels safe. When she offers Starletta’s mother money to let her into the house, Starletta’s mother refuses. Ellen is placed in bed with Starletta’s mother but keeps her coat on due to her own racial prejudices but comments that “when I got up in the morning I was surprised because it did not feel like I had slept in a colored house. I cannot say I officially slept in the bed because I stayed in my coat on top of the covers” (39). Ellen’s distorted inherited view of racism skews the actual protection and importance of Starletta’s family and their home. Though Ellen takes ownership of her own home, she recognizes it is not a safe place for her as long as her father is alive.

Ellen’s grandmother, whom Ellen calls “mama’s mama,” cherished her daughter, Ellen’s unnamed mother, but the death and destruction of Ellen’s mother unleashes a mother-love that destroys all that relates to her daughter and her memory, including her granddaughter Ellen. Mama’s mama is consumed with Ellen’s mother and does not offer much credence or concern for her two surviving daughters, Nadine and Betsy. This punishment is on-going since the actual

presence of Ellen does not bring memories of her daughter but of her daughter's worthless husband. Ellen shares that her grandmother "never complained about the care I gave her. Just about my eyes. You got that bastard's eyes she would say to me when I washed off her face. So I would shut them. I cannot help my eyes is what I wanted to say to her. But I just said to myself I will look after this one good and I will not let a soul push me around this time" (77). This need to shut her eyes and to hide her similarity to her father is painful to witness since the child has no bearing on the parent. Ellen again assumes the role of the adult and engages in reverse parenting and caregiving.

Ellen's personal well-being and survival is tied to her grandmother's survival. Ellen is disturbed by her grandmother's odd behavior but says "[b]ut she won't die while I'm in charge. I will let her sleep but I'll wake her up if she starts to die. I hope she can give me some warning. That is what I should have done with the first one" (77). Ellen had attempted to save her mother during her overdose and remained close to her as she died, in the fetal position, but she does not leave her grandmother as she struggles with death. Unlike the image of the powerless white orphan, Ellen is not afraid of death but afraid of being punished for having the grandmother under her watch. The hired help has been sent away and Ellen is left to be the nurse and caregiver. As her caregiver, Ellen mothers her grandmother like a devoted servant. Ellen assumes a role within the family life that is vastly different from that of the typical young, white, southern female protagonist.

In the eyes of her maternal grandmother, Ellen must repay for the lost life of her mother. The child has no value based on the grandmother's perception because Ellen's birth mother destroyed her value with her marriage to Ellen's father. Ellen's lack of value increases her payment since her father gives her no recognizable legacy. The ill-will that Ellen must endure is

due to being a product of her mother's sins. According to her grandmother, Ellen's father represented an inappropriate outsider who was not good enough for Ellen's mother. Based on the description in the novel, Ellen's mother lived in conditions beneath her upbringing. Ellen, the product of this union, offers no appropriate image to the grandmother save remembrance of her lost daughter and her hated son-in-law. During her grandmother's illness, Ellen approaches her with "I want to ask you a question... Well I know why you hated my daddy but what about me? Why can't you see I am not like him?" (78). Her grandmother responds candidly, "All I know is when I look in your face I see that bastard and everything he did to my girl," which shows that she does not differentiate between the behavior of the child, Ellen and the adult, despised son-in-law. With the innocence of the child who is motherless, Ellen responds that "But I did not do anything I say back to her and wonder at the same time why I said that because we all know it is not what I did to her but what I did not do for her. And her gate is flung open and there is nothing left but the hearing all she has left to say to me" (78). Ellen is already deeply crippled by survivor's guilt and not being able to save her mother. This lack of value casts Ellen into blackness several times. In the novel, Ellen is literally and figuratively placed in the black familial realm which brings her safety. Primarily, her interaction is with Starletta, her black neighbor and sister-friend. Ellen's main connection to her mother, however, stems from the black sister-friend of her mother's girlhood, Mavis. Mavis remains as a worker on the grandmother's land. She is part of the history of Ellen's legacy on her mother's side. It is only after Ellen's interaction and nurturing from Mavis that Ellen questions her grandmother's behavior after her interaction with Mavis that provides her with a nurturing environment. The exchange between Ellen and her grandmother is a pivotal moment in which Ellen can recognize the relationship and her role in her grandmother's anger and rage. Mama's mama refuses to see



Ellen as a grieving child who is also an orphan, but she instead sees Ellen as an accomplice to murder who must pay. Gibbons transforms and inverts the grandmother from the dotting elderly lady to a hell-bent punisher who lashes out at the only surviving link to her dead daughter.

Ellen's grandmother attacks, saying,

Why you little bitch. You set up in that house like the world owed you a living. In cahoots with your damn daddy. I know all that went on. You laid up all in that house with your daddy's buddies. I'm surprised you don't have some little nigger baby hanging off your titty. But you left before I could get the both of you at one pop. You and your daddy let her take them pills or more than likely drove her to it. And then you let her die. And then somebody comes to my house and tells me how they found you all laid up next to her like a little idiot. But hi ho I got you now. You might have run out before that bastard got what was coming to him but I swear you will never stop paying for your part. (78)

Ellen's refusal and defense is powerless; her grandmother cannot hear her claim that "All the people who said things about me were wrong" (78). Ellen cleverly seeks a defense to her predicament, "But it was no use just like when you are standing there with the smoking pistol you found beside the bleeding man and you try to tell the police you found him there and you have a good reputation and this is just a terrible accident" (78). The failure of her grandmother to empathize and the ardent desire and need to crucify the child pushes Ellen further into her guilt. This will also be the second instance within her family sphere that Ellen is called a bitch. Ellen knows that she has lived a traumatic experience and that no comfort can be found with her mama's mama, so she resolves, "I decided to spend the rest of my life making up for it. Whatever it was. Whatever I decided one day I actually did. One day if I ever sorted the good

from the bad and the memories of what I wish was true (78-79). Ellen's decision to accept the need to process her own responsibility further removes her from the realm of childhood and places her in the adult sphere. She is forced to deal with the anger of her grandmother and the threat that "You just remember you are mine now" (79). This ownership of Ellen is not one of maternal love and support but rather one fueled with hate and rage.

Ellen realizes, and accepts, that refuting her mama's mama's image of her is impossible. She has been permanently judged as a cohort with her father in her mother's destruction. Mama's mama does nothing to acknowledge her own role in the destruction of her daughter and offers her granddaughter no sympathy. Her grandmother also misreads Ellen's physical proximity to her dead mother. She does not recognize the desire for maternal closeness. Throughout Ellen's time caring for her mama's mama, she is told "All she says clear for me to understand is you best take better care of me than you did your mama. And each time she says that I promise loud I will so we might not hear the other one who says kill her. But I did not kill her just like I did not kill my mama or my daddy. She died in spite of me" (79). Again, Ellen steps into the role of trying to play God to preserve life when she tries

to make [grandmother] keep breathing and when she stopped I blew air in her like I should have. She did not live but a least I did not slip into a dream beside her. I just stood by her bed and looked at her dead with her face pleasant now to trick Jesus. I said to her the score is two to one now. I might have my mama's soul to worry over but you've got my daddy's and your own. The score is two to one but I win.

I stood over her hoping she was the last dead person I know for a while.

(79-0)

The one thing that could be an honorable legacy from Ellen's father is discarded by her mama's mama. Mama's mama deceitfully acquires Ellen's father's farm from his brothers who spy on Ellen and her father. Ellen overhears mama's mama ask Ellen's father brother, Rudolph, at the back door of her house, "What are you bringing that trash here for?" (70). His response that Ellen should have the flag is met with her grandmother spitting "on the flag he had folded up in a neat triangle and held to her like a present" (70). Her grandmother uses this moment to again punish all who have been associated with Ellen's father by saying to Rudolph, "after all the money you have taken from me you have the audacity to bring that bastard's business into my house. You should be shot" (70-1). Ellen hears Rudolph defiantly tell mama's mama that "he only took what she offered. All that was due him" (71). This public display of ungratefulness and Rudolph stepping beyond his boundaries is rewarded with her calling him "a worm and a farm boy too big for his britches. And if you don't think I can ruin you too then just hide and watch me!"(71). Ellen's mama's mama continues to threaten Rudolph, "You just remember whose name that dead bastard's farm is in and while you're at it take a drive to the courthouse and check the name on your own damn deed. Then come back here and tell me who is running this show" (71). This emasculation of Rudolph illustrates what the grandmother desired to do to Ellen's father and is the wrath that she currently pushes on Ellen. The farm that would have been Ellen's has been stolen and held by the ill-will of her maternal grandmother. It is also revealing that Ellen's grandmother was not able to control her beloved daughter to keep her from marrying Ellen's father. Her behavior retroactively attempts to right the wrong she feels has been done to her daughter but also robs her granddaughter of every ounce of legacy especially in terms of a southern young lady. The burning of the flag is the final destruction of Ellen's legacy

and her namesake. She has been left with no legacy since her father has forfeited his rights to his property.

Ellen's commentary on her father and her mama's mama relationship illustrates her grasp at reading situations. She compares herself to her father by pointing out her industriousness and his lack of it:

He could have ruined his own self in time but she was tired of waiting for him to wither up.

He would waste that little bit of money so in the middle of the wasting he might forget his life had always been bad and was getting worst all the time.

I always figured that a little imagination to go along with the money would have stretched a dollar here and there. But he was fresh out of hope as he liked to say about wishing and spitting in your hands to see which one fills up first.

He was weak as water I have heard more than one person say about him.

(76)

Ellen recognizes the power of her mama's mama and how her father is weak and is an inadequate match for her mama's mama in that it is "just what you do not need to be if you have dealings with my mama's mama. She would come rolling in a wave over you and leave you there on your behind choking on the thing you had intended to say. And she could keep coming with her flood and stand laughing at you struggling in the waves of your forgetting" (76). The image of drowning, of not surviving, surrounds dealings with her grandmother. Ellen again draws upon the image of religion, saying, "I maybe should be sad and pray over him when I picture him fighting long distance with her," but even Ellen as a child accepts that "I blame him

for making his own self weak enough to be beat to death by a little old lady no matter how mean she is. Men and dandies are not supposed to be like that” (76). This description casts her father outside of the southern tradition where men as suppose to be strong and dependable but Ellen also stresses that “if you pet and groom your strong heart long enough you will turn it into a damn lap dog heart. But on the outside you still try to show off how brave you are. All she had to do was wait for Rudolph to drag up his last bird. But it was a flag instead” (76). Ellen assumes the role of an adult in her commentary and gaze. Ellen realizes and acknowledges that mama’s mama is the stronger of the two (grandmother and father). In this battle, Ellen makes an interesting distinction between weak and strong men. She also draws back upon her father’s cynical and helpless commentary on hope and wishes that she will later free herself of the fear of seeing hope as hopeless when she is in the presence of her surrogates Julia and Roy. Her father maintains a hopeless and powerless view. Hate is not directed at her father, only distaste for his weakness. Ellen inherits and develops a disdain for weakness like her grandmother, and she reinforces her understanding that it is futile to battle against her grandmother.

The lack of space for Ellen becomes powerful while she lives with her grandmother. There are several critical scenes where her grandmother is always careful to place her outside of the nurturing maternal realm even when Ellen is residing in her grandmother’s home. The critical example of being outside is the placement of Ellen in her mother’s old bedroom. This actual placement Ellen will later realize is not a gesture of love or endearment but of revenge and anger. Ellen says “[m]y mama’s mama said she gave me the bedroom because I deserved it. It took me a while to figure out that the room was not a prize or a present for being sweet. I started to think she knew what all I would see dancing around in that fireplace and how I would need the lights on all night“ (62).

Critics' discussion of food and the family bonds leave out two scenes of importance. First is that Ellen's dinner is placed on the stove for her to eat alone after she returns from working in the field. This lack of compassion reinforces her grandmother's desire to cast Ellen into blackness while her Sunday meals with Ellen in the dining room are the one time within the week that Ellen is allowed "to play" the role of a white child. These meals represent the only acknowledgement of Ellen as family, but they are held in silence and therefore isolating. Second is that Ellen is also told not to touch anything in the house. This forbidding is more than a fear that a child will break something, but that the items within her mama's mama's home are too valuable for Ellen to touch.

Ellen's time with mama's mama functions as one of the extreme paradoxes in her life. For example, Ellen often reflects on the weight of the curtains in her mama's mama's house and how they keep out light. When she is taking care of her bed-ridden grandmother she says,

I fan those curtains that are heavy and figured like a oil picture. They weigh I know more than my own skinny self I know much more than the sheets my mama sewed for curtains. She would hang them over the windows and look at them sad like she wished they were out of a book or these that do not let in much light. (79)

The expensive curtains also keep out life. The contrast between the weight and richness of the drapes and the poverty-filled image of Ellen's mother's sheets sewn together to make curtains illustrates the contrasts of lifestyles. It also provides a connection for Ellen back to her life with Ellen's mother and father.

When Ellen sees Starletta's mother taken advantage of in selling her quilts, Ellen draws a link to the way mama's mama treats Mavis and the other blacks. Ellen says that "my mama's mama did not pay them doodly-swat. I saw the amount she had written on the envelope she

handed Mavis ever Friday” (67). Mama’s mama equates poor whites and blacks as equally inferior. Her mama’s mama takes Ellen’s mother’s clothing from the house, robbing Ellen of her mother’s belongings and the chance to wear her clothing of which Ellen had “decided to wear a little something ever day” (24). Wearing her mother’s clothing is a maternal extension, but Ellen is robbed of this when one of the ladies who works for her mama’s mama “loaded everything of my mama’s in a big box and hauled it to the car herself. I just stood looking. Oh all the shoes and stockings worn and not worn. All the dresses and underthings and necklaces I never saw my mama in” (33). Ellen realizes that there is a side of her mother that she did not know and that there are many things missing in her current life with her father. This point is made even more pointedly when the worker says, “She said to tell my daddy the message was plan and simple. Now get it right. It was she had rather real niggers have my mama’s things than any of us that drink and carry on like trash” (33). White trash suggested here is artificial and different from the way white trash will be addressed in *Bastard Out of Carolina* which makes being white trash worst than being black. Nonetheless, in the eyes of her grandmother, Ellen’s existence is always a reduction.

*Ellen Foster* provides and distinguishes several images of motherhood classified by race. The closest, familial images of motherhood in the novel are the most dysfunctional and problematic. The women who would be considered inside of Ellen’s natural sphere such as her aunts and her grandmother provide no support or protection. Also, traditional institutional spheres, mother-like, that should provide Ellen with safety and protection fail her. The school cannot protect her from her father’s rants on the front lawn or from the voyeur quality of the teachers as their racism and judgment is transferred to their interactions with Ellen. The image of the fallen is reinforced when Ellen’s father leaves the money on the schoolyard symbolizing

the end of innocence at the elementary school.<sup>80</sup> The loss of innocence is also reinforced by the grandmother's scorn.<sup>81</sup> The court does not take the time to research a placement that would be in the best interest of the child, and the school psychologist does not fully understand the complexities of Ellen's situation. These extreme forms of abandonment from Ellen's nuclear family push her into a journey where she must embrace surrogacy. Her return to childhood and protection becomes possible only due to surrogacy.

In her article "Re-Visioning the Wilderness: *Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* and *Ellen Foster*," Kristina K. Groover carefully argues the differences of home for males and females in the American journey of the wilderness. The best known wilderness-filled search for a home coming of age story is Twain's classic *Huckleberry Finn*. Groover reiterates Nina Baym's argument that the women are excluded from traditional journey texts and that "only men in American society have historically had the mobility required to produce a 'believable flight into the wildernesses'" (187). This believable flight into the wilderness becomes the defining journey in *Ellen Foster*. Groover discusses the notion of spirituality as Ellen searches to locate "her mother" and firmly places her within the maternal tradition with the mental and physical home at the center. She says that Ellen's homelessness represents not freedom like the male wilderness story of Huck Finn, but "spiritual oblivion" (188). Groover defines Ellen's journey as a spiritual quest to find her mother which is a home. She asserts that Ellen places no faith in the standard institutions such as religion and the judicial system nor the social services divisions.

Ellen's lack of faith in outside sources is a result of her distrust and the acknowledgement that the family structure that should protect and nurture her does not exist and has "spun out of

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<sup>80</sup> This image of money collapses Ellen into the placement of a black girl who is sexualized. Images of the jezebel and prostitution evolve in this scene. The devalued child is echoed in the other narratives.

<sup>81</sup> Due to these collapsing images on Ellen, the grandmother no longer sees her as a white child but a dirty, poor, girl who engages in miscegenation.



control.” Groover argues that this family chaos and “fractured domestic life” is a result of “spiritual disorder” (189). The notion of spirituality does not enter the context of Ellen’s life until she is at the funeral for her mother. Groover illustrates Ellen’s recognition and acknowledgment that suicide is a sin when

[the minister] says that even though he did not know my mama he feels like he knew her well because he has met us and we are all so nice. It does not bother him that what he said does not make good sense. And what else are you going to say when the Bible comes flat out and says killing yourself is flinging God’s gift back into his face and He will not forgive you for it ever? The preacher leaves that out and goes straight to the green valleys and the streets of silver and gold. (20)

Groover also highlights the “hypocrisy of traditional religion in the blundering, superficial minister who performs her mother’s funeral” as part of Ellen’s rejection of the traditional (191). I argue that it is another layer of rejection and nonacceptance that Ellen finds. To Ellen, God is someone with whom to barter, and Ellen barter with God when situations prove challenging. The interjection of the various institutions that have been foreign to Ellen in her early life offer no comfort especially because her family life has been so fragmented. Ellen knows that safety and comfort should be reflected in home. She knows that comfort exists in the process of mothering. She is on a journey as Groover suggests, but it is more of a maternal journey than a religious one. Ellen is not totally disillusioned with God and religion, for she often calls on God to make deals to move her back into some sort of home with a maternal bond. Groover’s theory that Ellen sees churchgoing as “an empty tradition” misses the point of the southern cultural context and minimizes that Gibbons’s story reduces power of several traditional structures of authority within the community (191).

Ellen equates safety not only with a physical home as Groover asserts but also with the active figure of mother. Yet, the domestic sphere is deconstructed through Ellen's experiences, regardless of how much she needs a domestic haven. Groover asserts that "preserved in Ellen's memory, domestic practices serve a spiritual role, providing guidance and connecting the living and the dead," but Ellen's domestic practices surface from her ritual-like need to connect and to self-mother (190). She uses her time alone as ways to recast and recreate her existence. As "Ellen strives to duplicate a 'normal' family life for herself" (Groover190), she follows her mother's example and compensates for her lack of home and family by 'mothering' herself while she waits for a new home. However, Groover's use of Ellen's mother as an example is problematic because unlike her mother, Ellen is a survivor. Ellen gathers examples of how to mother herself from outside the traditional family sphere and structure.

Among Ellen's resources outside of her inept nuclear family structure are the classic texts that Ellen devours as part of her escape. The examples placed before her by families outside the traditional, acceptable realm become her methods of self-mothering and her examples of motherhood.<sup>82</sup> Groover examines Ellen's various experiences "with her own neglectful family and with the outsiders who care for her" as a method of reconsidering "the meaning of family" (192). In so doing, Groover suggests that Gibbons redefines family as "blood ties [that] cannot always be trusted to "[hold] you up" (192). Far from creating a despairing picture of family, Gibbons merely widens her focus, finding love and support for her heroine from sources that the rural southern community rejects. Ellen finds the love that sustains her only when she abandons her community's prejudices and its restrictive definition of family. Accepting that blood ties

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<sup>82</sup> As part of her escape from her current life dramas, Ellen reads classics by the Brontë sisters and Shakespeare. She considers her reading "project" for the last two years an important endeavor as she told the librarian to give her a list of books of "some count." The traditional lives of women in these narratives differ from Ellen's reality (9-10).

cannot always be dependable is an accurate depiction of Ellen's journey; however, within the journey are the connection and bonds she has with those outside of the traditional southern definition of family. The outsiders (to the traditional southern cultures) are the only ones able to gaze on the full neglect of Ellen without making her experience a mockery. Groover states that

Gibbons revises the spiritual quest paradigm by suggesting that transcendent experiences may be located not only in an uninhibited wilderness, but in the midst of family and community. In Gibbons's text, the flight from home is an exhausting and terrifying journey; home, by contrast, offers both physical and spiritual safety. By treating home as a sacred space, Ellen Foster ... redefines spirituality based on women's experience of domestic life and their valuing of affiliation and community. (195)

The need for a child to find safety and nurturing parental figures becomes Ellen's quest, but it is not merely the need for a home as Groover asserts. The coming of age journey becomes the format in which her exploration takes place. It does not emanate from nor lead to a religious epiphany. Ellen's birth home with her father and mother does not represent a sacred place. Religion was a foreign concept in her upbringing. Ellen appropriates from religion and God what she can incorporate into practical use based on her experiences. In this appropriation, Ellen reassesses the value of God in her life and manipulates her interpretation of religion for that purpose.

Ellen barter with God for protection and love to ease some of her self-absorbing guilt surrounding her mother's suicide, her father's death, and her grandmother's death. The child inherits the sins of the mother. The closest that Ellen gets to embracing God, much different from what Bone experiences in *Bastard Out of Carolina*, is this bartering. Ellen's life has been a

gamble, so her relationship with a foreign religious figure is also placed in this construct (part of her industriousness). Her child-negotiation also mirrors the often-present religious transformation that exists in southern literature. It is ironic that Ellen's true faith seems to rest in her own self-formed, self-relevant judgment and not that of the traditional church. She does not see herself as being one of God's lost sheep. She is comforted by her method of bartering with God in that it provides for both sides to be even because Ellen does not desire to win against God or her family; she refuses to blindly follow anyone after those who should be closest to her do not offer her any solace or protection. Judgment cast on the mother who took her own life, and the dislike that her mother's living sisters had for their sibling casts judgment on the child. However, Ellen does not receive any additional support or empathy which is similar to the lack of meaningful support that Cholly receives after his Aunt, his surrogate, dies in Morrison's *The Bluest Eye*. The nuclear family's support would have made Cholly's life different. Ellen's life would, of course, have been different if her mother had lived, but would Ellen have become as well-adjusted and developed? Or would she have become one of the cycle of inept nurturers inherited from the legacy of mama's mama? Legacy in the novel and in the larger southern tradition eclipses the religious realm to illustrate the power of the father and the father's impact on the mother. As Ellen journeys more and more outside of the traditional southern structure, there comes a shift in the importance of the patriarchy in terms of protection and family. Ellen moves increasingly into female empowered spaces that alter the influence of men on her outlook. She embraces that the most important part of the family structure is the mother; hence, her journey.

Traditionally, "home" located within the nuclear sphere signifies safety, nurturing, and protection. The places where female children in the novels examined in this study receive

maternal love and comfort are in surrogate-created nurturing spaces not within the biological maternal sphere. The trauma that occurs to each of the girls happens in the space that should represent safety and comfort. Ironically enough, these various traumas occur in the actual center of family life, the kitchen. Ellen reflects on the difference between her old home and the old life and the new one with “new mama.” She observes, “Sometimes I wonder what the girl [previous room occupant] is doing now and I bet to myself she is not a crook no I bet she is somebody decent because she had somebody decent to love her good...Now I can turn out to be different too” (120). Maternal discourse and comfort is created outside of the physical home of the birth mother. The use of silence in Ellen’s portrayal of her abuse from her father is seen as well in the voiceless Pecola, the guarded/protector Bone, and the illiterate and self-effacing Precious.

Ellen’s maternal relations also abandon her. Her aunts and maternal grandmother believe Ellen is damned, and they choose to throw her away due to their own self-absorption. For example, Aunt Nelson’s relationship with her daughter, Dora, is all consuming; Aunt Nelson cannot see the vulnerability of the orphan child, nor can mama’s mama see past her hate for the father and her disdain for her own daughter to recognize the innocence and vulnerability of her own flesh and blood. Ellen is always defending herself to those within the nuclear family as she tries to rewrite her existence.

Linda Tappmeyer’s “Writing and Rewriting; Stories in Kaye Gibbons’s *Ellen Foster*” draws a connection between storytelling, Ellen’s self-realization, and Ellen’s transformation. Tappmeyer opens her essay with a quotation from Daniel Taylor’s *The Healing Power*: “We tell stories because we hope to find or create significant connections between things. Stories link past, present, and future in a way that tells us where we have been [...], where we are, and where we could be going” (85). This quotation represents the role of the twentieth-century writers as

they de-construct in order to re-create the notion of the traditional sphere of motherhood. While it is true that Ellen's life is a reflection of her influences of literature, Ellen actively seeks literature as her means of escape and, in part, to create her alternative self. Tappmeyer asserts that "[s]everal times Ellen notes with distress being without books," and... "Ellen, tells us, reading often becomes her tool for turning off the thoughts of past abuse and family tragedy that she does not want to pursue," but she does not connect the real suppression that Ellen seeks to hide or to re-write (86). The veritable trauma of Ellen's mother's suicide, and the sexual and physical abuse by her father, are not explored in connection to why Ellen must read at night or the reason that her maternal grandmother does not offer any shelter or protection to Ellen within the recast of this southern discourse.

Gibbons's text is praised by Tappmeyer and Giavanna Munafò for transforming race within the new southern discourse of literature as they note Ellen's developed empathy and sympathy for the blacks. In recognizing this transformation, neither critic looks deeper into the dismantling of the southern power of whiteness, nor do they recognize the influence and the hands at which the trauma occurs in the story, the white family. Ellen's empathy develops from the mother love she experiences with her three socially deviant surrogates: Mavis, Julia and Roy, and Starletta and her family. Moving to blackness<sup>83</sup> in the maternal sphere allows Ellen to find and embrace her "new mama." Before Ellen can find a new mama, she must confront the limitations and racism of the various institutions that should "protect her."

School represents another one of the traditional structures where Gibbons constructs a place for intervention but which offers no complete protection since the father invades Ellen's

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<sup>83</sup> Gibbons uses space as defined by race throughout the novel. When Ellen is within the domestic sphere of blacks she is embraced. She uses this as her modeling of her ideal future/desired home. When she is in whiteness, often family space, it is seen as belittling and destructive. Roy and Julia are deviants, so they are not fully considered white spaces in the novel.

space there. Her teacher who is voyeur-like in Ellen's life discovers the marks. The physical markers of abuse (bruises) alert the authorities that something has happened to Ellen. Ellen comments on this discovery as "I had rather nobody saw my business" when "the first day back at school [after her mother's death] my teacher noticed a bruise he[her father] put on my arm and they all had a field day over it in the school nurse's office" (44). This commentary for Ellen is quite introspective. She sees the school as an intrusive social structure, similar to the court system when it later decides that she must go live with her maternal grandmother and not stay with Julia and Roy. She sees the judgment that results from the school's voyeur nature. The fact that the teacher was "calling in everybody but the janitor to come in and take a look at it" makes Ellen's abuse into a spectacle for all to see (44). Also, Ellen realizes that this is the same teacher who "had been watching me close ever since I would not tell her about my mama" and "said she was fascinated by me and my bruise and just had to hear more" (44). When questioned about what happened, Ellen tells her that "my daddy put the squeeze on me and that is how it happened. She was shocked but I told her I was used to it so do not get in an uproar over it. You live with something long enough and you get used to it" (44). This scene actively illustrates that the traditional structures do not fully nurture nor protect Ellen. Ellen recognizes that the gaze from the teacher is problematic, and the interaction also reveals and confirms for Ellen that her nuclear extended family will not be a viable option for a safe home.

When the teacher acknowledges that Ellen needs a new place to be and her "home" will not be suitable, Ellen is in agreement and is resigned to the notion of a new place as she reflects to herself "[t]hat sounds good to me but I already tried it one time" (44). This "one time" refers to her attempt to stay with the widowed Aunt Betsy who is oblivious to the plight or state of Ellen's being and safety. Ellen shares the conflicting messages that her Aunt Betsy conveys

during Ellen's weekend long stay. Ellen notes that her Aunt Betsy "just keeps saying for me to make myself right at home...Then she wants to know who is coming to take me back" (41-2). The racism of the period comes out when Ellen suggests the teacher call Starletta and her family. When the teacher responds, "Isn't Starletta your little colored friend?," Ellen surmises that "You could tell by the way she said colored that this would not do," and "I would feel foolish calling up Dora's mama or my mama's mama and I have already worn out my welcome at Aunt Betsy's" (44). Ellen is hopeful about the adults' power within the school institution when she says "maybe she will have better luck than me is what I thought" and when a decision has been made, she favorably reflects "It is about time I thought. Yes Lord it is about time" (45). This scene is also powerful since we are drawn slightly into the religious realm. Ellen is hopeful that the traditional institution will help her, even though they reject the only safe place she knows, Starletta's family, due to racism. It is the art teacher who suggests to her colleague and principal that Ellen live with her. She can see that she would be the most accepting of Ellen since she, too, is an outsider. Ellen is thus taken into the home of the surrogates Roy and Julia.

Ellen recognizes early on that her new surrogates are different from the other adults in the community. She says, "If you did not know them you would call them off the rocker [,] but they were just happy she said with a big H" (47). Ellen recognizes they are different based on their gender roles as well as how they freely show affection which is different from her experiences. They expose her to a childhood that has been forbidden for her to assume. Julia tells her that "it was good I loosed up. We would run around and she would tell me to let it all hang out...Go with the flow, she would say" (47). The notion of going with the flow has been foreign to Ellen since she has spent her young life occupied with preserving her basic needs of safety and sustenance, and she admits that "I had no idea people could live like that" (47). Ellen learns that



Julia and Roy are outsiders from the north who “always liked the South,” and to Ellen’s surprise, she learns that they wanted to “have a quiet place in the country far away from all the city hassles” (48). The concept that a mind could be “polluted by city life” is new to Ellen. Ellen learns that Julia “used to be a flower child but now she is low key so she can hold a job” and that when she was young she wanted to save the world (48). This section reintroduces Ellen’s father within her new world as Julia who is from the North alerts and confirms for Ellen that there are more men in the world like her father, to which Ellen responds, “he [her father] is not the only one?” (48).

Another first experience for Ellen is her birthday with Julia and Roy. Ellen says “Then they told me one day my birthday was coming up so what did I have in mind to do? That got my goat because I had forgot and could have turned eleven without my knowledge...She wanted to know what I usually do. I always turn the next age during the day then I go to bed and feel different” (50). The party Julia plans is Ellen’s first, and her lack of family to celebrate her life holidays becomes evident. It also reveals that the previous pattern is one Ellen accepts as the norm. Later in her interactions with Mavis and her surrogate new mama, she realizes that her experiences have not been normal for a child her age. Within these happy moments with surrogates, Ellen is unable to shake previous images and associations. When Julia and Roy tell her to make a wish, she remarks that “They scared my pants off telling me to make a wish so loud. I wished I could make the wish later when I could think to myself” (51). The image of past associations with her father referring to wishes as spit in your hand and the inability to strip the image of her mother’s death make it difficult for her to consider positively the concept of making a wish aloud due to her father’s negative comments on hope, especially since she has had to be so introspective and closed with her thoughts. Ellen allows herself to take unique pride in

having a party. The reality that someone cared enough to go all out is evident in the store-bought cake and the pride that Ellen feels at the treatment of her guest. The outsider notions of Roy and Julia provide Ellen with something she has not had previously – acceptance of her sister-friend, Starletta. It has been alluded to that Starletta would not be welcomed in the homes of her nuclear family as Ellen imagines the whites reporting to her mama’s mama “Yeah old Ellen runs up and down the road with her little nigger friend they might say” (75). The reception that Starletta receives is different than she might receive elsewhere as is Ellen’s welcome. Starletta comes to Julia and Roy’s home and to Ellen’s claimed home for the celebration. The language surrounding the description of Ellen’s space as “my room” shows comfort and ownership as well as possession-like description of her kindred sister-friend as “Starletta was the only colored girl in the movies and she was mine” (51). Prior to entering the cinema, Ellen assumes the role of mother searching Starletta for her movie money. Though Ellen does seem mother-like, the mention of the police hints at racism: “I told her to stand still and be lucky that I am not the police that will rough you up a little in the process” (51). This interaction tells that Ellen is quite aware of the racial differences within her southern culture as well as the authority that she can assume over Starletta’s person due to her whiteness. This scene becomes marred in the southern racial discourse that moves past the innocence of a child helping a friend. It also reinforces Ellen’s struggle throughout the novel of accepting her black friend as a young girl like herself. This racial equalization in Ellen’s eyes will evolve as she moves through her various experiences. Also, during the party, Ellen thinks with a unique sense of pride that “It made me grin to think of Starletta having some birthday cake after her supper. She took a hunk with the N part out of my name” (51).

Symbolically, Ellen's comment makes the reader wonder if this is part of Gibbons's interjecting the image of blacks as niggers into the discourse.<sup>84</sup> This occurs early in the book and prior to Ellen's racial transformation. Regardless, for Ellen this party was "just Christmas and you know all the things I got then now just look at all the presents on this table. Julia said they went all out" very different from when Ellen had to go all out for herself. Ellen appreciates Starletta's gift and shares, "her mama had made me a Dutch girl pillow to stick on my bed. You can always tell one by the hat and the shoes. Tell your mama I thank her I said to her. Say it over in your head and out loud so it will not leave your head" (51-52). This talking down to Starletta can be interpreted two ways. Starletta might be developmentally challenged or, that even though the reader knows that Starletta is younger than Ellen, this again is one of Ellen's unconscious socially/racially dominating gestures. The pillow is different from the sweater Starletta's family had given her at Christmas since the sweater is gift of necessity. The pillow is a decorative gift that represents something with which Ellen can adorn her new home or as she says "my room" (50).

Although Ellen is in a safe place and protected, the reality remains that she is still vulnerable. She tells the reader: "I did not ride to get Starletta or to take her home because Roy and Julia were afraid of whom I might see on the way. They lived miles from him [her father] but Starletta is a neighbor. I thought about him too and we all walked outside to say goodbye. You tell your mama" (52). Thinking about her father is part of her reality even at happy moments and continues up until his death because Ellen recognizes that she is not safe from him as long as he is living. Her father's volatile nature does not offer her protection in any sphere.

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<sup>84</sup> This comment along with Ellen's sense of authority and value as in a better social-economic class may allude to Harriet Wilson's *Our Nig*.

The traditional institution of school does not protect. Even though the school initiates the removal of Ellen from her home, Ellen's nameless father catches everyone, the teachers and Ellen, off-guard. Ellen reports, "[m]y daddy came my way. I did not go his" which is extremely adult-like (53). Also, her language describing this disturbing scene is as telling as her third person usage of "Old Ellen" because it allows Ellen to distance herself emotionally. The notion that Ellen could have invited her father into her world is as absurd as what he does at the school. The voyeur teacher does not gaze upon Ellen as a victim who needs to be protected by as an instigator who brought her dirty laundry to the school. Ellen's dissociation continues as she reflects on how other children will recall that day at school and what happened to "Ellen":

He stepped out of the truck waving some cash money and telling Ellen dammit to come back he would pay for it.

Then my teacher came back in the room and looked at me like I invited him. She told the children to finish their naps but who would sleep when that man Ellen's daddy is outside?

You have to wonder what they will remember when they are big. A man coming to school? A man waving dollars and screaming? One man my daddy waving dollars, yelling and undoing his britches during naptime?

I told the teacher I could make him stop. Just give me a pistol and then go out there and scoop him up. (54)

This interjection of Ellen into the adult sphere by suggesting that she end her father's life resembles the first chapter in the book and Ellen's desire to take control of the situation. It also mirrors her father drunk on the bathroom floor while her powerless mother watches. In each of these scenes, Ellen feels empowered to take control of her situations while the adults around her

just mirror, watch, and gaze. The teacher and the school wait for the police to come while Ellen says, “I yelled for him to put his dollars on the ground and go back home” and concludes that “there was no sense in him leaving with the money” (54). Again, money is the only perceived value that Ellen feels that her biological family can provide. This money, she reasons, she can save for finding a new home and to purchase the things she needs to self-nurture and to provide for herself. After the disturbing incident, Ellen finds comfort in her surrogate, Julia. Referring to Julia she says “she pulled my head to her stomach and said let’s go home....When we got home I stopped feeling dazey and wondered if he had left the money. She took the dollars out of her purse and then I had them” (54-55). If we assume that the money comes from the dropped dollars by her father at the school, they are a symbolic of her father physically entering the safe sphere of the surrogate. This tie of biological ownership continues regardless of the lack of protection for the child.

Custody of Ellen becomes an issue after this incident at school. Mama’s mama decides to step in now since it appears that the family’s dirty laundry is being aired. Her desire to control Ellen and the situation becomes evident as Ellen sits in court and sees her grandmother gazing at her. The gaze is not one of concern, but one of revenge and control. The alleged private doings and happenings concerning Ellen had been made public where a judgment must be made, and the grandmother relies on the legal institution to protect her image and recognize her standing in the nuclear sphere as the grandmother. The court institution places Ellen back into a core nuclear sphere. Ellen, who witnesses the proceedings, shares that “the judge in the box who was extra old to have a job talked right to me. He said he had grandchildren of his own and could certainly understand her point” (55). Similar to Ellen’s remarks on the duality of the minister at her mother’s funeral, she critically questions, “What do you do when the judge talks about the family

society's cornerstone but you know yours was never a Roman pillar but is and always has been crumbly old brick? I was on my seat frustrated like when my teacher makes a mistake on the chalkboard and it will not do any good to tell her because so quick she can erase it all and on to the next problem. He had us all mixed up with a different group of folk" (56). This being mixed up with other folk is ironic since the judge is assuming by visually looking at Ellen and the presence of the grandmother that they represent the typical white southern family, and his role is to bring justice to the situation. He places Ellen back within a nuclear familial sphere without any regard to her well-being or desires. Ellen is not asked her opinion during these proceedings, but is left mute to witness as the adults around her prove yet again to be inept and fail to protect her.

The court scene is also ironic since Ellen witnesses her biological father sitting in "the middle of two police," as Ellen warns herself that she still has "to be careful," and then, "lo and behold my mama's mama. I had not seen her since the graveyard and there she is again to watch this time" (55). Ellen associates her grandmother with watching as things happen to her and not openly engaging or acting on her behalf. This watching is akin to passive nature of her mother who escaped it all through her overdose but leaves her child to deal with the aftermath of her escape. Again, Ellen's grandmother accuses her and the father of driving the mother to the suicide. Meanwhile, Ellen sits in between her two surrogates since she thought "staying in the middle of Roy and Julia was best" (55). This provides mental support and places Ellen physically in the space of a child. The dress that Julia buys for the court appearance is disliked by both her and Ellen, "She said it is not exactly our style but there are some times when you have to play the game she learned the hard way" (55). The new look for Ellen is "a sailor neck collar and she said here is the worst part. Lace stockings and black patting leather shoes.

Conformity she said” (55). The need to conform makes the entire court appearance like a performance for the grandmother’s benefit. Julia and Roy try to recast Ellen into the traditional childhood realm of a young, white female southern girl by her dress and physical placement between the two surrogate parents. The former hippies realize that they are powerless to the larger institution of the court and, ultimately, to the power and monetary influence of the grandmother. The couple might also be cast as part of the agitators from the North. The judge looks past the reality that the nuclear family has had little to do with Ellen and that the surrogates are the ones who have given her stability. The court reinforces a repetitive theme in the novel by maintaining the outward image of the appropriate family with no regard to best placement for Ellen. The interjection of the court system becomes another way that Gibbons challenges the traditional white southern culture and concept of family.

Ellen has grown accustomed to needing to carry her belongings within a single box. The use of the single box to carry one’s belongings is ironic since the 1970s gave a rise to social services within the family structure. Many children were moved from temporary home to temporary home.<sup>85</sup> After the court makes the determination that she must go live with her grandmother, Ellen tells Roy and Julia, “I had rather go to the reform school or even get on the chain gang than go stay with her” (60). This fear of living with the grandmother who did not claim her after her mother’s death is important. The fear of abandonment continues as Ellen prepares for the next part of her journey. At the start of summer break, the court instructs Ellen to live with her grandmother. In great angst, she recalls,

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<sup>85</sup> The late 1960s and early 1970s saw an increase in outside involvement and the development of social service policies as it relates to children. The 1980s saw the majority of the laws placed into motion to assist in the protection and welfare of children. For more detail on the impact of social services on children, see attachment literature and various descriptions of adrift. Many children due to their lack of permanent residences kept their belongings to a minimum, hence my image of the single box of Ellen’s (Powell).

Before I left I packed all my things that would fit in one box and willed the rest to Julia and Roy. Some of these things might come in handy I said to them. Maybe it is wasteful to scatter your worldly goods from hither to yon but I never wanted to have more than would tie up or tape down in the box. All I really cared about accumulating was money. I saved a bundle. (61)

Since Ellen has not been given a full and secure emotional foundation, she continues to transfer value into currency. To make her transition easier, she tells herself, “for a while I figured she might have liked the idea of having a girl around the house but when she saw my actual self and my box she changed her mind. You cannot blame her. I am not exactly a vision. But Lord I have good intentions that count” (61).

Ellen does not describe herself as a beautiful young woman. She leaves out her physical description until her interaction with her mama’s mama and Mavis and later as an opposite to her cousin Dora (68, 23). These various descriptions shed light on how Ellen absorbed the indifference and scorn from her biological family as a result of resentment toward her mother and father. The notion that she is unappealing reinforces the rejection and abandonment within the family sphere. Ellen is only told that she is pretty or has value from those outside of the nuclear sphere. After spending most of the summer with her mama’s mama, Ellen resolves that the relationship was hopeless and no amount of currency could improve it – “[b]ut by July I called her the damn witch to myself and all the money she had did not matter anymore. That is something when you consider how greedy I am” (61). Ironically, Ellen’s value placed on money shifts to the realization that there are more reliable and concrete things than money. This starts to bring closure to her own disconnect of what constitutes value for herself. The box represents her need to repack the things that she values. These are things that she bought to sooth herself



and seem to be necessities for her. It is almost as if Ellen does not completely unpack within the space of her immediate relatives for in the closets of her aunts' homes, she never truly unpacks (112). Ellen is traumatized by her placement in her grandmother's home; however, she is given something very valuable – Mavis. Mavis is her link back to her birth mother since Mavis was her mother's childhood friend.

Mavis becomes an unlikely surrogate to Ellen. Mavis is a well-rounded and multi-dimensional black woman who is not positioned as the mammy figure since she lives outside the white home; her primary role is not caregiver to Ellen, and she represents a subversion of the traditional literary framework since although she is black, Mavis has worth and is acceptable through Ellen's eyes. Also, Mavis keeps Ellen connected to her other colored adoptive family, Starletta's. Ellen is surprised to know that "they go to the same church!" (64). Ellen is not formally introduced to Mavis but is told as her grandmother drops her off in the fields to "ask a nigger what to do" (63). This directly places Ellen back into blackness and into the black family. She is taken under the wings of Mavis who instructs her that "the boss lady left you here to work not to stand. And I needs to make sure you do it. Now get you a hoe. When I gets to the end of mines I'll catch you up to the rest of us." Ellen responds to this directive, for "That was the first thing I had heard reasonable so I started chopping my row" (63). Ellen describes what her previous life was like: "I lived on a farm with my mama and daddy but they hired colored people to do my part of the slave labor. I was too small to work right. I used to play in the fields with Starletta and watch her mama and daddy chop but I never figured it would be me one day" (63). Her journey has brought her full circle. As stated above, the change of circumstances even surprises Ellen. She never imaged that her placement would mimic that of Starletta's parents

who she used to gaze on at her parents' farm. Her grandmother is the source of this transformation.

The lack of protection also extends to Ellen being turned into the fields ill-prepared for the hard labor and the harsh sun. It is almost as if the grandmother wished that Ellen would become ill from the experience. It is not until Ellen is embraced by a surrogate, Mavis, that she is protected and taught how to survive in her new reality. Ellen learns that only the surrogates have the ability to empower and protect her.

Ellen learns from her surrogate Mavis about her mother's childhood. When Ellen asks Mavis if her mama's mama made her mama work, Mavis responds, "Lord no! She won't cut out for hot work. Her mama made the other ones work like dogs but not your mama. You don't plan to tell the boss lady I been tell you anything do you?" (65). Two other contrasts are illustrated in this passage: Ellen learns that her mother was pampered and did not work as a child and that her aunts were forced to work which could be one reason that they feel no empathy for Ellen based on unresolved resentment for their sister, and she learns of the delicate balance that black women must maintain with the white children in their employer's household. Ellen is an outsider even though she appears to be a defenseless child, but Mavis knows that she must still remain guarded and careful since she is a marginalized black woman and poorly paid worker. Mavis understands the dynamics and politics of mama's mama's ill-will. She tells Ellen that "what the boss lady is up to is her business but it must be a mighty bad debt you is out here working off. They is no sense in a white child working in this heat. I can hardly stands it my own self" (64). Initially, Mavis fears Ellen who is a child. She is the boss's grandchild and white. Once Mavis is comfortable and trusts Ellen, she inquires, "why I was not in Vacation Bible School or at least somewhere out of the sun. I told her exactly what I was told. My mama's mama said I was under

her feet and besides she could not bear to look at my face day in and day out. Also she said I might learn a thing or two out there” (65). Ellen learns a thing or two not only about what a family looks like, but also about her mother from Mavis. Ellen learns about hard work and the inequalities towards blacks. Mavis’s connection to her mother is priceless.

Mavis is the only one in Ellen’s world who provides a link to her mother. Ellen says “[o]ne day she said flat out you look just like your mama. Lord chile you got the same black hair all down your back” (65). Ellen is surprised that Mavis knew her mother and is comforted by what she shares with her, yet, Ellen’s aunt negatively contrasts Ellen’s dark hair with her Cousin Dora’s blond hair. Her aunt’s subtle divisive remark illustrates that value is not seen in Ellen especially by her biological family based on surface beauty. Mavis’s reflections on Ellen’s mama provide Ellen with an alternative legacy to the current negative self-images. Earlier and prior to Mavis’s hair remark, Ellen had reflected on her odd-shaped body and that she was nothing special to behold. Such revelations shed light on Ellen's confirmation that although she may look like her mother, as she insists to her father during one of his abusive moments, she is not her mother. Mavis also shares with Ellen that “Yes chile! I was raised up beside her on this farm. I knowed her as good as I know my self. I never knowed anybody sweet like your mama. Smart as a whip too!” (65). With this knowledge, Ellen is given a new legacy, one that allows her to question the ill-will that she is forced to endure from her grandmother. Ellen’s connection to the black mother figure brings her into an accepting and embracing maternal realm/bond.

Ellen’s birth dismantles and rewrites the notion of the traditional southern legacy by recasting her as a black child. Mavis also provides Ellen with a reason to escape to the quarters of the blacks, although this space is reminiscent of southern slave plantation. Ellen’s father being referred to as trash and a nigger as well as the earlier accusation of Ellen having a nigger

baby, places Ellen not in vacation bible school but in the hot fields working harsh, long hours with the blacks (78). By the end of the summer, Ellen herself reflects that “[i]f I just looked at my own arms and legs up to where my shorts and shirt started I said I could pass for colored now. I was tan from the sun but so dark I was just this side of colored. Under it all I was pinky white” (66). This description and realization by Ellen is telling because to the outside world, she has been cast into blackness and has been treated as such, but in reality, she is a young, white girl. Ellen is aware of her reduced status in her relationship with her grandmother and the treatment that she endures as she reports that “[a]t the end of the day the colored workers went to their shack and I walked to my mama’s mama’s. On work days she left a plate of something for me on the stove. That might not sound social to you but it was perfect for me” (66). This is contrary to the once-a-week meal that she does have with her grandmother on Sundays, “When we both ate at the same Sunday table we both picked at our little individual chickens or turkeys and did not talk. And still it was OK by me” (66). Ellen is aware that she has been set outside the realm of acceptability. As a result, she seeks interaction from the sphere that she finds the most familiar and comforting, blackness. Ellen tells the reader that “after supper each night it was not raining I walked up the colored path and spied on Mavis and her family. It looked like slavery times with them all hanging out on the porch picking at each other. They fought strong as they played and laughed” (66). Ellen most likely learns of the southern plantation tradition from the literary works she has read. She then is able to transfer this fictional knowledge to the visual reality she witnesses and the poor treatment she knows blacks endure as sharecroppers and/or tenant farmers. Ellen’s core mother-modeling enters and is recognized.

Ellen spies on Mavis and the other blacks. We are told earlier in the story that Mavis’s name is the only one that sounded different from the blacks as they initially introduced

themselves, and for that reason Ellen remembers it. Mavis embraces Ellen and welcomes her into the maternal sphere like a mama figure. Ellen connects with the lives of the blacks who work for her grandmother. Ellen's ritual of keeping lists returns as she begins to carefully detail her nightly gazing into a list in her quest for a family. (This list entails Ellen's cataloguing of happenings to share with Starletta since they no longer live close to each other.) She reports that "while I was eavesdropping at the colored house I started a list of all that a family should have. Of course there are the mama and the daddy but if one has to be missing then it is OK if the one left can count for two. But not just anybody can count for more than his or her self" (67). This is the second instance when Ellen acknowledges that having one parent is possibly satisfactory in constituting a family. This foreshadows her later choosing the single foster mother as her "new mama." The excitement that Ellen feels as she watches Mavis and her family is important. Ellen watches and thinks "[I might] bust open if I did not get one of them for my own self soon. Back then I had not figured out how to go about getting one but I had a feeling it could be got" (67). For Ellen, the notion of a family was not biological or innate but one that can be shopped for, acquired. Her positive notions of family stem from her primary interactions with black families.

Ellen feels embraced by the black families but is also conscious of the times and the implications that blackness brings. She clarifies this stance in her lists by stressing "I only wanted one white and with a little more money. At least we can have running water is what I thought" (67). This need to qualify family by race and resources is key since Ellen has learned to value whiteness and money as good things even though white people have not embraced and nurtured her. Ellen's experiences in both communities allow her to critically examine the placement of each based on race.

Throughout the novel, there has been one consistent family, Starletta's. Ellen is considered a part of their family. Whenever Ellen needs something, she can depend on her first "surrogate family" to assist. The family provides shelter, safety and warmth to a child who has been abandoned. Ellen relies on Starletta's father in many instances: "Starletta's daddy called the heat man for me and took me to town to get a coat. We went to the stores in colored town and he got me and Starletta corduroy coats" (26). When she joined the Girls Scouts, there was extra money in the envelope, so "I had Starletta's daddy drive me to town to buy my uniform and accessories" (27). Ellen through her relationship with Starletta's family also recognizes the inconsistencies and unfairness in life that often comes down to race and perceived racial difference. When shopping for the Girl Scout uniform and items, Ellen is quite descriptive as she describes Starletta, "She yelled and went limp on the floor when I did not buy something for her. She could not have a uniform because they do not have a colored troop in my county. They might in town" (27). This lack of a colored troop meant that the friends would have a separation. In terms of family connection, Starletta is the closest that Ellen has to a sister.

Throughout the text, Ellen is also fascinated with making lists like a mother does preparing for the grocery store. As previously mentioned, she maintains her sisterly bonds with Starletta through her lists that document and preserve the girls' bond in the midst of their separation often due to racial divides. Gibbons interjects ideas that often stereotype blacks and often reflect the still segregated community. This is evident in Ellen's acknowledgement that "I wanted the badges more than I needed to be honest so I signed my daddy's initials saying I had made a handicraft or wrapped a ankle or whatever the badge called for" and how Ellen leaves the Girl Scouts – "I got tired of going to meetings" – that hints that no true interaction took place

between her and the organization (27). Her only close bond is with Starletta who is outside of the white racial realm of acceptance.

Ellen's positive memories of Christmas come not from her biological family but from her holiday with her surrogate family. There are two distinct images that surface surrounding the Christmas after her mother's suicide and prior to the sexual abuse by her father. Ellen still has a child-like innocence. Her exposure during the holiday is through Starletta's family, and she tries to deflect her child-like excitement by saying "[a]lthough I did not believe in Santa Claus I figured I had a little something coming to me. So on Christmas Eve I went with Starletta to the colored store and bought myself some things I had been dying for and paper to wrap them with" (28). Similar to the way that Ellen self-mothers, she also creates her own Santa and like a parent, she "wrapped them at the kitchen table and hid them. When I found them the next day I was very surprised in the spirit of Christmas" (28). She interjects her immediate family, her father, into her Christmas memory by wondering "When I got home . . . wondered if I ought to wrap something laying around the house for my daddy. I did not have enough paper. He did not come home that night anyway" (28). This contrasting thought of trying to include her birth father in her Christmas cheer is ironic since he is not concerned about her well-being. Her conscience is relieved about her not purchasing anything for him because he misses the holiday. By reaffirming her disbelief in Santa Clause, Ellen pushes away the need for a traditional familiar bond by saying "I am glad I did not believe in Santa Claus. As my daddy liked to say – wish in one hand and spit in the other and see which on gets full first" (27). This is a reoccurring reflection that wishing, which complicates her birthday party with her surrogates Roy and Julia, is a wasteful exercise. She recognizes that her nuclear family has left her out when she reflects that "I knew my mama's mama was having her usual big turkey dinner that night but that was

OK because I had turkey sliced up with dressing along with two vegetables and a dab of dessert. As long as there is a parade on the television,” or distractions like her books, Ellen is content (27). Her T.V. dinner meal choice mirrors her mama’s mama annual dinner. She makes a point to stress that the only people for whom she spends her valuable money are Starletta and her family, and she boasts, “I got Starletta and her mama and daddy a nice spoon rest. I had the sales lady wrap up the one I saw with the green chicken on it. Then I had the rest of the money for my own self” (27). Unlike her father, Ellen shares her resources with her informal family. These reflections highlight the innocence of a child reflecting on the beauty of the store and excitement of Christmas. This scene highlights a rare sense of normalcy for Ellen and an extension of childhood in her personal reality. Each time she ventures out in the town with Starletta’s family draws Ellen deeper into blackness, and the black world is a stark contrast to her earlier feelings on race and the later judgment by her mama’s mama that she is sexually promiscuous with black men.

Ellen reflects several times on the value she places on money and her greed. She willingly spends money on Starletta and her family and is genuinely surprised and appreciative that they have given her a needed, thoughtful gift of a sweater. Ellen’s mind drifts to her father as she worries “what he might do about me making off with all the cash money” which is ironic that she places herself only in relationship to her father with the currency of money. There is no other value mentioned.<sup>86</sup> She acknowledges that her father’s only concern would be the money and not her which is ironically foreshadowed in the funeral scene when the father is relieved that Ellen’s mama’s mama does not make a scene at the funeral as he thinks to himself (erroneously), “I do not have to pay for her girl” (21). He does not even claim Ellen’s mother as his wife. The

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<sup>86</sup> This relationship resembles that of Huck Finn and his father Papp Finn in Mark Twain’s *Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*.



father's relationship to both Ellen and her mother is one of money as is the fact that he signs over his farm which leaves Ellen without any transferable legacy. Ellen observes after this transfer that "[h]e stopped doing anything but drinking and sleeping" (25).

The two Christmases that Ellen narrates are spent away from her nuclear family. When she spends the holiday with Starletta's family, it is marked within the picturesque image of "the smoke rising out of the chimney from the road. You know it is warm from where the smoke starts" (29). She recognizes that Starletta's parents are different in their own home. Ellen tells us early on that her life with her mother and father was not one of luxury, but she is able to see the class difference caused by race when she comments on Starletta's family home. Starletta's family is comfortable with her, accepting her as their adopted child. When she sees the father pinch the mother, Ellen reflects that "they would not carry on like that if they were at the store or working in the field. They walk up the road and pick cotton and do not speak like they go together. People say they do not try to be white" (29). This racial distinction is further clarified as Ellen stresses that she does not drink after them, that their house smells of fried meat, that one adjusts to the odor, and that they try to clean the house all the time but it is still dirty (29). Ellen feels that they need a rug or something to "suck it all up" (30). They live in one room and have an outhouse – due to this Ellen waits until she gets home to relieve her bladder. The only one who reads is Starletta, and the white ladies from town buy Starletta's mother's quilts at a low price and sell them at a profit. The family's origins are unknown, but Ellen observes that do not have any extended family like the other black families they live near (30). Also, this notion of acting white or challenging the behavior of the white women who re-sell Starletta's mother's quilts would make Starletta's family equal to the whites, but they know better than to challenge the judgment of white women. Ellen accepts her witnessing of Starletta's parents show of

affection within their home sphere as humanizing; however, she also recognizes and understands the reasons behind their modified behavior in public.

Ellen takes a different amount of care to describe Starletta's father by sharing that "Starletta's daddy wears a green coat and a matching hat. Castro has a hat just like that. He, nor Castro, has never bothered me and he is the only colored man that does not buy liquor from my daddy. I do not know what he spends his money on" (30). She makes clear to the reader that Starletta's father is not a dictator like Castro and is very different from other black men and from her own father. She again associates money with vices like liquor as her father does. These negative behaviors do not reflect good examples of protection for Ellen, nor a safe home; however, the care that Starletta's father takes to include her brings her close to a family structure.

Ellen accepts these invitations as much as her racial biases will allow her. The exchange between Ellen and the family on Christmas Eve represents a good example of boundaries within the southern discourse as Ellen shares that Starletta's daddy "asked me if I want to stay and eat with them. No. I'll just stick around until you finish if that would be OK with you. You know you are welcome to stay. You know it's OK, her mama says to me. You know it is" (31). Even though her mother is dead, Ellen starts to respond with "My mama" (31). This afterthought is similar to the flashback she has of her mother when she is with Julia. Ellen's mind wanders in this same scene, "Do I have to watch? I could go" reflecting back to the funeral, and Ellen feels she should leave Starletta's and go home (31). These afterthoughts serve as reminders to how fresh her mother's death really is and the influence that her mother had on her life and development. When Starletta's "mama says to take something you better eat," Ellen is unable to do so because "no matter how good it looks to you it is still a colored biscuit" (32). This is also an interesting contrast to critic Veronica Makowsky's discussion of the relationship between

food and self-nurturing. The inability to accept food due to race is important since Ellen comes later after more interaction with outside surrogates, to abandon her judgmental ways, but she is also drawn to memories of her mother through the relationship with her surrogates. Another result of her relationships is that Ellen learns to care for others, even to purchase things for them. She genuinely decides to provide Starletta's family a gift similar to the ability for her to learn to accept the gift from Julia and Roy on her birthday. Her ability to give a gift to her surrogate family is accepted graciously and is considered thoughtful. Ellen's exchanges with her surrogates completely contrast the harsh treatment that she sustains from her cousin's household and her father's absence on Christmas. Gibbons uses these two scenes during Christmas to highlight Ellen's abandonment.

When presented with her Christmas gift from Starletta's family, Ellen says, "oh, my God it is a sweater. I like it so much. I do not tell a story when I say it does not look colored at all. I think I would like to put it on now if that is OK I can slip it over my shirt and wear it I say and I think I need to cry a little" (32). When Ellen says to Starletta's parents, "You want to open your gift while I look or do you want to wait for me to leave," she foreshadows the rejection that she will feel from her Aunt Nadine and Dora. The exchange for this thoughtful gift is "that was mighty sweet of you. You didn't have to do it. I had to. Well well well, the mama says and gets up to put it on her stove" (32). This gift receives a place of honor which is extremely different from the disappointment and insincere nature of Aunt Nadine and her cousin Dora when Ellen presents the painting of the playing cats (32):

I heard Nadine say Ellen has tried very hard to please us and you have hurt her feelings. Sugar listen to me. Even though we might think it might be silly or a bit cheap-looking for us we still need to act nice...Now let's put that picture up just

like we think it's the prettiest thing we've ever seen. Then after she's gone and it's just you and me again, we'll take it down. OK? (109)

Ellen's gift is also less genuine than what she gives to Starletta's family as the cat playing is a foil to what Ellen really is capable of contributing. Ellen rationalizes to herself that "I do not think they could go for one of my experiment pictures or the one I call brooding ocean" (105). She recognizes prior to creating the painting that "Lord knows I have a load of money saved but it would take every penny to buy something to suit them. And I need to hang on to that money for my own business" (105). She braces herself for their possible reaction thinking, "even if they hate it I can still be proud of giving something I approve of" (105). Her approval is important, and she recognizes that Aunt Nadine and Dora's expectations and values are based on things that are far from practical and outside of her reach. Also, it is significant that Starletta's family gives her something that she can wear since they are the surrogates who transport her to the store to purchase her needed items. Starletta's family welcomes Ellen as an extended family and remains thoughtful of her needs.

Even when Ellen starts to feel like part of the family, she knows that socially she needs to distance herself and so disrupts the family moment by saying, "I have to go now. I need to get on back home" (32). The response from Starletta's family demonstrates their concern that the child is vulnerable. "Stay here. What are you going to do when you get back?" Ellen responds, "Lord I stay busy" (32). This "staying busy" often entails propping chairs up to doors to lock her father out, hiding in closets and climbing out of windows when they are not frozen shut. Starletta's father assumes the role of protector as much as he can in his own marginalized status as a black man: "You come back when you want to .... Then he wants to know if my daddy is at home today. I have not seen hide nor hair. If he's there when you get home you come on back

here if you want to. Come back here, he says” (32). This invitation to come back is an offer of protection. Ellen’s mama’s mama and outside family including her father’s brothers, Rudolph and Ellis, and her aunts Betsy and Nadine, all know that the father is a volatile and destructive person, but no one seeks to try to protect the child from the destructive keeper who, ironically, is the one who should protect and provide her with a legacy. Her nuclear biological family pushes Ellen further away from her standing as a child and often call her outside of her name. Ellen does not have positive experiences or reflections when she is directly interacting with her biological family.

Memories of her mother surface when Ellen is within a safe maternal sphere of the surrogates, Starletta’s and Roy and Julia’s homes. For example, in the scene when she is gardening, she tells the reader: “The times me and Julia and Roy worked in the garden I did not think about him [father] but of my mama and the way she liked to work in the cool of the morning.... I know I have made being in the garden with her into a regular event but she was really only well like that for one season” (49). She interjects the introspective adult part of herself when she concludes that “You see if you tell yourself the same tale over and over again enough times then the tellings become separate stories and you will generally fool yourself into forgetting you only started with one solitary season out of your life. That is how I do it” (49). This re-creation of one’s story is the strategy used by all of the young protagonists in the novels of this study in order to take control of their lives.

In “Stories Told by Their Survivors (and Other Sins of Memory): Survivor Guilt in Kaye Gibbons’s *Ellen Foster*,” Linda Watts touches on numerous key points of remembrance and guilt. Watts outlines the rites of passage through which Ellen journeys in self-birthing or “re-birthing” herself into a whole and healthy young woman, like several of the other female

characters in the subject texts. Although Watts explores the guilt that Ellen feels surrounding the death of her “primary caregivers,” she does not in detail examine the lack of protection that her mother provided and as a result, the trauma caused to Ellen when her mother commits suicide and Ellen must self-mother for survival. Watts discusses rebirth in connection to Ellen’s new mama (the claimed mother) but does not discuss the numerous other surrogates who provide modeling for Ellen. Without these other surrogates, Ellen would not have been able to recognize the characteristics she desired in her new mama. The new mama is a result of her viewing and learning from the two main historical figures with Mavis and Starletta’s mama. By witnessing these two black women whom Gibbons places to represent the historically marginalized black field worker, Ellen is able to see modeling of motherhood. Her initial rejection of the value of these women is inherited according to the racial paradigm in which her family seems to be trapped. Ellen is initially repulsed by these women and what they represent. Her need to feel superior is a result of what has been inherited by her family. Without her contact with Mavis and Starletta’s mother, Ellen would not have been able to accept Julia and Roy’s home as a potentially safe place, especially not fearing Roy as a male. Ellen has been fortunate to interact with the father-figure that Starletta’s father represents. He provides a healthy and safe father image for her in light of the abuse from her own father. Gibbons provides dual images of black men and white men and women through race and class to invert various stereotypes. Starletta’s father allows her to trust that Roy will have no ill intentions. The images of the drunken, stereotypical black male and the opposing image of the trustworthy black male draw on the early writing tradition of Harriet Beecher Stowe’s *Uncle Tom’s Cabin*. Several critics have drawn a link to earlier literary works when referring to character development in *Ellen Foster*.<sup>87</sup> The

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<sup>87</sup> See Linda Adams Barnes (Flannery O’Connor), Kristina K. Groover (Mark Twain), Veronica Makowsky (Eudora

earlier narratives serve as foundation texts for Gibbons as she crafts a novel that traps its characters within a rural southern setting that is outdated. The setting allows for Ellen's journey to take place within the progressive new south in the times of integration. Gibbons also expands this progression to show some of the negatives that have arisen – the abandonment of children, dysfunctional families, isolated children and incest.

In the new South, various surrogates who are not relatives exist. Outsiders provide modeling for Ellen and assist Ellen in her quest for claiming a new home and ultimately, a new mother. Briefly, near the end of her essay, Watts deals with the abandonment resulting from Ellen's mother's suicide, drawing an interesting link between memory and Morrison's rememory in *Beloved*, but she does not deal with the repressed guilt or anger and confusion surrounding Ellen's wished-for escape from sexual abuse and the stigmatism that follows her, and her worry about her grandmother not dying under her watch. Ellen describes her grandmother as having "a big clown smile looking down at [her] while she said to [her] you best take better care of me than you did your mama" (73). Also, the lack of sympathy that would ordinarily follow a child who lost her mother is problematized and is interestingly presented by Gibbons. When her mama's mama coldly discloses to Ellen that her father is dead, she instructs Ellen, "Go ahead and cry. Just make sure you cry more than you did for your mama" (69). Ellen's describes her tears for her father as "when they say a star or a old president is dead and you feel sorry for a flash;" however, her emotions for her mother remain guarded as Ellen struggles with her death (69). A heart illness made Ellen's mother weak, and ultimately she used the medicine for treatment to kill herself. Ellen's mother's death leaves her with a heartache that surfaces as guilt for Ellen since she believes she abandoned her mother by not getting help during her overdose. The father

who should have been the protector, and historically has been so in the southern narrative, blocks protection and aids in the destruction of the mother. When Ellen thinks about her mother's death, she thinks about silence and that her mother got the last word, but in terms of the child and the role of the mother, what does this last word cost? Unlike her mother's heart medicine, the only medicine that can comfort the anguish and guilt that Ellen harbors in her own heart is the desire and need to self-birth.

Ellen's desire for a new life becomes her motivation as she sets to heal herself. Ellen's mother never receives approval from her own mother and that her mama's mama provided poor mothering models. This poor model resulted in Ellen's own mother's inability to maintain herself in the prescribed placement of favor for her mother. This disapproval and rejection leaves Ellen's nameless mother without the skills to develop her own motherlove. Throughout, Ellen's flashbacks provide various examples of reverse mothering. She mothers her own mother as well as her mama's mama through their illnesses. Ellen even protects her mother by climbing into the crib kept in her parent's room. This buffer probably protected her mother from worse physical and mental abuse at the hands of the father. How does one develop motherlove in the midst of disdain from one's own mother? Where does one's support come from especially when one attempts to mother in isolation? How does a withheld financial legacy marginalize the mother and force her to stay in an abusive marriage? From Mavis, we learn that Ellen's mother was a kept woman who had fallen from grace in the eyes of her mother through her choice of spouse. This fall from the pedestal made her unvalued in the eyes of her own mother; and therefore, she lacked any currency in her mother's eyes. The lack of currency made her a bastard outsider. It is illustrated often that mama's mama finds value in money. There is no mention of a father in relationship to Ellen's mother past; so perhaps, no modeling existed for Ellen's mother



to choose a husband since one did not exist within the southern discourse to protect and to prevent her marriage. The other sisters have lost their husbands, resulting in an extended family without men. In past novels, this male absence could be seen as a place of maternal and female strength, but in *Ellen Foster*, it causes the women to be self-absorbed and selfish to the needs of others. This causes the women to become blind and produces an inability of the women to mother anyone outside of them biologically and causes isolation. Bone in *Bastard Out of Carolina*, Precious in *Push*, and Pecola in *The Bluest Eye*, and Ellen are isolated in many ways. The only attachment and interaction comes from people who are powerless to help them: Precious' white male teacher; Pecola in Claudia, the prostitutes, and Soaphead; and Ellen in Starletta's family, Roy, Julia, and Mavis. Like Bone, Ellen seeks some solace within traditional societal structures including religion, but does not find fulfillment or acceptance. The maternal sphere is the only place of acceptance that will embrace Ellen.

New motherhood for Ellen is found outside the traditional maternal bond. The image of Ellen lying with her dead mother almost attempting to re-enter the womb, parallels the scene when she is embraced by the new mother (119). The title of mother is bestowed only to the new mother. The other women and men Ellen encounters help redefine her racial and gender biases. For example, Roy does not seem to work, but he cooks and cleans, as Ellen notes, not the traditional male roles.

Although Tappmeyer links Ellen's new respect and enlightenment to the plight of southern blacks, she does not take into account the gifts that the blacks have offered Ellen: protection, mothering and modeling of loving homes, how to find a new mother, and men that are contrary to her nuclear family. In Ellen's search for a new mother, several critics outline the

journey she travels.<sup>88</sup> The claiming of the mother can occur when Ellen has undergone her own process of self-mothering and is ready to allow a remothering process to take place. When she is ready, she claims a mother.

Ultimately, Ellen's chosen mother is made possible through the traditional authority of the court. The surrogate mother initiates the process and removes Ellen from the adult responsibility of negotiating her new home. Unlike Ellen's other interactions with institutional authority, the details are worked out behind the scenes by her new mother. This allows Ellen for the first time to maintain her role as a child and not be a child who is forced to act as an adult. Other shifts occur in Ellen's life as she is taken into the maternal fold of the foster mother, her final surrogate. Ellen soon finds value in herself, since monetary currency has no value as her new mama tells her "I can't take this money" when Ellen seeks to buy herself a space in her home by proposing, "I want to pay you that money so we can keep this all on the up in up. That way you and me will be even. You get the money and I stay here until I graduate from high school. How does that sound to you?" (119). Ellen is accustomed to negotiating in her life for her own personal safety and survival. Her new mama informs her, "I tell you what. I'm going to call County Social Services first thing in the morning and we'll get the ball rolling. I can't promise you anything but if you need a place as badly as it appears then we would welcome you here" (119). Within this scene Ellen is pulled into the maternal sphere not only verbally by "we would welcome you here," but also physically when the foster mother "leaned over and pulled me up next to her and it was just like I wanted it to be" (119). This wanting "it to be" makes Ellen compare her life to that which "sounded a little bit like something from one of my old books but I had waited so long to believe somebody that I just listened and believed" (119). Her believing

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<sup>88</sup> See Kristina K. Groover and Minrose Gwin.

is stressed further when the foster mama asks her name and then says to her “Ellen I bet you never thought old Santa Claus would bring you a new mama for Christmas” (119). This is ironic since throughout the text, Ellen has cast her own disbelief in Santa Claus and in wishes. It is only through her various surrogates that she learns to believe that good things can happen to her. Ellen claims her foster mother in that moment with “That is where I got the name new mama” and then relates, “There was just a couple of things I needed to know before I unloaded my box and settled in that room she mentioned” (119). The slight interrogation that follows is critical since all those who should have cared and protected Ellen have died:

Well I need to know if you are pretty healthy or if you have a disease or bad habits like drinking. Also are you generally friendly or do you have days when you act crazy or extra mean?

Why Ellen?

I just need to know.

OK. I’m healthy as a horse. Nobody here drinks or smokes. And to have a house full of children I think I’m pretty even tempered. How’s that?

Thanks I said. That’s exactly what I needed to know. (119-0)

This exchange is significant as Ellen has a checklist of vices that she has learned, from her past experiences, do not nurture or embrace her. The image of her weak sickly mother is replaced by the surrogate who is healthy as a horse; her father’s drunken rages and abuse and her grandmother’s ill-will are replaced with the reality that nobody drinks or smokes and that the foster mother is pretty even tempered. Ellen needs to know these things because they were on her list of experiences of what did not make a good home.

Ellen's journey is over now that she has somebody decent to love her and she believes that she can evolve into a good person. Her realization that she was greedy was symbolically based on the fact that she was bankrupt from the lack of love and compassion that did not surface in her various levels of abandonment within the traditional protective realm of family. Ellen discovers that the money she gave her new mama has been saved. She reports that it was "pushed back in the hall closet. I found it one day when I was rambling. The money bag has my name Ellen on it and the date I moved in here" (120). She concludes "[n]ow I can turn out different too. I could have been a hobo. If my new mama and her girls had been gone on vacation there is no telling where old Ellen might have turned up. If I think about my life like that I can see how lucky I am" (120). The notion of luck reflects back on Ellen's old vocabulary of bartering and money value. Ellen recognizes that her life has been full of gambles and nothing has provided her with the needed stability until now. One can only imagine the family willingly signing away Ellen as a ward of the state to rid themselves from the sins of the mother. Is it their fault (her Aunts Betsy and Nadine) that they are incapable of nurturing their dead sister's child, or is it the reality due to their own fragmented development that they lack the ability to see the other since they were fostered in an environment filled with selfishness and rage at the weak? The outsiders provide Ellen with more love and care than do the insiders. Ellen renders some individuals nameless, and provides others with names. The people that are usually central to a child's sense of belonging and core such as her mother, her father, and her grandmother remain nameless throughout the text. Or, as is quite evident throughout the text, the withholding of affectionate names such as grandmother or granny is replaced by a distancing name of mama's mama.

Ellen's journey has come full circle. Gibbons's novel raises many questions in terms of legacy and surrogacy. Ellen's maternal quest never includes a father. Ellen is able to establish a new legacy by claiming a mother. In her journey, she is able to consider many things. Though Ellen highlights throughout the valuable role that Starletta's father plays within the family, she does not see the sphere of fatherhood relevant and necessary for her development. The mother is the critical piece. At the group home, her reflection that Baby Roger "did not get a daddy" is ironic because it reinforces that that a mother is central for a child, not a father (59). Ellen is introspective as even she accepts that even in her new nurturing home she cannot reshape the image nor recast the experience with her mama's mama because "All that summer was a bad time and no matter how hard I try I still remember her sad," a sadness from losing her daughter (60). Ellen now has a place to live that embraces her. Her new mama has entered Ellen's maternal sphere and gladly been claimed.

Toni Morrison's concept of the outdoors becomes a power image in *Ellen Foster*, for Ellen has been continuously, veritably and metaphorically, put outdoors of her family. Ellen must work introspectively to self-mother as part of her development into independence and ultimately power by choosing her own mother. As the school psychologist remarks to Ellen during one of her therapy sessions, "The problem is WHY you feel you need another identity" (89). This need for another identity accompanies Ellen claiming her new mama and assuming the name Foster. Her past name is of no use to her. Its presence in her life is worthless, since we never know her last name other than the name she chooses for herself past claiming her new mama. In fact, her surname is never mentioned. Her self-renaming is evidence of the power she claims to mother herself. She removes from the cradle the hands of those who see her as a reflection of her father's ill-will and intent and her mother's cowardly escape. It is almost as if

Ellen's mother's family watches her slowly dying and never seeks to rescue her. Her death and demise would release the family from the responsibility and elevate them to the status of martyrs. Perhaps, the psychological hold of the father mirrors the hold that we will see of the mothers in *Bastard Out of Carolina* and *Push*. It could mimic and mirror the reverse classification of what happens when Ellen is drawn into blackness and Pauline in *The Bluest Eye* is drawn into whiteness. The surrogate pattern in Ellen Foster makes one wonder that perhaps self-mothering and true maternal power remains and rests in the historical bosom of the wet-nurse – the mammy figure since Ellen is able to develop her ideals of mothering through Starletta's mother and Mavis. Kaye Gibbons redefines the maternal figure as a single foster mother who can love girls who have been thrown away.

#### CHAPTER IV: Through the Mother's Eye in Dorothy Allison's *Bastard Out of Carolina*

“Trash rises . . . Out here no one can mess with it, trash rises all the time.”

– Aunt Raylene, *Bastard Out of Carolina* (180)

Dorothy Allison's *Bastard Out of Carolina* set in the late 1950s, early 1960s in poor Greenville, South Carolina, represents a complex family-based narrative that centers around poverty, legitimacy, and violence. This first person account provides a detailed progression of neglect. The novel's primary mother, Anney Boatwright struggles to maintain her position as an honorable woman in her small southern town. Anney is mother of two daughters: Bone, whose father remains nameless throughout the narrative, and Reese, whose now-deceased father Anney had married and loved. Anney makes several choices that cause doubt about her desires to protect her daughters, especially when she marries Glen Waddell, the inept son of the wealthy dairy owner. Of the four subject novels, Allison's novel provides the greatest illustration of family support in reaction to incest. The family both actively and passively watches as Anney attempts to mother in a destructive marriage while trying to legitimize her role as wife. The family also evokes the silence of the mother as they shield the child born out of wedlock, Bone, from details about her father as well as from intervention from any traditional outside institutions. The role of the mother shifts from protector and legitimizer to abandoner when the abuse that Bone endures at the hands of her stepfather, Daddy Glen, becomes more grotesque. The saviors who repeatedly help this fragmented, motherhood bond survive are the three surrogates: Aunt Ruth, Uncle Earle, and Aunt Raylene. Though Anney's siblings become the surrogates, they do not abandon their role as sibling to Anney, but they do pick up the pieces to protect and to mother Bone.

The narrator, Ruth Anne Boatwright, refers to herself by her family nickname, Bone. She is the daughter born out of wedlock to Anney Boatwright during a time when the community still considers her sexual activity sinful. The novel has been classified as an incest narrative, a coming of age story, and a fictionalized autobiography of the author Dorothy Allison.<sup>89</sup> Framing the discussion of this novel will be the same boundaries used in the previous chapters; however, *Bastard Out of Carolina* incorporates the most powerful family-based group of surrogates. The larger community scorns and looks down upon the outsiders, the Boatwright family. Within this family unit with its strong maternal bond, the Boatwright sisters act as supporters and defenders of each other. Bone finds herself more embraced within the familial maternal bonds than by her mother as the novel progresses. However, the patriarchal system and historical setting of the text marginalizes the main characters and places motherhood in isolation. The text centers on the meaning of bastard as a stigma and value judgment. It also imprisons the mother in the role of an unmarried white trash woman – nothingness blights the future of her child.

Bone's lack of a father literally and figuratively marks her identity. Cultural institutions devalue the child. Deborah Horvitz examines the novel that she coins a *hysterical text* as one in which

trauma is forcibly and violently enacted upon a female body, cultural/political/historical factors merge with personal/psychological ones to induce experiences so devastating that we wonder how, even if they can be endured. In *Bastard*, culturally instituted and legally sanctioned sadomasochism – class prejudice resulting in poverty – becomes inseparably entwined with individual and psychological sadomasochism – domestic violence and

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<sup>89</sup> *Ellen Foster* is also a fictionalized narration from Kaye Gibbons's life.



incest...which situates each traumatized protagonist within a concatenation of circumstances unique to her social, historical, geographical, familial, and psychological experiences. (239)

In the text, marriage becomes a strategy that people hope will correct the wrongs of their lives and their own childhoods. The value of marriage is based purely on the need to be attached and the perceived stability marriage provides. The main focus of mothering is Anney and the numerous ways that she does not protect Bone and, ultimately, how others must engage to do so. In the course of this study, it is one of the most graphic portrayals of violence toward a child with the mother's knowledge and consent. The signs that Anney chooses to ignore not only leave physical but also psychological marks on Bone. Anney has the family support to leave the abuser; however, in her eyes, her family support is not enough to give her the legitimacy that marriage provides. Her ability to look past the abuse and the negatives of her life with Glen is similar to Pauline's ability to escape into her own fantasy world as she embraces whiteness in *The Bluest Eye*. Anney hopes to obtain a better class and social standing by maintaining her marriage to Glen.

The traditional lens of the patriarchy defines Bone's narrative. Allison carefully crafts the introduction and early portion of the text to parallel the devalued and powerless nature of the female and ultimately, the female child. Southern culture and her mother's behaviors validate the patriarchy. Later twentieth-century novels such as *Bastard* and *Push* question the role of illegitimacy in claiming female children, and the legacy that these girls will represent. Their illegitimacy further marginalizes their mothers who make choices based on the existence of their sins. The acknowledgement of children out of wedlock echoes Hawthorne's *Scarlet Letter* thus suggesting the lack of cultural progression in response to unmarried women. The historical

marker of the unwed mother comes to represent the ills of society judged by the outside forces that must be corrected and must be vilified. As result of devaluations by the men in their families and communities, these women often try to minimize their presence by not highlighting the proof of their illegitimacy. It also casts the white mother into blackness which is undesirable in the southern patriarchal society. Abuse has been stereotypically focused on the black female child's body; however, the combination of physical and sexual abuse upon the body of the female child is not unusual in American literature. A common theme occurs when the child is female and not legitimate and not protected by the traditional family structure. The notion of family structure and legacy is critical in the southern paradigm of belonging.

Bone acquires different forms of power from her three main surrogates and even from some of her false ones. Male power is what Bone wishes she possessed, often appropriating the behavior and images of her male surrogate, Uncle Earle as a coping method to endure her abusive situation, for instance. This is one her of solutions to the abuse the she must live through. Bone finds value in her relationship with her surrogates who are outside the traditional southern paradigm of belonging, on which the dominate culture places value. Anney's value is slightly raised once she marries Lyle, her first husband and Reese's father, but not fully, since a marker of her previous life and continuous linkage to poverty, Bone, is ever present. The image of this female child called "Bone" symbolizes and reinforces her position and role in the various family structures. Anney's lack of protection as a mother brings no value outside the traditional family structure. Bone literally becomes her mother's backbone. Throughout the narrative, the family maintains a steady foundation for the protagonist. We witness the human reality of the scars that Bone bears and also the various hungers that consume her throughout the text.

In *Bastard Out of Carolina*, Anney's main motivation is survival. She represents the tainted southern woman, carrying the burden of her shame with the birth of her bastard child. She goes with Glen to his family's gatherings and endures their gazes of disapproval. She repeatedly commits further self-abuse by going to the courthouse to *rewrite* Bone's legitimacy. These acts further ostracize and debilitate Anney. The birth certificate becomes Anney's obsession because she understands the mark that she [Anney] has given Bone. Interestingly, there are things that Anney chooses not to witness. Ironically, she is unconscious when Bone is born and later is semi-unconscious throughout the abuse her daughter suffers. Anney and her family consciously and consistently never acknowledge nor reveal the identity of Bone's actual father. Anney often behaves like a child, a child that all, especially her daughter, seek to protect.

The absence of the mother is mentioned in the novel's first paragraph since Anney is unconscious when Bone is born and cannot bear witness to the naming of her child nor her legitimacy. The question becomes whether or not Anney Boatwright actively chooses to become unconscious of her obligations of motherhood throughout Bone's life, or, whether or not she is a victim, trapped within the southern paradigm of legitimacy in class, race, and gender as white trash (as Dorothy Allison's autobiography, *Trash*, proclaims).

Within the community of Boatwright women, one of Bone's surrogates, Aunt Raylene, is also an outsider. This extreme outside position shows us its influence on the surrogate relationship. In "Surviving the Family Romance? Southern Realism and the Labor of Incest," Gillian Harkins looks at the position of the southern law and its relationship to the text. She argues that "men are protected from law by this working class storytelling; the women are reified as the instruments of masculinity resistance" (118). Southern law protects men, and women maintain this role by not challenging or disturbing the law, hence becoming the tools of

resistance to masculinity. Within this known structure, Bone lacks the agency to tell her mother of her abuse because she knows the response. Even after Anney witnesses the aftermath of her child's rape, she stays with her husband, the head of the family, avoids dismantling his masculinity, and protects him. In my analysis, women are defined by the men in their lives, and how the women also embrace the excuses of the men. Aunt Raylene does not subscribe to the confines of these masculine dictates. This reality shows why Anney is powerless to stay to protect her daughter. Abandonment of Bone becomes the best form of protection for Anney to exercise as her final failure as the protective mother. The selfish act reinforces her own legitimacy at the sake of her daughter's.

The Boatwrights provide a glimpse into southern poverty and social deviancy. Bone perceives that her family is poor, white trash who are ignorant and hated. Throughout the novel, she struggles against this image of herself as she can see herself reflected through the various members of her family. Bone is told by her Uncle Earle, "You're a Boatwright, Bone, even if you are the strangest girlchild we got" (27). Since Bone does not know her birth father, she is left with a fragmented identity.<sup>90</sup> The Boatwright family as a whole does not permit her into the mystery of her birth father; they share only glimpses of his characteristics as a way to connect with Bone. Bone explains, "Granny wouldn't talk much about my real daddy except to curse his name, but she told me just about everything else" (26). Bone acknowledges, "There weren't any pictures of my real daddy, and Mama wouldn't talk to me about him – no more than she would about the rest of the family" which shows that Anney employs silence as a method not to acknowledge her past (25). Her Granny emphasizes Bone's lack of existence and the only

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<sup>90</sup> Her family negates the presence of her father in her life. Bone absorbs Daddy Glen's negative image of her as bad and evil built upon this absence of a legitimized father. See Shawn Miller's "An Aching Lust to Hurt Somebody Back: The Exile's Patrimony in *Bastard Out of Carolina*."

legacy that she inherited from him as “you got family you an’t ever gonna know is your own – all of you with that dark dark hair he had himself” (26). It is ironic that her father remains nameless even at the end. Her father was a married man with “six children who didn’t even know I existed; said he sold insurance to colored people out in the county and had never been to jail a day in his life” (25). This lack of jail time is foreign to the Boatwrights. Part of the Boatwright legacy is incarceration. This is ironic when they judge Bone’s father based on his lack of jail tenure, and later they will respect Gene based on his volatile temper. Her Granny says that her father was “[a] sorry excuse for a man” which makes Bone “feel kind of wretched until Aunt Alma swore he hadn’t been that bad, just pissed everybody off when he wouldn’t come back and ask Granny’s forgiveness after she ran him off” (25). This would also connect to the devalued and/or decreased currency of Anney. The family consistently claims that Anney, the birth mother and the prettiest of the Boatwright girls, does not need any more heartache. As a mother, she tries to offer and to create some sort of legitimacy within the southern paradigm for Bone.

The family is filled with dysfunction and violence. Bone becomes a direct target of trauma, not through the hands of her legacy of being a Boatwright, but through the union and hands of her stepfather – the one who was meant to give some sort of legitimacy and nuclear family foundation to Bone and her younger sister, Reese. Reese’s legitimacy is never in doubt as Bone witnesses that her half-sister is repeatedly claimed by the other side of the family. Bone confesses, “I envied the way [Reese] could look from that picture to Mama’s face to Grandma Parson’s bent shoulders and guess how she might still change before she grew up. She had another family, another side of her to think about, something more than Mama and me and the Boatwrights” (59). Reese also resembles her father and mother. As a result of this other side,

Bone interprets that “Reese could choose something different for herself and be someone else altogether” (59). Reese does not absorb the hate and the rage of Daddy Glen since she is marked as legitimate and has a family with standing and power outside of the Boatwrights who can bring her protection and offer some additional value to Reese even though her mother is viewed as less desirable. Reese is viewed as the child who lost her father; there is something precious projected in this which makes her appear more vulnerable and needing of protection. This, along with Reese’s physical beauty which is closest to acceptable – blond hair and blue eyes, makes her have a sacred value which in turn acts to protect her. Bone is one of her father’s many illegitimate children that “others say he’s got scattered from Spartanburg to Greer, he’s been kind of a one-man population movement” (26). This reality of being illegitimate symbolically makes Bone who does not have her father’s name nothing special.

The southern value of belonging is carried through the male line. Without properly being linked to a patriarchal family or legacy, Bone is forced to exist on the margins of her already-marginalized family. Allison re-writes the illegitimacy narration and reinforces the value and dominance of the patriarchy on motherhood.<sup>91</sup> Glen claims Anney and the girls by whispering, “Call me Daddy ‘cause I love your mama, ‘cause I love you. I’m gonna treat you right. You’ll see. You’re mine, all of you, mine” (36). This is ironic since he is the outcast within his own family and must seek ownership of an already formed family outside of his own prescribed territory. There is also no mention of him fully claiming Anney’s children through adoption. He cannot offer Anney the protection or the luxuries of the southern womanhood but only a false legacy of another layer of inappropriate illegitimacy. This as a combination of perceived inadequacy makes Bone the prime target for the new “daddy.” Anney claims Glen as husband

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<sup>91</sup> See J. Brooks Bouson, Minrose Gwin, and Laura S. Patterson.

and father but cannot foretell how and why ownership over the entire family is so important to Glen. Historically, women have been owned by their husbands and hence children owned by the family structure. This possessive notion that they are Glen's alone will become critical as the level of abuse increases against Bone since in his mind; no one can intervene on his direct claimed and owned "daughter." Lacking a legacy of his own, Glen can only manipulate the ready-made family of Anney, Reese, and Bone. Allison crafts these relationships within a tradition that did not initially account for its participants but placed them on the outskirts as outsiders and other.

Harkins's article that highlights the growth and the differences in incest-related literature during the late twentieth century focuses on Allison's text to show how the novel resists the increasingly frequent label of survivor realism due to its exposure of both the lower class status and the sustaining of the "heterosexual marriage plot (116)." Hawkins looks at the marginalization of the characters, especially the Boatwright family and Daddy Glen. Harkins also draws on Freud to attempt to compare the conscious and unconscious realities of children who suffer abuse and agrees with Allison's comment that novel is tragic, that she explores the southern backdrop of legitimacy and tradition through tragedy. This narrative exploration is different than the first person account in *Ellen Foster* mainly due to the Ellen's younger age, and her lack of family support. The challenges presented by legacy and tradition illustrate the traumatic discourse throughout the text. Several critics argue that the story is about Bone as a survivor triumphing and escaping her tormentor.<sup>92</sup> I argue that it is actually a timeless tragic story detailing repeated lack of protection and an extreme illustration of marginalization. It is a positive reinforcement of the outsiders, those considered social deviants, who embrace their roles

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<sup>92</sup> See Eunjoo Woo, Vincent King, and Shawn Miller.

as surrogates and ultimately, motherhood. It is ironic, as Harkins reminds the reader, that it is not Anney who names her daughter, but her sister Aunt Ruth whom Bone is actually named after. The power and influence of naming foreshadows her surrogates who offer guidance, protection, and motherlove. Since the narrative itself enters through the patriarchy by illegitimacy, Allison establishes the male presence in the novel.

The images of men in the novel are multi-dimensional. In no other novel within the study (except perhaps for Cholly in *The Bluest Eye*) does the author provide background information for the men. Based on this information, a sense of empathy develops for the male characters and allows the reader to see their marginalization. The Boatwright men are marginalized even though they are white men. Their marginalization is linked directly to class and their lack of legacy within the southern patriarchal discourse. The extremes of the Boatwright men illustrate that they may be many things and regarded as negative in many ways, but they were not rapists or child molesters. Allison, like Gibbons, deconstructs the southern patriarchal notion of men. Gibbons uses class and race while Allison uses class and gender to deconstruct and in many ways to invert the notion of the traditional southern class and gender prescriptions. Bone tells the reader that she adores her uncles. This adoration is multi-layered. She loves them for their outlaw nature but also for the truth that they bring to their lives and situations. The text does not make perfection or innocence out of the Boatwright men, but it illustrates the grittiness of truth that comes from violent outbursts and alcoholic dependencies. Bone often reflects that what the “men did was just what men did. Some days I would grind my teeth, wishing I had been born a boy” (23). Bone internalizes the value placed on male children and uses it as a construct in her own identity. She craves to be like her uncles and mimics them by wearing their old denim workshirts, “just the way they did when they worked on their trucks” (23). She reflects



that “my aunts treated my uncles like over-grown boys – rambunctious teenagers whose antics were more to be joked about than worried over – and they seemed to think of themselves that way too” (23). Bone describes fond memories of how “Earle and Nevil raked their calloused fingers through my black hair and played at catching my shirttail as I ran past them, but their hands never hurt me and their pride in me was as bright as the coals on the cigarettes they always held loosely between their fingers” (23). These men are gentle to Bone and love her. She is a sense of pride for them. The fact that Allison is able to provide the stark contrast between the public label of trash with the Boatwright men and the illusion of a social standing in Glen and his family is an inversion and reversal of the southern notion of acceptability and patriarchy. These contrasts make it possible to see and to understand why Bone holds her uncles in high standing and bears witness to the fallacy in Daddy Glen’s own life and the image of his family.

The rage at being reduced by other than these adored uncles causes Bone to react. Similar to Claudia in *The Bluest Eye* needing to deconstruct the notion of white beauty through dismantling her white dolls, Bone dismantles the notion of wealth and the middle class whiteness in the garden at Daddy Glen’s family’s home. She destroys the rose bushes by “put[ing] my hands out and trail[ing] them lightly along the thorny stalks and plush blooms, scooping buds off as I passed.... Trash steals, I thought, echoing Aunt Madeline’s cold accent, her husband’s bitter words, ‘Trash for sure,’ I muttered but I only took the roses. No hunger would make me take anything else of theirs” (103). The roses represent a visual beauty and lifestyle. Bone recognizes that the class differences and the resentment that arises as a result. She continues

I could feel a kind of heat behind my eyes that lit up everything I glanced at. It was dangerous, that heat. It wanted to pour out and burn everything up, everything they had that we couldn’t have, everything that made them think they

were better than us. I stood in the garden and spun myself around and around, pouring out heat and rage and the sweet stink of broken flowers. (103)

Like Claudia from *The Bluest Eye*, Bone is outside the norm. She is an outsider within the Boatwright clan and within her own nuclear family of her mother and sister. This outsider position, like Claudia's, stems from the realization that the notion of proper and standard does not incorporate their very existence. As a result, Claudia and Bone use their status as outsiders to attack that which views them as marginalized. Bone's mother attempts to minimize the gaze by dressing her children and directing them to behave, but she is powerless against her class position. Anney also feels the gaze that she is unfit and less than appropriate in comparison to the other Waddell wives. Glen does not have the skills to protect his new family; therefore, he allows them to be visually and verbally abused and reduced. Anney allows this to occur and tries to balance keeping her role as wife and saving her role as mother.

The choices and the burdens that Anney faces are foreshadowed throughout the novel. The initial and later choices of mothering become Bone's responsibility. This has been seen throughout the study in the mother-daughter dyad. The literary critic, Eunjoo Woo calls for more research and scholarly attention to mother-daughter relationships in the article "Breaking the Silence of Abuse and Poverty: Mother/Daughter Conflict and Abandonment in Dorothy Allison's *Bastard Out of Carolina*." Anney transfers her parenting to family members of her children, Bone in particular. In the beginning, she asks the girls' permission to be with Glen by saying, "You and Reese like Glen, don't you?" and causes Bone to nod as she reflects to herself "of course we liked him, I'd tell her, and watch her face relax so her smile came back" (33). Bone also reflects on the transformation that "Glen Waddell turned Mama from a harried, worried mother into a giggling, hopeful girl" after she had dated him for two years prior to

agreeing to marry him (35). Bone's and her mother's roles reverse since Anney becomes like a happy school girl and not a mother. The family around her has their doubts, but do not actively try to dissuade which means they also neglect Bone and Reese. The family expresses their doubt and caution, but Anney is too consumed by the romanticized notion of legitimacy.<sup>93</sup>

Anney makes several choices that help place her children, especially Bone, in harm's way. Anney does not make any arrangements for Bone and Reese the night the abuse starts when she goes into labor. There is no history of Anney ever leaving the girls alone with Glen during their two years of dating. That night of Bone being initially molested and raped appears to Bone several times as a flashback, and although Bone learns to suppress this memory, it shapes her thoughts: "Sex. Was that what Daddy Glen had been doing to me in the parking lot?" (63). Later, when Glen hits Bone, Anney stays even while his rage escalates and he takes his frustrations of inadequacy out on Bone who carries the mark of the devalued child. Bone describes her mother's attempted intervention as "'Glen! Don't do this, Glen!' Mama's hands beat on the bathroom door.... No. No. No. He was raging, spitting, the blows hitting the wall as often as they hit me. Beyond the door, Mama was screaming" (234). Anney's position behind the locked door mirrors her position in society and marriage – powerless to change. As the mother, Anney seeks to hide the proof of Bone's abuse and remains silent to her family. Her family sees the proof of the abuse, the bruises, and challenges the physical marks on Bone. The family intervenes and responds to the brutal beating. Uncle Nevil asks, "It true? That son of a bitch beat her bloody?," and Aunt Raylene responds, "Like a dog,... Child's striped all the way down to her knees." . . . "I'd kill him" (245). Like Denver in *Beloved*, Bone must become her

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<sup>93</sup> The family in *Bastard* resembles the community in *Beloved* who abandons Sethe and does not leap to act to warn her. This non-interference is also similar to the community's treatment of the female protagonists Pecola, Ellen, and Precious in the other texts.

own parent by carving out protection and resistance for herself. Bone assumes the role of other and must begin to self-nurture.

The mother-daughter bond grows thinner. In an effort to shield Bone from Glen, Anney, prior to the final rape, moves Bone to live with various family members and adjusts to life without her first-born. She tells Bone that “I never realized before how much you look like Alma....But when we were sitting on those steps together and you were standing in the yard, I saw it so clear. I saw what you’re gonna look like when you’re full grown. You’re gonna be as pretty as Alma was when she was a girl, prettier than you can imagine” (274). This is an important connection since Anney knows on a deeper level that she will relinquish her role as mother. Anney will not see Bone grow-up. Anney has missed so much of Bone’s life and development already that she asks, “What is it you think about all the time?,” and Bone responds, “Nothing much...Nothing I could explain” (274). Anney could have fully embraced Bone within her maternal bond by inquiring more from her daughter as does Bone’s surrogate Aunt Ruth Ann, but she does not; instead, she sums Bone up quickly:

You’re always so quiet, always watching...I can tell when you’re mad, you know. You get that storm-cloud look on your face, and you’ve had that enough lately.

The thing is, if you’re not mad, I can’t tell what’s happening inside you. You never look happy. You look like you’re waiting. What are you waiting for, Bone? (274)

Bone does not have the full vocabulary to articulate to her mother what she is waiting for. Anney’s behavior has forced Bone into the adult role more than once, and Bone has begun to accept that Anney no longer exists in the mother position of guider and protector for her. Anney

makes a conversation (that she could have led as the mother focusing on Bone) focusing back to herself when she begins to sound like she will cry with “You’re still mad at me, aren’t you? Not gonna tell me anything?” (274). Anney seems quite child-like in this interaction as if Bone, the child, is playing a game with her and being cruel. Anney does not acknowledge that Bone is the child in their relationship and has been placed in a delicate position. At the end of novel after Bone’s final abandonment, Bone introspectively connects her mother’s behavior back to losing her childhood when Bone was born with “Who had Mama been, what had she wanted to be or do before I was born? Once I was born, her hopes had turned, and I climbed up her life like a flower reaching for the sun“ (309). However, during the front steps interaction, Bone resorts to her usual camouflaging of her own emotions. She cries as she remembers, “Aunt Alma’s direct look this afternoon when she’d talked about loving Wade, about wanting to kill him. I didn’t understand that kind of love. I didn’t understand anything” (275). Bone wants to understand that kind of love that a mother could have for a child, but she understands that her mother does not have that kind of love for her.

Bone bravely tells her mother what she has been “waiting for.” She finally says, “I’m waiting for you to go home’ .... ‘I’m waiting for you to go back to Daddy Glen” (275). Anney responds to her daughter in the doubtful way that she has adopted since she met Glen. In a whisper of a response, she says, “You think I’m going to?” (275). What is troubling in this mother-daughter conversation is that Bone guides the conversation and has the courage to give the conclusion where as her mother attempts to coddle Bone around the subject and to use doubt as a way of pushing the reality away. When Anney asks Bone to sit by her and Bone refuses, Bone reveals that “Mama’s heart pound with fear – ‘Bone, I couldn’t stand it if you hated me”

(275). Bone directly responds to her mother's fear-filled proclamation with "I couldn't hate you...Mama, I couldn't hate you" (275). Again, Anney and Bone's roles are reversed.

Anney needs reassurance from Bone and needs for Bone to forgive her. She agonizingly pleads, "Oh God, Bone! I can't just go back, I can't have you hating me" (275). Bone maintains her composure, makes herself "speak with no intonation at all," and tells her mother that "I an't never gonna hate you...I know you love him. I know you need him. And he's good to you. He's good to Reese. He just ...' I thought a minute. 'I don't know'" (275). At the root of this is why Bone does not tell her mother the fullscale of Glen's abuse. Bone thinks earlier in the novel, "He never said 'Don't tell your mama.' He never had to say it. I did not know how to tell anyone what I felt, what scared me and shamed me and still made me stand, unmoving and desperate, while he rubbed against me and ground his face in my neck. I could not tell Mama. I would not have known how to explain why I stood there and let him touch me" (108-9). Bone describes the physicality of their role reversal. She observes that "When Mama spoke she sounded almost like a girl, unsure of herself and scared" (276). Anney continues to highlight her insecurities surrounding a social ideal. She says, "Maybe he needs to talk to somebody. Raylene said maybe he needed a doctor" (276). Anney again deflects responsibility from herself as mother and places Glen at the center. She does not dig deeper, and through Bone's gaze, she has accepted her position as the voiceless child in the situation to which Bone must bring to resolution. Her mother negates the true issue of Glen and attempts to appease Bone by inserting herself in the mother place as protector with "I won't go back until I know you're gonna be safe.' Mama's voice was determined. 'I promise you, Bone'" (276). This is the beginning of the end of the mother as protector. Bone recognizes that her mother is powerless to protect her, and therefore, she must protect herself. Bone says "I won't go back.' The words were so quiet, so flat, they

didn't seem to have come out of me. But once they were said, some energy seemed to come back to me" (276). This energy is Bone accepting her full position as the adult and her own authority as Anney tries to assert her role of mother with "I wouldn't make you, honey" to which Bone responds, "No. I know. It's not that, Mama. I know you wouldn't" (276). Anney's interactions have become predictable to her daughter. Her weakness for Glen has been reinforced by her failure to put Bone first. Bone views and accepts that her mother is powerless to protect her and even more powerless to leave Daddy Glen. Bone says,

When I spoke this time, my voice was strong, the words clear. "I know you'll go back, Mama, and maybe you should. I don't know what's right for you, just what I have to do. I can't go back to live with Daddy Glen. I won't. I could stay with Aunt Carr for a while or move in with Raylene. I think she'd be glad to keep me. But no matter what you decide, when you go back to Daddy Glen, I can't go with you." (276)

Bone firmly removes herself from her mother's "maternal realm" and protects herself by placing herself firmly with a surrogate whom she knows will embrace her and her presence. Anney is initially unable to accept this side of Bone and attempts to reel Bone back in with "'Bone. What are you saying to me?'...She was afraid" (276). Bone sees the fear in her mother and says, "I love you, but I can't think of anything else to do" (277). Bone's love mirrors her Aunt Alma's love that is too strong and enough to make one kill. When Anney cries, "Oh, God, what have I done?," Bone gently says, "Mama, don't. Please" (277). This is enough for them both. Their roles have been altered and will not return.<sup>94</sup> Bone has resolved to make her own decision to

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<sup>94</sup> See Deborah M. Horvitz argument on silence and Anney's metaphorically "unconscious" to the abuse. Eunjoon Woo details how Anney "gives being a 'woman' priority over being a 'mother'" (697). Also, J. Brooks Bouson details how a history of shame embedded in the family relationship stains Anney's role as mother and protector.

protect herself and her well-being. Anney's motherlove fails Bone. As Bone listens to her mother crying, she confesses that "My own eyes were dry. I didn't feel like I was going to cry. I didn't feel like I was ever going to cry again" (277). Bone acknowledges her numbness that results from saying good-bye to your own mother, the one who was suppose to protect you.<sup>95</sup> The two scenes are powerful as Bone exerts control not only over the situation but her own emotions while Anney is powerless and emotional over her selfishness to mother. Bone cannot foretell the future, but she knows she must adapt to life without her mother mothering her. Bone is resolved and at peace. Bone assumes the role of the mother since she knows that her mother is incapable of protecting her. The reality that a mother cannot think of anything else to do other than staying with a rapist is startling.

After Bone is brutally raped, Anney attempts to legitimize Bone one last time. The official stamped record of Bone's birth certificate has been Anney's cross to bear; however, a stampless birth certificate without the words "certified bastard" does not provide Bone with any deeper sense of belonging than the earlier description of Anney carrying her to the courthouse to try to legitimize her child. Anney's absence from Bone's development and her own fixation with legitimacy causes her to marginalize her daughter even more than Bone being a poor, white, southern girl who is also a part of the Boatwright clan. Within a small town, can a stampless birth certificate bring legitimacy? Bone laughs at her mother's "gift" because for Bone, in her reality in the small town, her mother's actions acknowledge and reinforce her disconnected legacy. Anney's continued withholding of Bone's birthfather further disconnects Bone and makes her "just" a Boatwright. Instead of giving Bone the gift of a heritage, Anney gives her the "bastardless" birth certificate still without any acknowledgment of a father which still makes her

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<sup>95</sup> Shawn Miller offers Anney's determination to remove bastard from the birth certificate and the various stories surrounding this task as a "real healing gift" (151).



a bastard. Shame surrounds Anney's physical leaving and fleeing of Bone who is like an orphan child. This night abandonment resembles Bone's birth when a surrogate must name Bone. Again, Anney surrenders Bone's wellbeing to another surrogate who will take responsibility. Throughout the novel, surrogates fill the critical spaces more than the mother. The mother should have been the one asking about the abuse, should have been the one leading the punishment of Glen for his brutal abuse of Bone, and should have been the one to stand guard at the hospital. Instead, after Glen's brutal rape of Bone, Aunt Raylene, Bone's surrogate, stands guard to protect Bone against the interrogation of the sheriff at the hospital.

Anney accepts her inability to protect her daughter and severs her maternal claim to Bone after providing her with her perceived gift of the birth certificate. In the final mother-daughter scene, Bone insists that Anney will be absent for the remainder of her life. Anney attempts to transfer her silence and shame to Bone. Her family has transferred this silence to the identity of Bone's birthfather. Bone's legacy is the rejection of her mother's concept of identity and legitimacy. Anney's fleeing is the result of her bearing witness to the horrific. She no longer claims Bone as her child; she surrenders Bone to those who can care. After Glen's brutal attack, Anney does not even give the nurse Bone's name. This is the second time that Anney does not "name" her child. She leaves Bone to fend for herself in the hospital. The brutal rape further reduces Bone – as the bastard child. Glen views Bone as a utility, and he literally and physically acts upon her and leaves her with no value (111, 73, 108). Glen strips and robs her. The mother witnesses the aftermath of her daughter's body as a violently acted-upon object. The rape by her stepfather – the one who should protect and offer legitimacy renders Bone even more valueless within the southern context of value and motherhood. Anney's abandonment mirrors the perceived valueless items that Bone collects from her Aunt Raylene's riverbank and reinforces

the history of children without any value. Glen further reduces Bone into the southern notion of trash. He uses her body to lust after and makes her undesirable even to her mother.

Prior to the marriage, the women in the family try to intervene by expressing their concerns in multiple ways. Anney's elderly aunt, Maybelle highlights her initial doubts in Glen, warning, "Yeah, Glen loves Anney. He loves her like a gambler loves a fast racehorse or a desperate man loves whiskey. That kind of love eats a man up. I don't trust that boy, don't want our Anney marrying him" (41). Aunt Alma, who tries to dismiss and dispel any doubts that family might have about Glen, responds impatiently to Maybelle,

But Anney loves Glen... That's the thing you out to be thinking about. She needs him, needs him like a starving woman needs meat between her teeth, and I an't gonna let nobody take this away from her. Come on, Maybelle, you know there an't no way to say what's gonna happen between a man and a woman. That an't our business anyway, that's theirs. (41)

To offer more reassurance, Alma embraces Maybelle's hands and says, "We just got to stand behind our girl, do everything we can to make sure she don't get hurt again" (41). This focus of standing by Anney means that the family is not initially looking out for the well-being of the children. There is an unspoken assumption that their mother, Anney, will protect them. The family does not understand that Anney will later resolve to seek literal shelter for her children to keep them away from an abusive Daddy Glen while maintaining her own role as wife. The family does not fully understand the complexities of Anney's desires for her marriage.

Anney's family knows that there is something wrong with Glen in the role of Daddy Glen. Happiness and laughter are replaced with darkness and caution as Anney initially shares with her family her plans to marry Glen. Anney tells her mother, "You just don't like the

Waddells” (37). In the South, family association is critical, and Anney tells her mother that “Glen loves me, loves my girls. Don’t matter if his family is stuck-up and full of themselves. Glen’s not like that” (37). Anney’s mother responds, “You don’t know what that boy is like, Anney. You just don’t know,” foreshadowing the evil behavior Daddy Glen has yet to reveal (37). The family’s concerns still exist after Anney and Glen have dated for two years; Anney’s maternal mother sees something is not right and worries. Anney pushes this worry away and sets out to defend her new position as wife by proclaiming, “I know he loves me” (37). Bone listens to this proclamation and describes her mother’s conviction that Anney is “certain that Glen Waddell loved her more than his soul and everything else would come from that. ‘I know enough,’ [her mother] told Granny” (37). Anney attempts to eliminate her mother’s fears in the clear sight of Bone and the other women in the family. However, Anney’s mother tells her daughter as an act of maternal protection that that “‘boy’s got something wrong with him.’” Granny turned to Aunt Alma for support. ‘He’s always looking at me out the sides of his eyes like some old junkyard dog waiting to steal a bone. And you know Anney’s the bone he wants’” (37). Anney’s sister Alma who will later become a surrogate to Bone plays an important role in Anney’s life. She helped raise Anney and functions as a mother-surrogate-sister; however, she does not reinforce Granny’s concerns and reduces the importance of Granny’s warning words to the terms of economics and value within the overall southern discourse by saying, “You just don’t think anybody’s good enough for Anney,...You want her to go on paying you to keep her girls everyday til she’s dried up and can’t imagine marrying again” (37).<sup>96</sup> The notion that Anney is the chosen and favorite among the girl children is reiterated. Anney later endures a

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<sup>96</sup> This echoes Ellen Foster’s mama’s mama’s interpretation of Ellen’s father, but now the marriage choice is reversed in a class context. Anney is of a lower-class status than Glen and holds her mother’s highest regard of all her children.

hysterectomy at the death of her son with Glen. The death of the son begins the strain of the maternal realm because Anney's value toward motherhood starts to shift. Anney's position in the Boatwright clan of women also starts to shift as her sisters come to her aid, but Anney's dependency to Glen grows stronger. The sisters' unsavory suggestion that Anney would stop using her mother as a care provider brings in another layer of interconnected financial dependency. Later when Glen and Anney experience difficult financial times during one of Glenn's periods of chronic unemployment, Anney borrows money from her brother Earle, which causes conflict in Glen's desired role of provider. Anney's paying her mother to watch the children is important as a marker that as a whole the Boatwrights struggle financially, and through later disclosed information, Granny struggles with her housing stability as well. Anney's mother watching Bone and Reese could have provided an additional layer of protection for the girls.<sup>97</sup> Also, Anney appears older in terms of what would be considered desirable as a southern wife, especially with two children with two different fathers, one illegitimate and one legitimate. These two fathers haunt the shadows of Anney's relationship with Glen. The mention of "drying up" foreshadows what becomes a reality after Anney loses Glen's male child, and she cannot have any more children (37). Prior to her marriage to Glen, Anney is pregnant with their child. She desires to get married quickly to give the child legitimacy of a father. The lack of a male child means the lack of an heir. Glen is already considered an outsider within the community and becomes even more so after his marriage to Anney because she belongs to the outlaw Boatwrights.

Bone struggles to reconcile Glen's double-nature and notes that it was Glen who claimed the role of father when in actuality he was anything but a protector to Bone. According to Bone,

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<sup>97</sup> Even though, Bone is the primary target of Daddy Glen's abuse, Reese also suffers as the other child in the house who often witnesses and hears the trauma first hand.

Daddy Glen has something in common with her family – his anger. She tells of her Granny complaining that “[Glen] can’t keep his temper’...but grinned in spite of herself. Everybody did. It was the one thing that saved Daddy Glen from the Boatwrights’ absolute contempt. The berserker rage that would come on him was just a shade off the power of the Boatwrights’ famous binges” (100). Bone describes these dual images of Glen as movie images that she replays in her head: “Daddy Glen screaming at me, his neck bright red with rage, and the other, impossible vision just by it, Daddy Glen at *his* daddy’s house with his head hanging down and his mouth so soft spit shone on the lower lip” (100). The contempt and shame that physically depicts Glen in the presence of his father is vocalized by his family. Bone over hears Daddy Glen’s brothers, Daryl and James, talking, “Look at that car. Just like any nigger trash, getting something like that...What’d you expect? Look what he married...Her and her kids sure go with that car” (102). Overhearing this and witnessing the gaze of the Waddell cousins who looked at Bone as if she “was some elephant in the zoo – something dumb and ugly and impervious to hurt” causes Bone to react and reaffirm that “That we’re not really family, just [the cousin’s] crazy uncle’s wife’s nasty kids? You’re no relative of mine, you’re not my people, I whispered to myself” (102). Bone recognizes that their gaze casts her as other and back into the southern trap of being poor. She sees her mother shifting closer to Glen. Glen, the black sheep of his own family, reeks of illegitimacy. He appears initially like a disguised knight who progresses into a dysfunctional abuser and father only in name. Bone, however, empathizes with Glen as she sees that he is just as fragmented and damaged as her own marginalized family. Within the family structure to Bone, his abuse is limited, it seems unlimited outside of it, to co-workers and outsiders with whom he needs no close relationship. The narration reveals that “People talked about Glen’s temper and his hands” (35). He “was a quiet sort who never fought in friendly

style.... He either gave you that slow grin or went all out and tried to kill you. The later earned him a little respect, Earle admitted” (38). Bone gazes at the anointed father and receives the bulk of his abuse for two reasons: her decreased value based on her standing as a female bastard child and herself as a reflection of Glen’s own dysfunction and lack of success and love.

Anney’s marriage to Glen creates a family life that contrasts the Boatwright family. Bone recognizes that “whenever we went to visit Daddy Glen’s people, that hunger would throb and swell behind my tongue until I found myself standing silent and hungry in the middle of a family gathering full of noise and food” (98). This silence and hunger is echoed in Glen’s relationship with the Waddell family and his desires for owning his new family. This is very different from the family bonds within the Boatwright family. The Waddell family fosters no warmth or genuine affection, but the Boatwright family does and thus challenges southern stereotypes about poor families. Bone also surmises, “It was not only Daddy Glen’s brothers being lawyers and dentists that made them so different from the Boatwrights. In Daddy Glen’s family the women stayed at home. His own mama had never held a job in her life, and Daryl and James both spoke badly of women who would leave their children to ‘work outside the home’” (98). Anney’s first husband, Lyle, had also wanted Anney to stay home. This class distinction makes Anney and her girls outsiders in Daddy Glen’s family’s eyes. Bone continues, “his father, Bodine Waddell, owned the Sunshine Dairy and regularly hired and fired men like my mother’s brothers, something he never let us forget” which shows the economic vulnerability of the Boatwright family but also reinforces Glen’s inherited arrogance (98). Bone also recognizes how “Glen had gotten more and more peculiar about his family, one moment complaining how badly they treated him and the next explaining it away” (99). This is also mimicked in Anney’s behavior. However, understanding Bone’s dual images of Daddy Glen cannot be explained

away. Anney explains to the girls that “your daddy wants his daddy to be proud of him...it about breaks my heart. He should just a soon whistle for the moon,” and Bone confirms that

It was true. Around his father, Glen became unsure of himself and too careful. He broke out in a sweat, and his eyes kept flickering back to his daddy’s face as if he had to keep watching or miss the thing he needed most to see. He would pull at his pants like a little boy and drop his head if any one asked him a question. (99)

This image of Glen seems out of place to Bone especially in comparison to her Boatwright uncles’ behaviors so that “it was hard to put that image of [Glen] next to the way he was all the rest of the time – the swaggering bantam rooster man who called himself my daddy” (99).

Anney’s brothers are also hesitant about Glen. Even though Earle introduced Glen to Anney, he is still cautious. Earle, who will be one of Bone’s surrogates, understands Glen’s excitement about a son but speaks cautiously of Glen to his brother Beau. After Glen leaves, Earle warns Bone’s Uncle Beau, “Never come between a man and his ambitions . . . Glen ever gets the notion that anybody messed up his chance of getting a boy child out of Anney, and he’s gonna go plumb crazy” (44). Nevil, another of the Boatwright men who later will hunt Glen after Bone’s rape says, “Me, I’m hoping Anney does give him a son, half a dozen sons while she’s at it. That Glen’s got something about him. I almost like him, but the boy could turn like whiskey in a bad barrel, and I’m hoping he don’t. Anney’s had enough trouble in her life” (45). Glen’s ambition is a male legacy. He desires to contribute in hopes of being recognized in his family. Anney’s family as a whole dislikes Glen’s family, the Waddells, but they are hopeful that the relationship with Glen will be good for Anney. The brothers, Earle and Beau, both agree that “Anney deserved an end to trouble in her life” (45). Their hope is short-lived, however, in terms of her children’s lives.

Glen's abuse can be viewed from multiple lenses, but in this discussion, I focus on the devaluing of the fatherless female child. The initial rape of Bone occurs when she is just five, during the delivery and death of Glen's male child. This is an instance when Anney does not plan ahead for her girls. She leaves them alone with Glen for the first time noted in the novel. Glen is still a near-stranger to five-year-old Bone and her younger sister, Reese. Even though he has dated Anney for two years, the girls were bystanders to the courting and relationship. Bone recalls the start of the initial rape: "Glen put his hand on my neck, and the stars seemed to wink at me. I wasn't use to him touching me, so I hugged my blanket and held still" (46). As Glen hums to the music and places Bone on his lap, she describes turning her "face to look into his eyes. There were only a few lights on in the parking lot, but the red and yellow dials on the radio shone on his face. He smiled, and for the first time I saw the smile in his eyes as plain as the one on his mouth" (46). This is important since up until this moment, his eyes have been described as lifeless and cold. Bone continues to describe how Glen rocks her with his hand on her panties and then fumbles with his britches; he is "talking again telling me Mama was going to be all right, that he loved me, that we were all going to be so happy. Happy. His hand was hard, the ridge of his wristbone pushing in and hurting me. I looked straight ahead through the windshield, too afraid to cry, or shake, or wiggle, too afraid to move at all" (46-7). Bone is confused and paralyzed. Glen talks about their "family" in stark contrast to the rape. He keeps telling Bone, "It's gonna be all right." Bone's fear keeps her where Glen places her. As he keeps rocking her, he is "breathing through his mouth and staring straight ahead" (47). Bone observes that "he was holding himself in his fingers. I knew what it was under his hand. I'd seen my cousins naked, laughing, shaking their things and joking, but this was a mystery, scary and hard" (47). Bone's language of the assault emphasizes Glen's inappropriateness:



His sweat running down his arms to my skin smelled strong and nasty. He grunted, squeezed my thighs between his arm and his legs. His chin pressed down on my head and his hips pushed up at the same time. He was hurting me, hurting me! . . . I sobbed once, and he dropped back down and let go of me...He kept laughing as he scrubbed his fingers against the blanket. (47)

Bone can only gaze at Glen and the empty look in his eyes as he is amused after the assault. Bone is reduced and objectified as something to be acted upon. Male children's value within culture, especially southern culture, is highly valued, and throughout the text, Bone analyzes the privilege and value that comes with maleness. There is not a moment of regret in Glen's act upon her young female body, yet, when he discovers the baby has died, he sobs to Bone and Reese, "My baby's dead. My boy. My boy" (48).

As predicted earlier by Beau, Nevil, and Earle, Glen's desires for a male child push him into a destructive place; however, the level of destruction is unanticipated. The loss of the baby and Anney's emergency hysterectomy highlight the need and emphasis Glen had to claim a family of his own. The novel details the unraveling of Glen as provider. One scene even suggests that Anney must resort to the unsavory acts of prostitution to bring in income to feed them (74). Glen's reduction becomes his rage against Bone.

Before the final, brutal rape, Daddy Glen remains desperate to control Bone, now twelve, and to continue to manipulate Anney. An uninvited Daddy Glen enters Aunt Alma's kitchen. Bone prepares for an afternoon picnic as a break from her caregiver duties of Aunt Alma who suffers a breakdown after losing one of her children and attempting to kill her husband, Travis. During Bone's time away from Daddy Glen's created structure, she lives with several family members who praise her potential that her mother does not fully recognize. She saw that she

could be different based on their support. Daddy Glen interrupts her peaceful afternoon. Bone describes Glen in his work cloths as he approaches the house, “his eyes looked bright and intent, his jaw tense...his voice was horse and deep” (280). He asks Bone a critical question: “Your mama an’t here, is she?” (280). After this question, he gazes at Bones and comments, “You’re getting bigger...Gonna be ready to start dating boys any day now. Getting married, maybe, starting your own family...Breaking some man’s heart just ‘cause you can” (281). Glen casts Bone into the heterosexual confines first of marriage and then as temptress in the role of manipulative seducer. Glen perceives that Bone is the source of his troubles; he tells Bone, “I talked to Anney, you know. She’s gonna come back. She promised, just needs a little time, time to make it up to you...That woman loves you more than I can understand. Needs time to work things out with you” (281). He demands for Bone to “tell her it’s all right... You’re gonna have to tell her you want us all to be together again” (281).<sup>98</sup> This again places Bone, the child, in the ownership position of the family’s demise. The assertion that Anney loves Bone more than he can understand echoes the same illogic that Bone must confront after the rape and then to the final abandonment by her mother in favor of the rapist Daddy Glen. The defiance in Bone saying “no” to moving back into Glen’s created family structure triggers a rage heretofore unknown in Daddy Glen. Bone describes herself as she absorbs Daddy Glen’s demand that they will all be together again, “my sweaty fingers were rolled into fists”; she whispers, “No . . . I don’t want to live with you no more. Mama can go home to you. I told her she could, but I can’t. I won’t” (281). The scene that follows is Bone’s resolved rejection of Daddy Glen in his assumed role as father. He angrily responds to her “no” by reasserting his ownership: “You’re

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<sup>98</sup> The novel suggests that Anney and Glen are currently separated but are in communication. These temporary separations have happened before, but usually Bone is with her mother. Now the separation has Bone with a family surrogate and Anney and Reese together.

not even thirteen years old, girl. You don't say what you do. I'm your daddy. I say what you do" (282). Bone repeats "no" three times and then says, "I'd rather die than go back to living with you" (282). She tells him "no" again and "I don't want to talk. I want you to leave" (282).<sup>99</sup> Bone recognizes as Glen "shook his head and went on smiling" that her dismissal is too much of an assertion, so she desperately attempts to appease him by saying, "I'll tell Mama . . . I'll tell her" (282). Bone tries to convince him that she will do as he desires to "tell [Anney] it's all right," but Glen, unconvinced, grabs her shoulders and shakes her and with a voice filled with rage says to her, "You don't want to make your daddy a sandwich?...You don't want to do nothing for me" (281, 282). As he shakes Bone and lifts her off the floor, Bone recollects his numerous violations,

I remember all the times he had lifted me to his chest, held me against him and run his hands over me, moaned while his fingers gouged at me. I had always been afraid to scream, afraid to fight. I had always felt like it was my fault, but now it didn't matter. I didn't care anymore what might happen. I wouldn't hold still anymore. (282)

This agency is a result of knowing and accepting the love and support from her surrogates. Bone understands that her mother has left her role as mother and assumed the role of wife, but Bone does not understand how far this rejection will go as she thinks that "I didn't care anymore what might happen" (282). In his attacks, Glen reduces Bone verbally and physically. His attempts to reclaim Bone as part of his family result in a contradiction of his distorted definition of family and the his need to be in control.

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<sup>99</sup> Eunjoo Woo further discusses the power of "no" in this exchange. For a more detailed discussion of Bone's voice, establishment of her own identity, and her courage to face the patriarchal authority, see the Woo article.

In the violent rape that immediately follows in Aunt Alma's kitchen, Glen seeks to exert a control over Bone to squelch any questions of his role as father in his distorted family legacy. Refusing to acknowledge his defeat, Glen exercises the only power he has – his sex. He has previously dismissed Bone as not wanting to do anything for him, and her defiance signals that nothing but extreme violence will reduce her enough to come back into the folds. He curses her, “You little cunt... *You goddam little bastard!*” (284). Bone attempts to exert her last form of control, saying, “Mama’s never gonna go back to you. I won’t let her. I hate you” (284). These words drive the action that becomes the horrific rape and lesson to Bone as Glen says: “I’ve prayed for you to die. Just leave us alone. If it hadn’t been for you, I’d been all right” (284); “You little cunt I should have done this a long time ago. You’ve always wanted it” (285); “‘You’ll learn.’ His words came in short angry bursts. ‘You’ll never mouth off to me again. You’ll keep your mouth shut. You’ll do as you’re told. You’ll tell Anney what I want you to tell her’” (285). Glenn attempts to again remove Anney from the primary role of mother and place her firmly again in the role of a wife who obeys her husband. In the wake of this exchange, Bone tries to defend herself with a butter knife and to fight back, but fails.<sup>100</sup> Bone does not have the physical strength to defend herself against her stepfather. As his penis assaults Bone, Glen dissociates his inability to control Bone through respect and physical violence with transferring his only remaining power and control to his literal sex. Glen attempts to use this logic, that it was a wild physical reaction, to alleviate himself from any responsibility. Bone curses Glen through God and the Bible, but still “[Glen] reared up, supporting his weight on my shoulder while his hips drove his sex into me like a sword” (285). The description of his rape is

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<sup>100</sup> See Patterson for a detailed discussion of the Bone’s weapon of the butter knife as a phallic image and symbolic ownership of the rape instrument.

a war image,<sup>101</sup> and Bone recognizes that she has resigned her position as daughter and now fights to save herself. She says, “All the time my left hand was flailing, reaching, scrambling for anything, something. Where was that knife? Where was Aunt Alma?” (285). Recognizing that she is alone and defenseless, this motherless child turns to God. Bone prays, “Please, God. Please, God. Let me kill him. Let me die, but let me kill him,” echoing the Boatwright uncles’ resolve (286). She recognizes that she might be killed, but her main wish is that he no longer lives. Bone’s resolve rests in self-sacrifice.

Daddy Glen’s patriarchal need to claim and to break Bone drives the violent rape, but when Anney witnesses the aftermath of her daughter’s rape, Bone is temporarily back in her mother’s maternal realm. As Anney’s motherlove surges, she attacks Glen, and Bone smiles, but all along conflicting thoughts go through Bone’s mind: “Would she think I wanted him to do that? Would she think I asked for it?...Please, God, let him die, let me die, let someone die” ... ”Don’t let him hurt my mama” (297). In spite of her own injuries and trauma, Bone still places priority on her mother’s safety. Based on her past relationship with her mother and her mother’s blind support of Glen, Bone is unsure of how her mother will view the situation. Bone recognizes that her mother has been repeatedly manipulated by Glen; nevertheless, Anney has repeatedly chosen her role as wife as more important than her role as Bone’s mother. Bone’s wish of death would be a relief for what potentially could be the outcome. The fear that her mother does not love her enough to protect her still remains deep in Bone’s heart.

In a temporarily surge of motherlove, Anney initially reacts to Glen calling him, “*You bastard! You monster!*” (287). Anney rejects Glen, commanding “*Don’t you touch me. Don’t*

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<sup>101</sup> See Patterson on more detailed discussion of the creation of rape novels, the difference between male and female writers in their portrayals, and how narratives are formed around metaphorical rapes detailing the perpetrator’s entry and exit of the victim’s physical space. Also, a detailed discussion of phallic weapons and how Bone’s body resembles an erect penis and therefore functions as a phallic weapon.

*you touch her!*" (287). Bone focuses her responsibility, thinking, "I had to get up, do something, get Mama out of there.... We had to get out of there, get away from him. I got to my knees" (287). Bone understands the power that Glen has over her mother. She understands how her mother has abandoned her in the past horrors of abuse in favor of staying with her husband Glen. She fears the same will reoccur. The description of Anney mothering Bone is painful; Bone describes her mother's actions:

Mama's hands were on me now, feeling for the damage... "Come on, honey," she cooed like I was a baby again. "I'm going to get you to a doctor." Her hands smoothed my blouse, knotted the torn pieces together over my belly, dragged my pants up my legs a little at a time, covering me up. (287)

The image of a mother covering her child and needing to piece her together hurts. This covering of Bone's body is loving but ironic in the presence of a "face white and stricken" Glen, the abuser (287). Throughout this moment in the maternal realm, Bone wants to leave the presence of Glen not only for her own safety but more importantly for her mother's. As Glen asks Anney to wait, Bone reports that "[Mama] wasn't listening. That's good, don't stop. Keep moving, Mama. Get us out of here" (287). Bone's inner conversation with her mother is filled with coaching and encouragement. As Glen's begging gets more intense, it begins to penetrate Anney's maternal realm. Glen draws her back into her prescribed position as the dutiful wife with him (287). Bone sensing this shift again, tries to direct her mother subconsciously with "Get out, we've got to get out of here. You don't know, Mama, you don't understand" (288). This reverse mothering is needed since Anney appears to surrender all reason in the presence of her husband. Witnessing this transformation back to Glen, Bone anguishes that "For a moment then I wanted to be dead already, not to have to look into Mama's face ever again, and not his.

Never his, never again” (287). Anney provides a false rescue to Bone. Anney’s resolve of choosing Bone is short-lived just as Bone had feared.

The last two images of her mother are filled with abandonment. The first is Glen’s final assault on Anney’s psyche as she tries to get Bone medical attention, and he pleads, “Anney, please! I didn’t mean it. I went crazy. I went crazy. Honey, listen to me! . . . Anney, you know how I love you. I wouldn’t have hurt her, darling, but I went crazy. I just went crazy” (289). When Glen’s crying does not work, a shift occurs. His voice becomes “very calm and very soft”; he says, “Kill me, Anney. Kill me” (290). As Glen begs that he cannot live without Anney, Bone watches as her mother slowly surrenders her place as protector of her daughter to protector of Glen. Her mother absorbs Glen and embraces him in his pain. Anney becomes oblivious to Bone and signals the ultimate abandonment of her role as mother and her full embrace of her role as wife. Anney no longer hears Bone’s whispers, and Anney registers a “face empty and strange” for Bone as she sees Anney’s “fingers on Glen’s shoulders, . . . the white knuckles holding him tight” (289). “My mouth closed over the shout I would not let go” (291). The mother’s betrayal is heard loudly and clearly in Bone’s revelation of watching her mother hold Glen:

Rage burned in my belly and came up my throat. I’d said I could never hate her, but I hated her now for the way she held him, the way she stood there crying over him. Could she love me and still hold him like that? I let my head fall back. I did not want to see this. I wanted Travis’s shotgun, or my sharp killing hook. I wanted everything to stop, the world to end, anything, but not to lie bleeding while she held him and cried. (291)

Bone is engulfed in the ultimate abandonment that she describes as “a wave of night and despair waiting for me,” and I “followed it out into the darkness” (291). This horrific day ends with Bone remembering that “Mama had been there, had carried me in from the car and made the doctor look at me right away. The nurse took me out of her arms, and Mama stepped back, her bloody knuckles still outstretched, touching my cheek lightly” (294). Anney gets Bone to the hospital for medical attention, but Bone quickly discovers when she “looked back for Mama” that “she was gone. Before she could give her name or mine, she had disappeared” (294). Anney scurries away from the outside institution of the hospital. The last time Anney took Bone to the hospital for wounds due to Daddy Glen’s abuse, Anney was berated by the doctor.<sup>102</sup> Anney leaves Bone alone to navigate and to disclose her own trauma to strangers. This allows Bone finally to draft her story for the outside world. As Bone begins to absorb that her mother was gone, she also keeps “wondering where Mama had gone. What had happened to Daddy Glen? I didn’t remember the ride from Alma’s place, didn’t remember Mama saying anything to me. Had she told them what had happened? Did anyone know? Where was Mama, and why wasn’t she with me?” (295). This last painful question will not be answered by Bone until the last time she ever sees her mother at the safe haven of her surrogate Aunt Raylene.

Anney comes to see Bone at Raylene’s home after her release from the hospital. Aunt Raylene is Bone’s final main surrogate, providing a safe place for Bone. She is also the family member who claims Bone from the hospital after the brutal rape. Anney’s appearance is almost like a violation of this sacred place for Bone. The imagery used to describe her intrusion is almost parallel to the images that were used to describe the description of Daddy Glen

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<sup>102</sup> Previously in the novel, Anney took Bone to the emergency after one of her brutal beatings from Daddy Glen. Her collarbone had been injured from his physical abuse, and the young doctor who was considered a community outsider scolds Anney. Bone often incorporates this doctor into her revenge fantasies about her stepfather. (*Bastard* 113)



approaching Aunt Alma's house for the final attack. Anney appears suddenly, stands "motionless in one of her old short-sleeved dresses, her arms crossed under her breasts and her head up. She was looking at me from slitted eyes. My heart raced at the sight of her" (305). This echoes back to Daddy Glen's eyes that "looked bright and intent, his jaw tense" (281). This odd folding of personalities reveals that Bone knows on a deep level that her mother will not be returning to her. The difference in this situation is that Aunt Raylene, the chosen surrogate, can bear witness to the abandonment and ultimately the abuse, unlike the Aunt Alma who by now is considered mad and can no longer protect anyone, not even herself. Bone now has "no" mother. The absence of another family and father becomes more evident after Anney relinquishes her role as mother.

Unlike her sister, Reese, Bone has no family other than the Boatwrights. Bone has no stories about her birth father to comfort her. The information that Bone does get about her birthfather makes him a reduction in the terms of what a father can and should be. Bone admits that "It was Granny who told me what a pissant he was; told me he lived up near Blackburn" (25). When Bone asks her mother if she looks like her father, she rationalizes to herself that "It wasn't even that I was so insistent on knowing anything about my missing father. I wouldn't have minded a lie. I just wanted the story Mama would have told. What was the thing she wouldn't tell me, the first thing, the place where she had made herself different from all her brothers and sisters and shut her mouth on her life" (31). For Bone, Anney's story could be part of her birthright, a mother-created acknowledgment. Though Anney had shut this part of her life out, often her customers from the restaurant would ask Bone, "'You're Anney's girl, an't you?' ...'Your little sister looks just like her, don't she? You must look like your daddy.' I nodded carefully" (33). Outsider projections on Bone's identity leave her blindly to accept that she must

look like her father but not knowing his identity further reduces Bone. Her lacking a paternal legacy is viewed as a reduction in the relationship of Bone and Daddy Glen. The role of father is an illusion in Bone's life.

The absence of a father complicates Bone's relationship with Glen. It is ironic that Bone refers to him as Daddy Glen. The diminutive and affection that "Daddy" should exude is not evident in the relationship between Bone and Glen. It was hoped by Anney and Glen that he would assume the role of the father. Anney claims prior to dating Glen that "I need a husband...He'd make a good daddy...a steady man" (13). Assumption for the role of father was easier when it came to Reese since she had a father who had died. This made Anney acceptable in the sense that this child was a child produced in wedlock, and Lyle was of respectable southern stock.<sup>103</sup> Lyle also did not want Anney to work, and she refers to him as a manchild (6). This increases Reese's value in the southern paradigm of womanhood. On the contrary, Bone when a child, was brought to the courthouse to witness her mother's attempts to rid her birth certificate of the bastard stamp. Bone has limited exposure to family structures outside of the Boatwrights and the brief and problematic encounters with the Waddells.<sup>104</sup> Her interactions are shaped by her birth and social positions and her abuse festers under the weight of this reality. These positions also complicate her mother's role to assume a new husband and to join the traditional paradigm. Bone becomes the outsider within her mother's maternal realm.

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<sup>103</sup> A man of acceptable southern stock would not rape a child. There is no mention of Lyle's relationship with Bone and no mention of resentment for her presence. Anney says, "He loves Bone, he really does...wants to adopt her when we get some money put by" (6). There is no mention made of Glen seeking to adopt either of the girls. This reinforces his paternal value on his "seed."

<sup>104</sup> In the novel, there is one "friend" that Bone embraces and often acts as a surrogate for, the albino, Shannon Peal. Like most girls their age, Shannon and Bone often fight. Even Shannon Peal calls Bone a bastard in their big fight prior to Shannon's death. Shannon's section has been read as a reprieve for Bone and for the reader to consider that Bone has time to see other identities. The Peal family provides another illustration of family life in a small town. They provide an outlet to Bone's religious desires as they travel and support gospel concerts.

Bone on the other hand, once Anney marries Glen, must rename herself and seek out her own forms of protection and mothering. The reader witnesses early on how Bone must interject herself within spaces where mothering can take place such as her hair being combed or when she is shelling peas with her grandmother. Her grandmother tells her “‘Pretty ugly’ ...her fingers sliding across the back of my head, untangling my hair and lifting it up off my neck. ‘Almost pretty. Oh, you’re a Boatwright all right, a Boatwright for sure’” (21). As Bone is held by her grandmother, she reflects that “I rocked myself against her, as happy and safe as [Bone just witnessed] Little Earle had felt with her teeth on his belly.” (21). These examples within the maternal sphere represent places of safety. These images mirror Ellen when her foster mother washes her hair or Pecola when Claudia’s mother, Mrs. MacTeer, bathes her after her period is first discovered, or in the next chapter, Precious as Ms. Rain rubs Precious’s back as she cries. These moments within the various novels denote safety and nurturing spaces that are provided by the community of women. By interjecting herself in these spaces, Bone seeks to belong not only to the Boatwright clan but also to the notion of being claimed and being a daughter. Unlike her half-sister Reese, Bone wears the dark value of illegitimacy. She does not belong really to anyone.

As in the other novels in this study, milk is constantly linked to motherhood and sustenance. The hunger to belong follows many of the characters within the text. Nurturing abilities also emerge in the novel. Symbolically, Anney becomes milkless after her emergency hysterectomy and transfers her remaining nurturing capabilities to maintaining her role as wife, not to her vulnerable daughter. There are numerous references of other characters providing a nurturing and an engaging environment for Bone which firmly secures her in the position of a child. This is important because Bone mothers and nurtures Anney and assumes the adult

position in the mother-daughter dyad. Bone has been displaced and then replaced with Glen. Anney deals with her daughter in a passive way while Bone's surrogates become the active agents in her life. Through their own marginalized state, they are able to provide her with a loving and nurturing presence. The surrogates block the outside world. The traditional authorities in the community are not allowed fully to help Bone due to the shield that the Boatwright family surrogates put around her.

Three outside entities that mirror the surrogates within the actual family structure could have intervened to a greater degree in Bone's defense – her school, the doctor at hospital, and the sheriff.<sup>105</sup> Unlike the family, the entities and their representatives do not fully embrace Bone as a child. Through her own lens and descriptions, a mistrust of the authorities exists. Also, the fear of judgment lingers as these representatives view her family as poor and as outlaws. Bone wonders if this is a reality that she can escape since no one can see her outside of the Boatwrights' dysfunction. It is as if no one can save her because she is poor, and people desire to erase her. Unlike in the other subject novels, there is no real influence of the social services or a school social worker tracking Bone as she transfers to various schools. Part of Glen's manipulation is moving the family further away from Anney's family. Due to this disconnect, Bone creates an alternative identity in each one of her school situations with little ramification or questioning. These traditional institutions elude a space in Bone's life potentially to shield her or to intervene on her behalf. She feels that they will judge her as "a them" or "an other." Bone watches as the young emergency room doctor, for example, berates her mother (113). This is important because someone tries to intervene, but he is silenced by one of the nurses who knows about the family's history. The young doctor's method might have not been the most

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<sup>105</sup> A young intern at the hospital when Bone has a broken collarbone, and the sheriff at the hospital after Bone has been brutally raped by Glen.

appropriate, but his anger signals to Bone that her abuse was excessive and inappropriate. Regardless, Bone uses the image of his rage in her revenge fantasies which act as a form of empowerment and active resistance for her (116). A distrust of outside authorities exists in *Bastard* as it will later be witnessed in *Push*. There is no record or notice of the doctor pushing further and reporting the abuse. He just aggressively expresses it and becomes a false potential surrogate for Bone, but a nonetheless powerful image that helps her cope in her own abuse.

All the girls, Pecola, Ellen and as we shall read, Precious, in the focus texts employ various methods of coping. Pecola cannot make eye contact and desires invisibility, Ellen shakes, and, as we shall read, Precious urinates on herself in school, Bone and her sister Reese masturbate to self-soothe against their abuse (174-176). Though the girls do not discuss their after school and nightly pleasures, they make sure that no one interrupts this time. By offering each other a safe haven, they provide themselves with an escape. Research has shown that often children who live in an abusive environment act out in various sexual acts.<sup>106</sup> Bone's masturbation is both resistance and empowerment.<sup>107</sup> Violence has become such a part of her life that Bone is deeply trapped between understanding of the violence and the need to be sheltered from it. She often masturbates while incorporating images of violence into her fantasies which become moments of resistance where she reenacts one of the most brutal beating scenes with Daddy Glen (116). Part of her response to his abuse in these fantasies is not responding by tears or screams. Bone transfers these fantasy images to her actual abuse and draws upon them as a point of power. Outside of her introspective point of resistance through her

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<sup>106</sup> For additional research regarding children of sexual abuse behavior patterns, see J. Brooks Bouson, Rosario Champagne, Deborah Horvitz, and Eunjoo Woo

<sup>107</sup> Eunjoo Woo suggests that the use of masturbation brings her back to her maternal realm and provides Bone with "maternal comfort" (695). I disagree with this assertion since Bone does not associate her love of her mother with guilt but is conflicted by the pleasure and guilt that arises from her act of masturbation (Allison 253).

fantasies, Bone recognizes her powerlessness in preventing and ending her abuse. Her mother, unable to protect her, proves useless as she beats on the other side of the locked bathroom door during Glen's abusive tirades. Space as a physical marker remains important. The actual site of the bathroom represents a trinity of symbolism in that Bone finds solace, pain, and retribution in the physical bathroom space. In the other three novels, the kitchen is the space where the most dramatic trauma occurs, but in *Bastard*, the bathroom is the most complex space of Bone's journey. The bathroom provides solace for Bone as she is able to take baths which she loves, and use this time as a safe isolated space away from her traumatic life. These places are often accompanied with images of renewal and baptism. The ritual of bathing is not only private time for her but a cleansing-spirit experience. She uses the escape of bathing like her religious epiphanies that she experiences while attending the revivals.

Bone connects with the gospel music heard at the revivals and uses it as another source of solace. Throughout the text, Allison also incorporates Christian symbolism fish images and God-like images. Often Bone's images and visions of revenge are filled with religious images of revelations with fire as the image symbolizing her retribution and revenge. This divine justice which is often executed in Bone's dreams and moments of masturbation is also reflected in images and feelings that she gets from gospel music. However, like Ellen Foster, Bone learns of the duality of gospel music as well as of the church and that salvation does not rest within the folds of the church. Her bathroom space of solace, however, has a duality similar to that which she discovers in religion. The bathroom also becomes a key point of pain because in their many different homes, Glen locks her in the small bathroom space and abuses her. Bone attempts to create other spaces of self-nursing and self-nurturing which her mother's or her stepfather's betrayal often violates. Ironically, the bathroom where she finds self-peace, often becomes her

torture chamber/crucifix. The small space often finds her wedged in with her abuser and her mother banging on the locked door. The site of trauma becomes a space that she re-appropriates for her own healing. Her revelations regarding her life often occur during her baths within this same space.

Lastly, the bathroom as a larger place-symbol ironically functions as a space of discovery and retribution. Though not in her own home, during a family gathering, Bone's previous contained haven and punishment chamber transforms into a place of confession and disclosure. This last use of the space remains critical for the active intervention of the surrogates because Bone's marks of abuse are discovered in the bathroom. Salvation for Bone will be found in her true protectors, her surrogates. The discovery by her Aunt Raylene during the funeral for her namesake, Aunt Ruth, triggers protection from her other surrogates. The complexity of the bathroom space allows Bone to re-appropriate and re-create the original haven with the help of her surrogates. She is able to take the physical space from a point of pain and abuse to utilize it as an active point for escape. The space is transformed and re-framed as a point of discovery and ultimately escape and justice through family intervention for Bone.

Bone accepts her position in the rugged Boatwright women's clan. Her direct acknowledgement results from her maturing age and the support or some sort of connection to her only family. She knows alternative models exist, and she is not as isolated as are Pecola, Ellen, or Precious. Her aunts and uncles provide her with praise and positive reinforcement. In her interactions with them, they assume the roles of adults even when Bone is placed in a caregiver position. These alternative models help Bone see that her abuse is wrong. After her mother witnesses the aftermath of the rape and caters to her "child" Glen, Bone acknowledges that "[m]y Mama had abandoned me, and that was the only thing that mattered" (302). Anney

does not give Bone the legitimacy that a mother's love can bring nor does she disclose her father's identity to provide Bone with a sense of belonging. Although Anney tells Bone that "You're my pride, Do you know? You and your sister are all I really have, all I ever will have," she does not fully demonstrate this in her relationship with Bone's abuser Glen (94). The surrogate Aunt Raylene reinforces a sense of legitimacy and value for Bone and also for her sister Anney. Aunt Raylene argues, "Ah, Anney, Bone's the best you got, works like a dog, she does, just like you and me" (188). Even with the family praise, Bone recognizes her mother's inability to truly see her; however, Bone sees that her mother's transformation will forever alter the maternal bond. The only people who give and see value and legitimacy in Bone are the surrogates who are undesirable in the larger community: her grandmother, her Aunt Ruth, and ultimately, her Aunt Raylene. Uncle Earle, the only male character who consistently plays an active role in Bone's life becomes a father-figure. He understands women and is the only Boatwright man whose wife leaves, taking away his fatherhood by taking his daughters. Since he does not have his daughters to protect, he offers protection to Bone whom he shelters. Ironically, he brings Glen into his sister Anney's life. He, along with various family members, who repeatedly emphasizes that Anney has "had enough trouble in her life," becomes a foreshadowing element in the novel (45).

Throughout the initial section of the novel, the family has borne witness to Anney's numerous disappointments with men and relationships. What the family does not truly acknowledge or understand is that Anney has a love affair with the traditional southern familial discourse, which could bring her safety and standing. Anney incorporates this into her life as part of a fantasy that *becomes* attainable with Glen. This is similar to Pauline's fantasy life and love with whiteness in *The Bluest Eye*. Unlike Pauline in *The Bluest Eye* and the other mothers, Mary



in *Push* and the nameless mother in *Ellen Foster*, Anney is a member of a strong familial community. Though the family as a whole is considered outsiders, they are a fairly close-knit clan. Anney is their pedestalized southern daughter similar to the initial standing of the nameless mother in *Ellen Foster*. Anney's child out of wedlock begins her fall in the southern discourse, and as a result, she remains determined to raise her daughters into some sort of appropriate social standing, initially, envisioning Glen as a good potential father (13). The burden for Anney is her devalued position within southern culture. Anney has models for mothering as well as a support system if she had wanted to leave Glen. This support system negatively impacts Anney's relationship with Bone since, ultimately, Anney knows that she can leave Bone with her family and that Bone would not become part of the institution of social services like Precious Jones or *Ellen Foster*. Anney uses her family as scapegoats. Unlike the protagonists of the other novels, Bone has an extended family that is present to assist and to serve as surrogates. This is also one of the reasons for limited outside institutional intervention in this novel as oppose to the others.

Three characters become the main surrogates to Bone – Aunt Ruth, Uncle Earle and Aunt Raylene.<sup>108</sup> Their positions within the text as well as in society leave them as marginalized people. Their positions and relationships fragment their own identities, and suggest each of these characters experiences abandonment in some shape or fashion. These three surrogates act as catalysts in Bone's life and provide intervention in her abuse and trauma. Unlike in the other novels analyzed here, Bone's surrogates emerge from her nuclear family.

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<sup>108</sup> Several critics highlight the importance of the family structure but none formally embraces Aunt Ruth, Uncle Earle and Aunt Raylene as surrogates for Bone. Miller highlights how Bone fails to see what Uncle Earle's behavior costs him (149). King suggests that Raylene offers Bone the "elusive magic" she craves by teaching Bone how to create a story outside of hate (134). Bouson describes Raylene as a "mother substitute" (117). Horvitz discusses how Raylene provides Bone with an art of seeing value in trash and how her lesbian identity provides Bone with a "lifesaving alternative to the dangers of heterosexuality" (253).

When a mother knows she is powerless to protect, do we fault her when she tries to locate potential surrogates? Throughout *Bastard Out of Carolina*, Anney seeks to establish a new home for Bone. When she realizes that she can no longer protect Bone from Daddy Glen, Anney seeks to find safe havens for Bone and Reese. The family witnesses and then often becomes the place of safety and intervention in this harrowing tale of abuse and trauma. Bone herself admits that “I sat in the dark, trying not to think about anything, especially not about Daddy Glen or Mama or how much of an exile I was beginning to feel” like (134). Bone’s namesake surrogate, Aunt Ruth, dies, and Aunt Raylene becomes the logical main surrogate, and then Uncle Earle, a male, homeless, wandering bachelor, begins to parent Bone.

The first chapter of the book outlines Aunt Ruth’s pivotal relationship in Bone’s life, and it is not until Aunt Ruth is near the end of her life that she reconnects with Bone who has taken the role of Aunt Ruth’s caretaker. Bone opens her narrative with “I’ve been called Bone all my life, but my name’s Ruth Anne. I was named for and by my oldest aunt, Aunt Ruth. My mama didn’t have much to say about it, since strictly speaking, she wasn’t there...she didn’t wake up for three days, not till after Granny and Aunt Ruth had signed all the papers and picked out my name” (1, 2). Bone justifies her naming with “Mama had always promised to name her first daughter after her oldest sister, and Aunt Ruth thought Mama’s child should just naturally carry Mama’s name since they had come so close to losing her” (2). Aunt Ruth also served as a surrogate to Anney. Anney reflects after Ruth’s death that “Truth is, she [Ruth] just about raised me. Daddy was gone by then, and Granny was always running after the boys or your aunt Alma, who was always getting herself in some trouble or the other. Ruth was the only one that was there for me, that I could talk to. Once she told me that she liked to pretend I was hers” (230). This revelation makes the earlier quotation more meaningful since Bone’s naming is a tribute to

Aunt Ruth. Also this aunt thought that she would never have babies (230). Aunt Ruth continues to assume the same dependable role for both Anney and her child whom Anney seeks to protect. Bone and Ruth offers Bone literal shelter from the abuse of Daddy Glen. Ruth offers Anney mental shelter to maintain her own role as wife. This arrangement helps to maintain Anney's own legitimacy within southern society.

Bone's initially positive feelings of displacement begin to dissolve as she interacts with her surrogates. But when Bone is deposited by her mother at yet another relative, Bone wonders if her "main purpose was to provide Aunt Ruth with an audience, someone who would nod at appropriate moments and not interrupt" (121). Although, terminally ill, her Aunt Ruth bestows a sacred space in Bone's life. Bone has always found comfort in her family's stories, but admits, "for the first time in my life, I couldn't think about all those old stories. All I could think about was going home. When was Mama going to take me home? Did I want to go home?" (122). Her aunt embraces and asks Bone, "Well, can we talk to each other or not?" (123). This lets Bone know she is desired and important. Like Ellen Foster, Bone escapes by reading books. Now with her Aunt Ruth, she has the space and opportunity to engage with a mother-figure. The surrogate who questions Bone the most closely is Aunt Ruth. Her aunt interprets men's childish ways telling Bone – "Men, are just little boys climbing up on titty whenever they can. Your mama knows it as well as I do. We all do. And Glen'...She was still for a minute, her eyes moving around the room as if she were looking for something. They came back to me" (124). In this moment, Aunt Ruth's motherlove goes into action. She pulls Bone to her tighter and asks, "Bone, has Daddy Glen ever...well...touched you? . . . Has he ever hurt you, messed with you?... Down here, honey. Has he ever hurt you down there?" (124). Aunt Ruth, who witnesses Bone's birth and unlike anyone else in the family, directly questions Bone if she is being abused.

Prior to this question, Bone is within the safety of the maternal realm of her aunt, intimacy for which Bone has longed, yet Bone cannot disclose the truth to Aunt Ruth because of her caregiver position.<sup>109</sup> This abrupt and truthful scene is critical since it comes from the unexpected Aunt Ruth Ann. Bone is too uncomfortable to tell the truth to her Aunt Ruth, and Bone is too wedded to her role as protector for Anney – she is like many abused children who are confused about the abuse and conversely need to protect a parent. Anney’s and Bone’s role reversals continue the demise of their relationship.

Bone assumes another role reversal by nursing and mothering her Aunt Ruth. She describes her aunt’s bird-like qualities when she appears ill, agitated, and weak. “Now she talked continuously, moving her fingers in constant little jerking motions and shifting her eyes around all the time as if she were afraid she might miss something. Bird-like, she lifted her head and craned to see out the windows” (121). Bone witnesses this transformation of her aunt who becomes more talkative and animated during her illness. This new person is in direct contrast to Bone’s previous “Aunt Ruth” as “the slow, soft-spoken aunt, the quiet one who thought a lot and said little” (121). Previously, Aunt Ruth was almost invisible. This is the invisibility that Bone wishes she can embrace. Bone comments, “She had grown so thin that I probably could have lifted her all by myself, though she would never allow me to try. But the greatest change was in how she moved and talked” (121). As her abuse progresses, Bone begins to mimic her surrogate’s previous mute-like behavior and becomes less vocal and Ruth’s later bird-like actions until we witness her in the final scene of the novel. Aunt Ruth’s frail-like nature evolves into a sparrow-like persona with her strong spirit resembling her brother Earle. Indirectly, the other

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<sup>109</sup> A later statement from Bone also clarifies why she felt that she could not tell Aunt Ruth the truth. Bone’s silence is weaved around her allegiance and desire to shield her own mother and not focusing on her personal safety and well-being. Bone places herself in the role of martyr and sacrificial lamb to her mother’s selfishness.

women express their concerns about the stability and intentions of Glen, but unlike Bone's surrogates, their intentions and focus tends to be on Anney. Not only does Aunt Ruth question Bone directly, she also questions Anney directly about her plan for mothering and protecting Bone.

Aunt Ruth attempts to interject nonjudgmental concern into Anney's arrangement. She tells Anney, "No, listen to me. I an't going tell you to leave him. He's your husband, and it's clear he thinks the sun rises and sets in your smile. I an't sure whether he's crazy jealous of Bone like Granny thinks, or if it's something else. But he an't never gonna be easy with her, and she an't never gonna be safe with him" (132). However, Anney's excuses become commonplace because she repeatedly defends him with "anybody can see how Glen got bent, what his daddy's done to him. I an't never seen a boy wanted his daddy's love so much and had so little of it. All Glen really needs is to know himself loved, to get out from under his daddy's meanness," and "It was like looking at a little boy, a desperate hurt little boy. That's when I knew I loved him" (132,133). Anney tries to deflect Glen's issues on his generational family dysfunction but does not examine the generational modeling or example she is setting for Bone and Reese. She establishes a pattern with man-children with Lyle. The family intervention comes too late and even they could not have predicted the truly horrific that is the truth behind Bone's cries of "Daddy Glen hates me" (122). Aunt Ruth agrees, "You're right, girl. Glen don't like you much. He's jealous, I think...There's a way he's just a little boy himself, wanting more of your mama than you, wanting to be her baby more than her husband" (123). Bone wants protection and for her mother, she says, "to love me enough to leave him, pack us up and take us away from him, to kill him if need be" (107). The child's desire for their mother to protect them and to desire them above all things is not a foreign concept. This lesson Bone will later learn from her

other surrogate's experience. Anney is blinded by the true harm and danger in which she places Bone.

Anney seeks to return Bone to a nuclear family structure with Daddy Glen. She removes Bone from Aunt Ruth's protection under the guise that Reese wants her sister back. This reasoning is problematic and not realistic. Bone's presence serves as a distraction to keep Glen away from Reese who is the valued child with a grandmother who would act as an active ally to protect her granddaughter at all costs. Regardless, Bone acts as a buffer to potential abuse of Reese. The mothers in the other texts function in isolation with no family. Anney actively engages initially in her mothering, but as her relationship with Glen progresses, he moves the newly formed family unit further away from her familial support system into isolation. Anney functions in reverse and causes her children to do so as well, especially Bone. Anney begins to alter her mothering model to suit her newly acquired husband, Glen. Glen desires to be the dominate male figure for his newly formed family.

Uncle Earle becomes the most consistent and protective male role model for Bone. Within the Boatwright context as described to the reader by Bone, Uncle Earle is a good man who loved his family but knows what it feels like to suffer great loss. Both he and Raylene have suffered losses of love surrounding children. The mothers involved in these losses remove them from the situation. Uncle Earle, who does not represent the traditional Boatwright man since his wife leaves him and takes his children, provides some positive reinforcement to Bone as a father-like figure. During a lively discussion, Aunt Ruth apologizes to Uncle Earle for her low remarks and actions by saying, "I know how you miss your girls. Know how you ache for what is gone. Don't think I don't hurt for you, baby. Don't think I don't know how you hurt" (129). Out of all the Boatwright men, Uncle Earle interacts with Bone the most and brings empathy and brute

force to his role as a surrogate. His brute force against Glen mirrors the rage and savage beating that Bone endures. Uncle Earle along with his brothers literally enact the physical pain and revenge that Bone only imagines in her fantasies. This empowers Bone and is positive since Bone is able to absorb strength and power through her uncles' actions. Uncle Earle is not a saint; he is described as "Uncle Earle was my favorite of all my uncles. He was known as Black Earle for three counties around. Mama said he was called Black Earle for that black black hair that fell over his eyes in a great soft curl, but Aunt Raylene said it was for his black black heart. He was a good-looking man, soft-spoken and hardworking" (24). Bone, often fashions herself through Uncle Earle's eyes, seeks strength and defiance as she tries to live against the rage of Daddy Glen. Bone actively records his defense of her and provides gentler images of this abandoned man. For example, when Uncle Earle ends up serving time in the county farm, Bone ventures to see him with her other surrogate Aunt Raylene. This environment for Bone to see her uncle is different and the image of him is new. Bone describes her Uncle Earle's shaved head as "He looked different without his long black hair, harder and older. Only his eyes were the same, dark and full of pain" (216). His loss of his "thick wavy hair" results from him attempting to castrate a fellow inmate (215). The violent image of castration and the emasculated image of a shaved head bring a complexity to Uncle Earle's character. These dual images serve as the actual depiction of his persona. Throughout the novel, dual language – feminine and masculine – describes Uncle Earle. None of the other Boatwright men's descriptions illustrates this duality that amplifies the dual role he plays in Bone's life. In the feminine sense, Uncle Earle becomes the visual connection in the family to Bone. He provides a link to Bone and a legacy with their black hair. Bone relishes in her adoration of Earle: "He was my uncle. I was his favorite sister's favorite child. I knew absolutely that I was his and he was mine, and I was suddenly fiercely

proud of him, and of myself” (217). He becomes the one family member to whom Bone relates in terms of look and demeanor. The presence of Uncle Earle in the novel gives Bone an ally. The physical similarities are important since she otherwise feels like an outsider even within the Boatwright family.<sup>110</sup> Bone shares that she often “tried to narrow my eyes the way Uncle Earle’s would shrink down when he played poker” (192).

Characters shift places and responsibility as the trauma experienced upon the child’s body becomes more violent and destructive. The history of Uncle Earle’s abandonment like Aunt Raylene’s is magnified through their involvement with Bone. Earle and Raylene reflect upon their own isolation and trauma as Bone attempts to cope with her own. They both become huge allies for Bone by offering her strength and protection. When Raylene discovers one of the severest beatings pre-rape that Bone endures from Daddy Glen, it is Uncle Earle who flies into action to physically protect and violently defend her. Bone testifies of her uncle’s reaction that “Earle’s voice was soft, and scarier than I could have ever imagined” (245). Bone describes the beating that her uncles administer to Daddy Glen from the arms of her surrogate Aunt Raylene. “There was a scream from down the hall, a loud crashing noise, and Earle’s voice shouting, ‘I’ll murder you, you son of a bitch’...Thudding, crashing sounds were coming from the front. They had gone out on the porch...The thuds where Daddy Glen hitting the wall. Those grunts were his. Those curses were my uncles” (247). The notion of the Boatwrights believing an eye for an eye comes to fruition in this scene when violence begets violence. Even within the siblings’ rage though, they both are able to have empathy for their sister Anney. As Raylene stands guard “with her back to the bedroom door, her arms crossed over her breasts, as if she expected us

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<sup>110</sup> There are numerous references that the family has Native American blood which reinforces stereotypically, the behavior of the outlaw Boatwright family. A Native American heritage also acts historically to marginalize the Boatwrights and provides them with a grandiose association as legends.



[Bone and Anney] to try and fight her to get out....After a few minutes Raylene came over and sat beside us. ‘Anney.’ Her voice was husky. ‘Anney, did he beat you too? Tell me, did he hurt you?’” (246). Within this empathy lie their own anguish and trauma surrounding abandonment. Even in the end of the story, it is Uncle Earle and Raylene who both witness and attempt to comfort Bone through the unforgettable loss due to her mother’s abandonment. Her Uncle Nevil appears to also transform. He vows to track down Glen and actively enacts Bone’s long-desired revenge.

Aunt Raylene’s past choices allow her to be the ideal surrogate for Bone. Early in the novel, Anney questions if someone has been talking about Raylene. This “talking about” hints at Aunt Raylene’s past life and her later – revealed relationship with a woman. Anney inquires shows her protective nature of her sister Raylene. This protective nature is returned as Raylene initially provides a safe place for Bone after school. Bone and her aunt develop a close relationship from which Bone builds another identity filled with purpose and value. After her aunt claims her from the hospital and aids in her recovery after Glen’s violent rape, Bone meets another side of her aunt. Raylene preaches, “Bone, no woman can stand to choose between her baby and her lover, between her child and her husband” (300).<sup>111</sup> Raylene agrees to share her own life experience that “[w]e do terrible things to the ones we love sometimes...She loves you more than her life, and she an’t never gonna forgive herself for what she’s done to you, what she allowed to happen” (301). Aunt Raylene accepts the fate of her own relationship because she acknowledges the inappropriate boundary she attempted to cross. She also is appropriately judgmental in her use of “allowed” as a key inference when talking about Anney’s responsibility as a mother. Raylene is the one who locates the abuse that gets the male surrogates in the family

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<sup>111</sup> This is part of the reappearance of the man-child that is witnessed in *Push*. Anney also refers to Lyle in terms of being a man-child.

involved, and Raylene is the one who questions Anney about her own potential abuse as well as defends Bone against the later gaze of the sheriff in the hospital. Raylene describes having lived the life of a man when she was part of the carnival and falling in love with a woman. She learns first hand the challenges of loving a woman with a child and that forcing a mother to choose between her lover and her child is destructive. This assumption of the male role in her life and her relationship places Raylene as a social deviant not only in the novel but within her family. She, unlike any other family member, emerges as the ideal to rescue Bone when the pieces fall apart.

Aunt Raylene as an outsider recognizes the damage and responsibility of the mother while others seek to place responsibility on Bone's shoulders as the child. The family surrogates love their sister Anney but do not absolve her of her total responsibility and judgment. As Bone's care with her mother becomes more problematic, direct blame begins to be issued to Anney. What we thought was a turning point when Anney says, "I know what I've got to do" becomes a repressed emotion just like Bone's suppression of her abuse even to her Aunt Ruth (255). She is like most abused children, and since she had assumed the role of adult, she absorbed the guilt and blame like Ellen in *Ellen Foster* and later Precious in *Push*.<sup>112</sup> Raylene, like Anney, places Bone inside the adult realm and outside the child realm. However, Raylene's position of Bone in the adult realm represents a sense of value and provides praise to Bone which she does not consistently get from her mother. For example, when Anney loses her only child with Glen, a male child, one of the Boatwright women, Aunt Alma, dictates to Bone "Your mama's gonna need a little time...Then she's gonna need you more than she ever has. When a woman loses a

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<sup>112</sup> The other protagonists in the study also absorb and struggle with various forms of guilt and confusion. For example, Ellen wonders if she could have prevented her mother's suicide and Precious has conflicted feelings of shame and pleasure during her father's rapes. See J. Brooks Bouson for detailed discussion of shame in *Bastard*.

baby, she needs to know that her other babies are well and happy. You are happy for her, Bone. You let your mama know you are happy so she can heal her heart” (49). Anney repeatedly places Bone into an adult realm and slowly robs her of her childhood. As Bone repeatedly reassures her mother by saying, “It’ll be okay,” and Anney establishes a model of submissiveness and yielding of personal agency for Bone in replying “Yeah, probably...And if it won’t it just won’t. Sometimes, Bone, you got to do things you wish you really don’t. But Glen needs to take care of this [negotiation with Reese’s grandmother], you understand? He needs to do it, and I’ve got to let him” (57). By allowing Glen in this context to exert authority over Reese’s inheritance and relationship with her grandmother, Anney shows that women need to coddle men and provide opportunities for them to exercise their masculinity. From the Boatwright sisters, Bone receives additional conflicting messages. Her Aunt Alma and mother provide her with adult responsibility and reinforce the role of women to be supportive and loyal to their mothers and the men in their lives. The true surrogates, Aunt Raylene and Aunt Ruth, provide Bone with a support and logic to consider herself outside of the traditional paradigm. As Bone moves further away from Anney, she begins to develop as the daughter of her surrogates and not of her birth mother.

Bone resembles her surrogates throughout the text, but frequently reflects on what it would be like to be her mother. Anney initially seems angel-like. She is admired due to her beauty and her own trauma surrounding loss. The image that she has of her mother shifts as her abandonment becomes clearer. She also reflects on how her own birth caused the death of her mother’s childhood and perhaps her identity (309). Instead of survivor-guilt, Bone has birth-guilt. This level of empathy surfaces in other novels, but the other child narrators are not as forgiving to the abandoning mother and their role in the child’s abuse as is Bone. Bone remains

committed to her mother and often looks for ways to silence the abuse, so her mother does not have to consider or make a decision. Bone knows on a deeper level that her mother will not choose her.

It is only after the realization that Bone has been abandoned by her birthmother that one of her surrogates, Aunt Raylene, can fully reveal the pain of her own past and true identity. The use of Aunt Raylene as the final surrogate is important since it brings forth a socially deviant personality in the southern town. Her life on the outskirts of town with the clearing near the river suggests the cleansing of a baptism. It is ironic that the same place from which Bone dragged things from the river to repurpose them is the place where she is able to heal and is protected. This reinforces and illustrates that even trash has value. Her Aunt Raylene also reinforces this value by providing a transparency between the two generations of women. After Aunt Raylene installs herself as Bone's main surrogate, she breaks her silence by claiming her lesbian identity. This is important modeling because it allows Bone to claim her own truth and shed shame. The pain and burden of making one chose over her child is evident as Ruth seeks to comfort Bone with the inevitability that her mother is not returning. It is only in hindsight that Raylene is able to articulate her regret in having attempted to make her lover make a similar choice. Her lover's choosing the child leaves Raylene alone and abandoned. Anney commits the same ultimate sin, and although not detailed in the story, it is suggested that Anney knows of Raylene's history and the reason she lives alone. Raylene's witness of Anney's final form of abuse through abandonment allows Raylene to take the place of the mother who has left the child, the mother who has provided her child with the only legacy that she feels is valued, a stampless birth certificate. Raylene embraces Bone to help her define her own legacy.

## CHAPTER V: By the Mother's Hand – Sapphire's Push

“if they could see *inside* me they would see something lovely ...”

- Precious, *Push* (125)

Sapphire's *Push* (1996) depicts the most grotesque form of abuse analyzed in this dissertation in which the novels have progressed to illustrate the abuse upon the female child body, the role that the mother plays in this abuse, and the subsequent surrogates who parent the young girls. *Push* represents a rarity in literature and in reality as it depicts not only the father's incest but a mother-driven incest as well. *Push* is the first person narrative of Precious who at the novel's end is sixteen years old and crafts her story that is this novel. Precious emerges from her long-term physical, mental, and sexual abuse by her parents (Mary Johnston and Carl Jones) into a functioning mother of two children, a young woman who is now literate and working towards independence from the public sector. *Push* also draws attention to the breakdown in generational mothering as Toosie, Precious's grandmother emerges as complicit in Precious's marginalization. The novel is the most critical of the public institutions in this study; however, the novel utilizes alternative institutions and structures as the method of directly influencing surrogacy. Precious's salvation comes as a result of the alternative school program, Higher Education Alternative/Each One Teach One and the influence of her main mother-surrogate, Ms. Rain who is also her teacher. The novel also looks at the community of women who help to create a family through the sister-surrogates from Precious's classroom, Rita and Jermaine, and the various support groups that help her deal with her life realities with dignity and support: Incest Survivors' Group, HIV/AIDS Support Group, and a supportive housemother at her group home. The novel also highlights the diversity of women who suffer and survive abuse.

*Push* is an incestuous discourse that tells the story of a mother-driven incestuous relationship. Set in the Harlem section of New York in the 1980s, *Push* is a complex novel whose characters reveal challenges not only of the family structure but also of traditional institutions. The story highlights the importance of alternative and non-traditional structures as points of intervention and as a catalyst for the development of girls. Twentieth-century American literature depicts many examples of bad mothers, but *Push* is unique since it chronicles a trinity of abuse – verbal, physical, and sexual – of Precious not only at the hands of her father, but also at the hands of her mother. The family history evolves from the mother’s need to offer her daughter as a way to keep her own relationship with a married man and to keep her status on the welfare rolls of New York.

The historical era of the novel, the 1980s, is a politically charged time in the United States. Cities were overrun with drugs, and the political atmosphere was dominated by active attacks on social welfare programs, the especially welfare queens (Jones 331).<sup>113</sup> There was a rise in teen pregnancy and an increase of unwed mothers in the black community. In addition, during this period, there was the rise of the AIDS/HIV epidemic. An unwelcome and unfair attack on the gay and lesbian community rendering its members as social and community outsiders further complicated the 1980s. Sapphire emphasizes the history of the period in the novel’s setting and uses it as a powerful backdrop. Community members’ sexual orientation is a controversial secondary focus in several of the other focus texts; however, none is as direct as in Sapphire’s *Push*. She creates the narrative voice through Precious to deal with a variety of black women images. Comparable to the numerous inversions surrounding class and race by the other

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<sup>113</sup> Jacqueline Jones’s *Labor of Love, Labor of Sorrow: Black Women, Work, and the Family, from Slavery to the Present* examines also the ramifications of race and gender and the development of class for black women.

authors, Sapphire uses the various historical images of the whore/jezebel and the mammy/black matriarch to negotiate Precious's existence. Sapphire inverts the argument of Jacqueline Jones and provides a stereotypical view of the social welfare system highlighting the racism by her characterization of Mary, an overweight, black woman who relies on and manipulatively abuses the social welfare system. Mary also illustrates a rare form of sexual deviancy: mother-daughter incest.

I will analyze three spheres and their relationship to Precious, the protagonist, in this chapter: traditional institutions, family, and surrogates through alternative institutions. Precious is able to face the death sentence of HIV and the brutality of birthing two babies conceived in an incestuous relationship with her father to become an independent, and a competent young mother who recognizes that her abuse and lack of mother-modeling does not render her powerless to love and to mother her own children. Through the emergence of a surrogate-mother, Precious is able to birth her own motherlove not only for her children, but also for herself and for the surrounding new home and community of women. Without this intervention, Precious would have remained illiterate and dependent on her mother and the welfare system. Similar to the other novels, both false and true surrogates are presented. Throughout my discussion of *Push* and later in the conclusion, I incorporate some of Alice Walker's womanist theory regarding the ability of women to love other women as a form of surrogacy, and ultimately, self-agency.

Precious's multifaceted-marginalization causes trauma in every physical sphere of her life, illustrating the long-term effects of abuse and neglect on the black girl child. The institutions closest to her (traditional public schools and social welfare services) ignore the various signs of abuse, and those geographically closest to her in the housing project draw attention to the lack of priority and accountability for the safety and protection of the child.

Precious's journey is like the plight of many abused children when people suspect that there is something wrong but fail to intervene. The only intervention into Precious's life occurs in the form of the gaze. Numerous people gaze on her life, but very few intervene.<sup>114</sup> The novel suggests that racism impedes the various social workers from questioning Precious's predicament. It also suggests that the community as a whole surrenders its collective thinking and nurturing as occurs in *The Bluest Eye*. In other words, Precious is expendable. The novel's language suggests that this failure to recognize the abuse is the actual failure to see Precious as a victim.

Sapphire's narration captures the duality of abuse especially sexual abuse. Precious remains conflicted regarding her abuse and her relationship to her abusers.<sup>115</sup> Precious's shame is embedded throughout the narrative as she seeks to understand how she could be valueless to those closest to her biologically, but embraced as valuable by those who are strangers, outsiders, and those deemed socially deviant. Precious's confusion around her sexual abuse by her father is clearly understandable; however, nowhere does Precious hint at confusion surrounding her mother and the abuse she endures by her mother. No pleasure and joy exist in her biological maternal sphere. Sapphire's creation of Mary Johnston is the grotesque remaking of the historical black matriarch. There are several psycho-economical reasons that the mother fails to protect her daughter, but critics have incorrectly cited mental illness as one reason for the mother's abuse and lack of agency.<sup>116</sup> The cycle of poverty is evident throughout the novel;

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<sup>114</sup> It would be easy to assume, and to suggest that due to the sheer large numbers of children who find themselves associated with the Department of Children Services, that an overwhelmed system causes the abuse to fester for as long as it does; however, the novel does not sustain this explanation.

<sup>115</sup> See Peter and Harkins of sexually abused children remain conflicted in feelings toward their abusers. They try to be good and not dominating.

<sup>116</sup> See Elizabeth Donaldson, Dorothy L. Hurley and E. Anthony Hurley.



however, poverty cannot excuse the extent of the abuse that Precious endures through her mother's hands.

In *Push*, Mary L. Johnston dismantles the historical image of the black matriarch, the ever-present strong, historical mother figure that carries the burdens of the family and maintains everyone's well-being. Trudier Harris describes the portrayal of the matriarch in literature as often contradictory and damaging and defines [some] strong black women characters as "sinning against their families and their communities when their motives are more self-absorbed and selfishly individualistic, in spite of claims to the contrary" (*Saints* 19). I will use this lens to analyze Mary's mothering methods. There probably has not been a character since Dorothy West's Cleo in *The Living Is Easy* who has been as unlikable and problematic as Mary Johnston.<sup>117</sup> Unlike Cleo, who did evil, selfish things, Mary herself is evil.<sup>118</sup> Mary uses her child as a tool for her own personal and sexual gratification and works against her daughter's development as a way to maintain her own standing as a nonworking woman on welfare. Precious cannot articulate any true picture of her pre-abuse life even though her mother attempts to craft a happy picture of the ideal, loving family to the outside world. Though her mother is in the picture, there is no close-knit relationship hinted at nor active interaction and engagement between mother and daughter. Mary, who initially embraces motherhood, does not offer any plausible explanation of why her motherhood takes a destructive turn.

Mary and Precious's interaction as a mother-daughter unit centers on money, sex, and violence. Dependence on the welfare system places priority on staying poor. This becomes the center of their lives. This cycle of poverty is illustrated in Precious's family through Mary and

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<sup>117</sup> Other portrayals of Bad Mothers with issues of incest and rape would include Joyce Carol Oates's *We Were the Mulvaney's*, Ann Petry's *The Street*, and Carolivia Herron's *Thereafter, Johnnie*.

<sup>118</sup> Mary is more than the antithesis of the black matriarch prototype and does not represent the idealized and seemingly self-sacrificing early depictions of the matriarch discussed by Harris.

Toosie (Precious's maternal grandmother) and it is evident that Precious's children help to sustain this cycle. Mary does not attempt to encourage or even to hope that Precious will have a reality different from hers or her mother's. There is no value placed on self-improvement, but plenty of energy and time dedicated to maintaining dependency on outside sources. Mary never employs survival tactics or seeks to be a good mother past her initial attempt to protect Precious from her "husband" Carl's molestation. Her behavior is worse than the suicide that Ellen Foster's nameless mother commits or than Anney's abandonment of leaving Bone after witnessing her rape. Mary sacrifices her daughter. This is far from the noble survival sacrifice that Sethe makes in Morrison's *Beloved*. It echoes James Comer and Alvin Poussaint's study in which they locate the dissolution of the black community in the slave system that broke up the familial bond that lead to the communal abandonment of children and their protection. Mary claims her child only in terms of how Precious will serve her.

*Push* deconstructs the concept of motherhood as physical ownership. Contrasting the earlier image and discussion of Sethe assuming physical ownership over her child, Mary assumes psychological, physical, and sexual ownership over Precious, the only thing she can control in her marginalized state. The novel explores the uncharted territory of the mother's ownership over the sexuality of the daughter for her own pleasure. Mary and Precious's relationship is dysfunctional, stemming from the mother not seeing herself as having any value outside of her sexuality.<sup>119</sup> When a black woman is without any other skill-set or method of contributing, her value can rest in being only a sexual objectification as depicted in the novel.<sup>120</sup> The modeling

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<sup>119</sup> Through Mary and Precious, Sapphire recreates the historical mammy and jezebel. The legacy of the jezebel lives in the value placed on black women as sexual beings while the mammy is often complacent and passive. The mother and daughter both fill these roles in the text. Precious seeks to embrace the image of the jezebel as the video dancer in her various forms of dissociation to cope with her abuse.

<sup>120</sup> See the earlier discussion of *Corregidora* and the purpose and image of the women.

that Mary provides for Precious is how to be a sexual being, but not a sexual being as it relates to her own pleasure but as it relates to others' pleasure. Mary even calls Precious a Jezebel as well as other sexually explicit names (19).<sup>121</sup> These sexual labels complicate Precious's identity.

Mary gives birth to a new definition of the bad mother. There is a shift in her own image and relationship to mothering (similar to Pauline's shift in *The Bluest Eye*). She becomes the "other" mother because she surrenders her role as protector to secure and to maintain her relationship with a married man. Her resolution that she can only control a small part of her existence becomes her model for her life and her daughter's. She makes their welfare-subsidized apartment into her own fiefdom. The boundaries become her source of power and control. Outside of visiting Precious in the group home, her mother has not left the apartment since the birth of Precious's first child. Precious discloses the majority of her interactions with her mother in flashbacks.<sup>122</sup> These flashbacks always include some sort of abuse, but Precious details no legacy of abuse in Mary's life outside of the abuse she inflicts upon her daughter and possibly receives from Carl. Precious first introduces Mary in a flashback after Precious's suspension from school because of her second pregnancy. The institution of school, discussed later, does not seek to protect or understand Precious but merely passes judgment as does her mother that Precious is a hopeless case. Precious reflects back on her mother's glare as she completes her evening ritual of cleaning the kitchen after preparing and serving their dinner. Precious reflects, "I don't wanna stand here 'n hear Mama call me a slut. Holler 'n shout on me all day like she did the last time. Slut! Nasty ass tramp! What you been doin'! Who! Who! WhOoooo like owl

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<sup>121</sup> Mary also calls Precious in this scene – "Fat cunt bucket," "Nigger pig bitch," "Miss Hot-to-Trot" in addition to "Jezebel" (19).

<sup>122</sup> The novel employs flashbacks similarly to the other novels to help detail the girls' various traumas. The flashbacks provide the girls with distance and often occur wedged between the nuclear family structure and the surrogate structure in the novels.

in Walt Disney movie I seen one time. Whoooo? Ya wanna know who—” (9). This reflection is three-fold. It reflects back to the negative relationship and abusive language that Mary uses to interact with her daughter; it draws in the image of childhood and potential innocence through the interjection of the Walt Disney movie; it highlights Precious’s knowledge of her own mother’s hypocrisy that will later be witnessed during a counseling session after Precious escapes her mother’s home. This introduction to Precious’s mother alerts the reader to the reality that this child faces.

No detailed background information for Precious about the nuclear family (mother, father or grandmother) exists. This omission disconnects Precious from any intimate family connection. We know that Mary arrives from the south. We know that Carl lives a dual identity – legitimate vs. illegitimate husband. His two families become an extension of his sexual freedom for black men now to choose.<sup>123</sup> Mary also chooses to use sexual freedom and the ownership of her child as an example of her mothering behavior.<sup>124</sup> Both Mary and Carl devalue Precious in order to reduce her to an object for their own pleasure. Mary’s mother, Toosie, reinforces the choices and behaviors of her daughter and complicates the abuse of her granddaughter, Precious. Also missing is any direct mention of Toosie’s influence on shaping Mary as well as any developmental value that Toosie might provide for Precious. In addition, there is no detail as to whether Mary was a victim of sexual abuse. The grandmother rarely appears. She emerges when needed to prove legitimacy for Precious’s handicapped child. Precious’s grandmother functions as a critical enabler helping to trap her in the sexual, physical, and mental abuse that she endures at the hands of her mother. The grandmother’s compliance

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<sup>123</sup> The legacy of slavery continues to connect black men to the sexual image of the stud. Precious will later incorporate quotes from Farrakhan to reinforce her understanding of her father’s trauma.

<sup>124</sup> This is an extension of the self-hatred that has been highlighted previously and the ways that it warps and manifests itself during child development and nurturing.

and failure to intervene in any meaningful way continues the stifling lack of development of Precious. Later in the novel, the continued intervention of Ms. Rain, surrogate-mother, helps Precious see her value. Mary and Precious's small and isolated apartment is important because it offers Precious no distractions or responsibility outside of caring for and servicing her mother. The role reversal evident in the subject novels surfaces in *Push* as Precious also assumes the mother and sexual partner roles to her mother. This depiction of the reversal is the most destructive and detrimental in the study.

Carl influences Mary's parenting but does not provide a model for her mothering. Mary transfers her mothering to Carl who in turn uses it to as an extension of his control of the women, of his need to subjugate women, and to fulfill his sexual desires. There is no other modeling for Mary to follow. Mary absorbs his influence. She transfers her destructive selfishness to Precious in order to gain some power. Carl's initial rape of Precious initially stuns Mary, but due to her own marginalized status in her relationship with Carl, she does not challenge it and, therefore, does not protect Precious.<sup>125</sup> Mary questions Carl's destructive behavior at first, but soon surrenders and disengages under his threats of violence. Mary makes no other additional attempts to divert or to change her deviant behavior, behavior that progressively gets worse. Her initial need to keep Carl fosters her ability to witness the rape of her own child, but her own lack of agency furthers the abuse and allows her to participate fully in her daughter's abuse and subjugation. Her sense of entitlement as a welfare mother transfers to the actual physical body of her only child. Precious only achieves self-development and self-actualization by leaving her mother. Each of the subject texts illustrates differently the daughter's taking care of her mother

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<sup>125</sup> I consciously prefer the term of rape over molestation to illustrate the severity of this incest trauma.

but never by a more blatantly abusive and damaging manner as Precious's role of sexually pleasing her mother. Mary appropriates and mirrors Carl's selfish and destructive behavior.

Precious is confused by the reality of her role as both daughter and mother. Her mother interjects Precious into mother-daughter relationship by using Precious as a replacement for Carl by sexually assaulting Precious and making Precious perform sexual acts on her during Carl's absence. By using Precious as a replacement for Carl, Mary is able to have her needs and values reinforced during the times when Carl is away. This reinforcement empowers Mary in her marginalized state of being poor, black, and obese. It also draws another connection to her and Precious, as Mary's need to overfeed her child traps Precious physically in a body that will make her undesirable, invisible, and repulsive to the outside world. Precious's parents entrap her for their own consumption. This literal and metaphorical consumption devours Precious's potential by removing her from her position as a little girl and placing her into a marginalized status as sexual captive and abused prisoner. Her parents isolate and enslave her. Her mother allows this enslavement. Precious endures physical abuse that is a result of her mother's frustrations and disempowerment. However, Mary achieves a sense of power and self-value in her degrading treatment of Precious.

Wendy Rountree's article "Overcoming Violence: Blues Expression in Sapphire's *Push*" complicates our recognition of Precious's lack of agency and protection by making excuses for Mary's marginalization. The blues motifs used by Rountree do not give full credence to the voice that Precious claims through outside assistance and motherlove. She reduces the power that hip/hop provides to articulate the violence, bleakness, and vulnerability of the 1980s that is an important part of Precious's vocabulary. Rountree acknowledges the use of outside forces, but never uses the term surrogate to embrace the motherly instinct and development that exists in

Precious's relationship with Ms. Rain or the girls from the school. Rountree also misses the value of the musical metaphor since jazz/rap/hip-hop are all about articulating and reinventing experiences that often have no previous words or names.

As with the music of the period, the novel also incorporates food in a powerful, but negative, way. Food becomes poisonous to Precious, and the kitchen becomes a treacherous and a destructive tool in the mother-daughter relationship. Typically, food is a form of nurturing; the kitchen, a site of love and togetherness; however, as in the other subject novels, the kitchen becomes the site of abuse and victimization. Food becomes a weapon that Mary uses increasingly to marginalize and to trap Precious in the image of the Mammy. The mirror image of Mary as a large, unattractive black welfare queen is projected onto Precious when her mother forces her to eat when she is not hungry and reinforces her desires for Precious to be obese.<sup>126</sup> Precious recognizes how her mother uses food as a vice, not to nurture her, but physically to increase her weight. As part of her self-perception, Precious more accurately physically resembles the historical depiction of the mammy figure but desires to be like the classic jezebel or, in the contemporary terms, the video vixen. One of Precious's and Mary's common interactions centers on food and becomes a paralyzing force in their lives. Food for Mary is all about consumption and being full to a state of gluttony. She forces Precious to eat and to consume as much as she does. Precious's father often refers to her weight while he rapes her, calling her big mama and other derogatory weight-associated names.<sup>127</sup> This further reduces Precious to an object and causes her to associate her physical image with her abuse. During

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<sup>126</sup> Derrida's discussion of the mirror image stage in child development becomes a distorted mirror image with Mary as the mother. Mary wishes to see Precious as less than herself and as a powerless Mammy figure.

<sup>127</sup> "Butter Ball Big Mama Two Ton of Fun" (35); "Big Mama" (58); "Fat Mama, Big Hole!" (111).

rapes, she visualizes her alternative self as a video dancer.<sup>128</sup> The use of weight and the image of the mammy figure forces Precious into a traditional stereotyped role of black women.

The kitchen, instead of being a place of nurturing, becomes another place of trauma. Not only does one of the most brutal descriptions of abuse occur in the traditional sphere of comfort, the kitchen, but Precious also emerges as a mother herself in the same space. The domestic sphere of the kitchen acts as a pass-through space and food, a pass-through experience, for Precious and her mother when Precious decides that she will not perpetuate her mother's model of motherhood to her children. Food brings no pleasure for Precious since her mother forces Precious sexually to service her through oral sex. Precious details her mother's rapes of her after Mary gorges Precious with forced overeating (20-21). Precious prays for sleep during these acts of transgression. Mary paralyzes Precious with fear since Precious knows too well the physical violence that her mother inflicts. Mary's vices violate the domestic realm. Various violations continue to occur in the domestic sphere. The intersection of the competing images of motherhood as nurturing as well as torturing takes place in the kitchen.<sup>129</sup>

The small home Precious shares with her mother is not the only place where invisibility and trauma occur. Sapphire also reconsiders how traditional institutions function for the fragile child. Numerous outside institutions' impacts influence Precious on her journey to self-recovery and self-acceptance, but the institutions are false surrogates although they remain important because they provide critical information for Precious's development. They also are the catalysts that lead Precious to the maternal circle of Ms. Rain, her housemother, and her sister-mothers who all take the role of providing motherlove. The first of all these false surrogates, the hospital,

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<sup>128</sup> The use of the alternative personality is a form of dissociation for Precious especially to cope with the trauma.

<sup>129</sup> Traumas that occur in the kitchen throughout the study novels completely alter the interpretation of the maternal sphere, see Gwin.



is an institution that documents family legacy and legitimacy. It provides background information on Mary as well as serving as a sphere in which Precious experiences her first shared maternal connection. As the nurse gathers information regarding Precious's family history for the birth certificate of her first child, the nurse makes a connection. Precious gives her mother's name, "Mary L. Johnston' (L for Lee but my mother don't like Lee, soun' too country). Where your mother born, she say. I say 'Greenwood, Mississippi.' Nurse say, 'You ever been there?' I say, 'Naw, I never been nowhere.' She say, 'Reason I ask is 'I'm from Greenwood, Mississippi, myself.' I say, 'Oh,' 'cause I know I'm spozed to say something'" (12).<sup>130</sup> The fact that Precious has been "nowhere" is not surprising. The only location that she occupies outside of her apartment with her mother is the school. This is evidence that Mary and her mother have severed ties with their southern roots and have isolated Precious from her family history. It takes the hospital as an institution for Precious to locate a connection with someone outside of her isolated and limiting environment. Mary and her mother represent the numerous blacks who left the South for more opportunity in the urban North. It is unclear the circumstances in the South that Mary and her mother left. These circumstances probably did not look like their current reality. This southern nurse makes a connection with Precious and temporarily acts as a mother-like figure for her. She attempts to help Precious.

The nurse appears several times in the narrative, but serves as a false surrogate through the hospital institution. After the nurse makes her initial connection to Precious's mother's birthplace, she uncovers another connection in Precious's life. Precious confesses after the

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<sup>130</sup> The initial description of Nurse Butter by Precious resembles Morrison's description of the black girls from Mobile in *The Bluest Eye*. Precious later attempts to call upon Nurse Butter for help when Mary kicks her out of the apartment for disclosing their welfare fraud. In during this latter scene, Nurse Butter's failure to ensure that Precious receives attention and a safe, temporary place to stay mirrors Geraldine's inability to see Pecola (*Bluest* 74-76). The Nurse's name is Lenora Harrison (*Push* 75-77)

delivery of her child that her father and her baby's father are the same man, Carl Jones. Precious confides, "I'm so tired I jus' want to disappear. I wish Miss Butter would leave me alone but she jus staring at me, her eyes getting bigger and bigger" (11). The nurse is in disbelief. Precious is only twelve and shares only out of childhood innocence. Precious will experience this same reaction and disbelief to her complicated life in other interactions with outside institutional. Precious describes how the nurse gets quiet, and she says,

"Shame, thas a shame. Twelve years old, twelve years old," She say over'n over like she crazy (or some shock or something). She look at me, butter skin, light eyes – I know boyz love her. She say. "Was you ever, I mean did you ever get to be a child?" Thas a stupid question, did I ever get to be a chile? I *am* a chile. (12-3)

Precious feels the question is absurd even though her earlier thinking of not knowing a time when she did not know "pussy and dick" is also telling (12). Precious thinks, "I'm confused, tired. I tell her I want to sleep. She put the bed down. I go to sleep" (13). The nurse reports her findings, and Precious awakes to inquiries from the outside authorities. Nurse Butter attempts to intervene but does not verbally encourage Precious to have strength to stand up to the unknown.

The authorities who enter the picture to inquire about the incest do not protect or fully intervene. When Precious awakes, she asks the new nurse, "Where's my baby? I know I had one. I know that" (13). The new nurse confirms for her, "Yes, you did Miss Jones, you surely did" (13). Precious learns that the baby is in "special intense care and I will get to see her soon and won't I please answer the nice men's questions" (13). Precious objects and thinks to herself, "[b]ut they ain' nice men. They pigs. I ain' crazy. I don't tell them nothing" (13). Precious's failure to trust the police leaves her further marginalized. The use of language to describe the

police shows the urban distrust of white authority. She understands that what has occurred is wrong, but she is also adamant not to trust the white outsiders of the system.<sup>131</sup> There is no further mention regarding the police's interaction in the matter. Precious's refusal to talk, her silence, is similar to Bone's interaction with the sheriff. The issue in Bone's case was the class difference and the gaze that showed her poverty and gender. Precious feels a similar marginalization based on being poor and black in an urban setting. She reflects, "Harlem Hospital where I was borned, where me and my baby got took after it was borned on the kitchen floor at 444 Lenox Avenue" (11). This documentation links the smallness of her world. She is also in disbelief of her current state. Precious admits,

It still tripping me out that I had a baby. I mean I knew I was pregnant, knew how I got pregnant. I been knowing a man put his dick in you, gush white stuff in your booty you could get pregnant. I'm twelve now, I been knowing about that since I was five or six, maybe I always known about pussy and dick. I can't remember a time I did not know. But thas all I knowed. I didn't know how long it take, what's happening inside, nothing. I didn't know nothing. (11-2)

The reality that Precious's parents rob her of her childhood becomes evident to her. There has been no mention of Mary taking her to the doctor or getting her any care, typical and necessary prenatal care that Precious's maternal surrogates at the alternative school later confirm. It is almost as if adulthood has collapsed onto an already non-existent childhood. No reflections exist in her life pre-alternative school where trauma does not make her a victim or outsider. Precious reports that

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<sup>131</sup> Sapphire often creates representatives from the outside institutions who are white. Their whiteness acts as a separate form of distrust layered on the institutional distrust. Precious portrays these interactions as forms of resistance. She inherits most of this distrust from Mary.

The nurse is saying something I don't hear. I hear kids at school. Boy say I'm laffing ugly. He say, "Claireece [Precious] is so ugly she laffing ugly." His fren' say, "No, that fat bitch is crying ugly." Laff laff. Why I'm thinking about those stupid boys now I don't know. (12)

This reflection further collapses her trapped reality, a child in an adult's world, since her pregnancy was not a result of her peers, but of her father. Home and the traditional school disregard her and subject her to various forms of abuse. The hospital offers Precious some shelter and comfort where she witnesses kindness but also the judgmental gaze.

The social services and hospital as institutions fail Precious as do the school and the larger community, but she does experience some minimal kindness. The Nurse Butter offers something Precious had never had, "warm kindness from her I never feel from Mama and I start to cry...I crying for me who no one never hold before" (18). The nurse also tells her, "Look at me, sweetie, you gonna get through this. You really are gonna get through this" (18). This embrace comes after the nurse shows her first child, Mongo, who has Down's syndrome, to her. Nurse Butter must "reach under the covers and take my hands. I ball 'em in fist. She rub her hands over my fist till I open them" and explains the health of the baby. When asked what happened to her baby, Nurse Butter shares that the baby "suffered some oxygen deprivation at birth. Plus you're so young, things happen more to the very young -...Did you see a doctor at all while you were pregnant?" (17). Precious "don't answer her nuffin', jus' hold out baby for her to take. Nurse Butter nod to little black nurse who take baby away" (17). This taking away of the baby illustrates Precious's rejection of motherhood. Mary remains invisible. These remembrances occur as flashbacks when Precious is expecting her second child and as her interactions with her mother become more volatile. Nurse Butter embraces and claims Precious

as a child at one of her most vulnerable points. Precious questions how, “Daddy put his pee-pee smelling thing in my mouth, my pussy, but never hold me” (18). This lack of affection becomes clearer as Precious moves further away from her biological parents and into the maternal sphere of outsiders. Motherhood for Precious is an abstract concept since her “Mongoloid” child does not live with her. She tells the reader “after I come home from hospital baby go live over on 150<sup>th</sup> and St Nicholas Avenue with my grandmother, even though Mama tell welfare the baby live with us and she care for it while I’m in school” (34). This lie of caring for the handicapped child reinforces the modeling that Mary receives from her own mother.<sup>132</sup> Precious’s rejection continues from potential mother figures. When Precious appears at the hospital after she is violently expelled from her maternal home for the last time, Nurse Butter proves to be a false surrogate similar to Ms. West, the neighbor.

Mary’s devaluing sentiments for Precious become clearer as Precious enters a new phase in her life at the alternative school. As Precious develops a greater sense of self-worth, agency, and support, Mary cannot control her and therefore expels her. The institution of school accepts Precious’s existence in several critical ways in the novel. Precious introduces her school experience by sharing her two main authority figures, both white, Mrs. Lichenstein, the school counselor and Mr. Wicher, her math teacher. She provides a lively description of these two white employees, as well as how she feels they see her in her blackness and marginalized state and imagines that they both live in the affluent Westchester community far away from the inner city domain of Harlem. Literary critic Rountree explores the school’s inability to assist her and the paralyzing effects that linger as a result, citing the example of Precious speaking to maintain

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<sup>132</sup> In *The Bluest Eye*, Geraldine appears to be pretty and delicate but her inverted notion of beauty causes her to withhold affection from her son and call Pecola a bitch during one of the numerous times that Pecola needed a mother-figure.

order in Mr. Wicher's classroom, but Rountree does not hold the teacher accountable for not intervening in Precious's life. Precious symbolically saves Mr. Wicher from the class's abusive talk and power, but he does see her need for protection. Mr. Wicher becomes a false surrogate since he uses, rather than aids, Precious. He does not intervene in making her a priority that needs saving or assistance. Precious describes her time in Mr. Wicher's class as "the policer" (6). This is one example in the novel of a teacher as failed surrogate. Outside of his telling Mrs. Lichenstein that Precious has an aptitude for Math, he makes no other form of inquiry into her life nor references any other engagement.

The burdens of city life overwhelm the various institutions that might aid Precious. The main contact that Precious has early on outside of the small Harlem apartment is the public school system. This is the same public school system that does not intervene or question why a child is urinating on herself, but does pass her along through the system until she is sixteen years old in ninth grade (junior high school). The school's passing Precious along mirrors the welfare and child service systems. Precious shares, "I'm getting pretty good grades. I usually do. I just wanna gone get the fuck out of I.S.146 and go to high school and get my diploma" (6). Her statement "I usually do" reveals these grades are non-merit based since it is evident that Precious suffers from illiteracy. She claims her role in the classroom as "Mr. Wicher like me in there, need me to help keep those rowdy niggers in line," and "I'm like the polices for Mr Wicher. I keep law and order. I like him, I pretend he is my husband and we live together in Weschesser, wherever that is" (6). Mr. Wicher manipulates Precious by allowing her to assume her protective posture in the classroom. Also evident for Precious is her own role-playing in the personal life of Mr. Wicher. As she will later do during her rapes, she images and appropriates different lifestyles. In this fantasy, Precious is a married woman who lives in an upscale neighborhood.

Since Precious has been “nowhere,” it would be unknown to her that Mr. Wicher could not afford to live in Westchester. Precious assumes that her role in school is to go silently from grade to grade even though she is aware that she does not understand the information and cannot read, but she accepts her role in the classroom as policer. This place of power gives her purpose and desire to be in school. She wants to learn but is unable to engage with her instructor to ask for help or to explain her inability to read. Her muteness amplifies her inability to seek help for her illiteracy. She can serve as Mr. Wicher’s voice due to her size and her ability to do his “job” of maintaining order, but he does not seek to engage to bring voice to her ability to learn by disclosing any roadblocks that impede her learning. She likes Mr. Wicher and comments that he is different from the other instructors because he, Mr. Wicher, is “nice, wear a dope suit every day. He does not come to school looking like some of these other nasty ass teachers” (7). Among all her teachers who remain nameless in the novel, Precious holds him in the highest esteem and even places him in her fantasy-coping life, but she acknowledges, “I can see by his eyes Mr Wicher like me too. I wish I could tell him about all the pages being the same but I can’t” (6). This inability to share, or the greater grotesque negligence, the inability for the teacher to inquire, proves that the institution of school fails Precious. Her white male instructor uses her as a bodyguard to survive the black urban landscape.

The school guidance counselor, Mrs. Lichenstein, also fails Precious as she is unable truly to see Precious due to her own racist issues. When Mrs. Lichenstein calls Precious by her given name of Claireece, Precious alerts us that “Everybody call me Precious. I got three names – Claireece Precious Jones. Only mutherfuckers I hate call me Claireece” (6). She reinforces this distinction when she thinks, “I wonder what else in that file with my name on it. I hate her” after Mrs. Lichenstein asks, “This is your *second* baby?” (8). Precious’s dislike of Mrs. Lichenstein is

evident as Precious processes the interaction and observes Mrs. Lichenstein's tone and language which increasingly becomes more problematic and judgmental. The school counselor does not dig deeply enough or actually see the child in front of her or the hidden complexities of her life. By "seeing" her, the institutional representation of the school could provide a safe place to reveal the layers of trauma that Precious must daily endure. To see her, the racist and economical judgment must readjust. By stereotyping Precious, Mrs. Lichenstein makes several judgments. She does not believe that Precious is capable of analyzing their interaction or feeling her white gaze of judgment.

Mrs. Lichenstein's interaction with Precious is extremely problematic. After calling Precious out of class and complicating Precious not only getting to lunch but also to Mr. Wicher's class, the only one in which that she feels safe, Mrs. Lichenstein assumes the place of authority physically and by her method of interaction. Though she has the right by virtue of her job to claim a place of authority, Mrs. Lichenstein portrays a sense of superiority as she interacts with Precious which often resembles an interrogation. For example, when Precious tells her "I don't want to miss no more maff class,' ... [she] look at me like I said I wanna suck a dog's dick or some shit. What's with this cunt bucket?" (7). (Mary had introduced "cunt bucket" as a reference for women she does not like. Precious acknowledges, "I kinda get it and I kinda don't get it, but I like the way its sounds so I say it too," and she incorporates it into her discourse (7).) Math class is the only class where Precious feels visible and needed. This interjection of her mother's framework for defining outside women foreshadows Precious's later rejection of the potential visit from Mrs. Lichenstein and interaction with two of her surrogates (Ms. Rain and Jermaine).



The school counselor and Precious see one another as the other. Precious shares, “[s]he staring at me, from behind her big wooden desk, she got her white bitch hands folded together on top her desk,” which illustrates distance and disregard. Mrs. Lichenstein reinforces the arrogance perceived by Precious when she says, “So Claireece, I see we’re expecting a little visitor” (6). Precious observes the tactics, “But it’s not like a question, she’s telling me. I still don’t say nuffin’” (6). This refusal to answer provides Precious with a sense of agency and defiance. Mrs. Lichenstein, not fully understanding Precious, later follows up with “How old are you Claireece?” (6). Precious returns the gaze of the counselor and responds to herself through this interaction with “White cunt box got my file on her desk. I see it. I ain’t that late to lunch. Bitch know how old I am” (7). Precious’s perception of Mrs. Lichtenstein as playing a manipulative game reinforces Precious’s distrust. This perceived game does not endear Precious to Mrs. Lichenstein but casts Mrs. Lichtenstein into a special historical world/disposition of distrust while Mrs. Lichenstein casts Precious as a trickster figure. “Files” holds special meaning for Precious throughout the novel. For many African Americans, documentation by the outside dominate white culture is contained in “files.” This cataloging replays the historical images of the slave-owners’ rolls and represents fear and misrepresentation of being manipulated and owned by the white culture. The counselor’s sense of authority and judgment surfaces as Precious describes when Mrs. Lichenstein clears her throat and says, “Sixteen is ahh rather ahh’ – . . . – *old* to still be in junior high school” (7). Precious responds again by not “say[ing] nuffin,’ and thinks that since Mrs. Lichenstein “know[s] so much let her ass do the talking” (7). Precious responds with silence to Mrs. Lichenstein’s prepared conclusions. Mrs. Lichenstein is not attempting to have a conversation with Precious but has chosen to manipulate and to interrogate. Precious becomes more annoyed with her assertion, “Come now, you are pregnant,

aren't you Clairleece?' She asking now, a few seconds ago the hoe just *knew* what I was" (7). This assertion suggests that Precious has been actively playing in a game with the school counselor and ultimately the system. There is no room in Mrs. Lichenstein's script for Precious to interject, let alone ask for help since she feels that the counselor has made up her mind and does not care. As a result, when Precious decides to "get up to go, Mrs Lichenstein ax me to please sit down, she not through with me yet. But I'm through with her, thas what she don't get" (7). This makes Precious a child-like prisoner of the counselor who will dictate her behavior during this interaction.

Mrs. Lichenstein fails to read Precious as well as Precious chooses to gaze upon her. The ultimate offense to Precious becomes when the counselor suggests coming to her home to meet her mother. Mrs. Lichenstein suggests, "I think we should have a parent-teacher conference Claireece – me, you, and your mom" (8). Precious understands the potential reaction from her mother and not wanting the gaze of the counselor in her home space responds, "For what? I say. 'I ain' done nuffin'. I doose my work. I ain't in no trouble. My grades is good'" (8). Precious says that "Mrs Lichenstein look at me like I got three arms or a bad odor out my pussy or something," but questions, "What my muver gon' do I want to say. What is she gonna do? But I don't say that. I jus' say, 'My muver is busy'" (8). The final intrusion from Ms. Lichenstein is too much when she suggests, "Well maybe I could arrange to come to your house –"(8). Precious's response needs no words for "the look on my face musta hit her, which is what I was gonna do if she said one more word. Come to my house! Nosy ass white bitch! I don't think so! We don't be coming to your house in Weschesser or wherever the fuck you freaks live. Well I be damned, I done heard everything, white bitch wanna visit" (8).

Precious wants to leave the office and to stop the intrusion from the white outsider. Judgments and assumptions thrive in Mrs. Lichenstein's interrogation of Precious. Mrs. Lichenstein passes judgment and announces, "Well then Claireece, I'm afraid I'm going to have to suspend you," and Precious inquires "For What!" (8). The counselor continues with her script, oblivious to the tension and effect of her method on Precious, with a simple, "You're pregnant," but Precious's proclamation and claim of self-empowerment interrupts her. Precious says, "You can't suspend me for being pregnant, I got rights!" (8). Mrs. Lichenstein, whose name is ironic, follows the doctrine and gaze of the urban black child filled with disregard as she states "Your attitude Claireece is one of total uncooperation" (8).<sup>133</sup> As Precious reaches over the desk and shares, "I was gonna yank her fat ass out that chair. She fell backwards trying to get away from me 'n started screaming, 'SECURITY SECURITY'" which reinforces the sense of fear that Mrs. Lichenstein has of Precious, a black child, and the school environment mirroring the prison system to keep young people contained (9). The school tolerates an inactive and disengaged Precious. Once she seeks to express her feelings of unfairness and her rights, she is a threat and dangerous. Her expression of anger causes expulsion. Prisoners are to be under control, but when they show that they cannot be, removal is necessary. Later in the novel, Precious will experience several humane instances that reinforce the sense of a child who possesses some value. It is unfortunate that Mrs. Lichenstein can see neither this humanity nor Precious's vulnerability by the way she chooses to approach Precious.

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<sup>133</sup> Mrs. Lichenstein and Mr. Wicher provide overwhelming stereotypical historical images of white teachers in inner city black schools. Whites become the dominating authority figures in urban school environments. There is no mention of a black teacher until Ms. Rain of the alternative school. The use of stereotyping is important since whites typically have the authority to gaze without being questioned by blacks; those who are disenfranchised do not have such a luxury. The use of this reversal provides a power illustration of how race plays out in various intuitions.

The visit from Mrs. Lichenstein to Precious's home creates direct interaction between the polarized institutions in Precious's life. Previous interaction from the school with Mary proved ineffective (37). Mary wants to know why the teacher is visiting. Precious associates this interference with "My muver don't want no white shit like Mrs Lichenstein social worker teacher ass nosing around here. My muver don't want to get cut off, welfare that is. And that's what white shit like Mrs Lichenstein comin' to visit result in" (15).<sup>134</sup> Interference from any of the dominant institutions could cause a threat to the economic status of the family as welfare recipients. Precious is aware that her mother is already defrauding the system by claiming that she takes care of Precious's first child. This need for Precious to remain in the home becomes even more important as the novel progresses and the true motivation of Mary's motherhood, economic and later personal gratification, is highlighted.

Mary alters the traditional black mother image by attempting to keep her daughter in a lower station than herself.<sup>135</sup> For example, after Mrs. Lichenstein comes to the house and shares with Precious that she has made contact with the alternative school, Mary attempts to devalue the alternative school as an option by preaching, "*School?... Go down to welfare, school can't help you none, now*" (22). As a result, Precious must sneak out of their apartment. Her mother clearly sees Precious's sole purpose as a soon-to-be- two-time black teen mother is to join the government's public assistance system – welfare. Precious must strategize to escape her mother's home. She plots, "Mama sleep. I be back before she wake up, back in time to clean up

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<sup>134</sup> For Precious, whiteness represents danger and disenfranchisement since the social worker is associated with the larger dominate institution with which her mother has told her to limit contact.

<sup>135</sup> Mama Lena of Lorraine Hansberry's *A Raisin in the Sun* values education, but Mary's wishes to keep her daughter beneath her status, is a startling contrast to Hansberry's character. Mary exercises a place of entitlement as a long-term welfare recipient and feels power by reducing her daughter.

and fix breakfast for Mama,” but in her plotting she wonders, “Why Mama never do anything.”<sup>136</sup> One time I ax her, when I get up from her knocking me down, she say, That’s what you here for” (22). Precious learns that questioning her mother results in abuse, which foreshadows her behavior towards Mary’s more deviant sexual abuse, but it also highlights the lack of value that Mary places on her daughter’s existence. Her daughter must escape the apartment rather than acknowledge the “Where you going?” that Mary hollers from her room (23). Mary yells, “You hear me talking to you!” to which Precious triumphantly thinks to herself, “Fuck you bitch. Ize gone” (23). This form of rebellion is new in Precious; her transformation starts. This transformation starts with the initial catalyst, Mrs. Lichenstein, from her traditional school. All weekend she has thought and dreamt about the alternative school located at the Theresa Hotel nineteenth floor and the possibilities that education can bring. Precious excludes Mary from her excitement as she ponders the possibilities without her mother’s gaze or knowledge. As she ventures through her neighborhood to the alternative place of hope, Precious meditates on her own reality: “Men, women, and kids waiting at bus stop to go to school and downtown to work, how I’m gonna get out HER house? I hate her” (23). Unlike the other novels’ protagonists in this study, Precious actively expresses her distain for her mother. No empathy exists.

On her journey to the alternative school, Precious realizes the validity that home brings her no safety. She notices the lack of verbal attacks that she encounters during her walk and that pregnancy brings her some safety and protection as “I’m walking slow slow now. No one say nuffin’ to me now my belly big. No ‘Yo Big Mama’ ‘n ‘dat meat and no potatoes’ shit. I’m safe. Yeah, safe from dese fools on the street but am I safe from Carl Kenwood Jones? This is my second baby for my daddy, it gonna be retarded too?” (23). This is the first time in the novel that

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<sup>136</sup> This is an example of the reinforced child/servitude/object as Precious acknowledges that her mother has no skills and no utility. Precious exists to serve her mother.

she mentions the baby with a sense of concern which is important since it occurs on her way to school where she hopes for a transformation in her life. This questioning of who would protect her is ironic because her mother surrendered her opportunity to protect. Mary's failure to protect Precious is a betrayal of earlier generations in the black community who died to protect their children.

Precious recognizes that she has no protectors and begins to see her dependency on her mother as problematic. Registering at the alternative school, Precious begins to see her purpose in Mary's life. As the receptionist verifies information, she confirms that "You said your mother was receiving a check for you and your daughter?" She nod her head to my stomach" (28). Precious clarifies for the receptionist, "Not this baby! I got another one 'sides this coming'" (28). In a non-reactionary way, the receptionist says, "Oh, I see, so your mother has custody of you and your daughter, in other words you're on her 'budget'" (28). She impresses Precious who thinks, "This bitch ain' no dummy" (28). Precious respects the receptionist since she uses the government lingo that Precious understands. Precious's mentally rewarding the receptionist for her appropriate usage of the government lingo emphasizes the modeling and generational dependency of poverty. Even though Precious is not the most literate, she understands the terms that have governed her existence as a welfare recipient. After she registers for school, she reflects on the only active modeling that Mary offers her. Precious introspectively contemplates the value that she brings to her mother's life

After my baby and me come out of the hospital my muver take us down to welfare; say I is mother but just a chile and she taking care of bofe us'es. So really all she did was add my baby to her budget. She already on the 'fare wit' me so she just add my daughter. I could be on the 'fare for myself now, I think.

I'm old enuff. I'm 16. say sometime I hate my muver. She don't love me. I wonder how she could love Little Mongo (thas my daughter). Mongo sound Spanish don't it. Yeah, thas why I chose it, but what it is is short for Mongoloid Down Sinder, which is what she is; sometimes what I feel I is. I feel so stupid sometimes. So ugly, worth nuffin. (34)

This recognition of her relationship to her mother appears more prominently after Precious discovers the meaning of “alternative” or as the receptionist calls it, a different choice, and hence the possibilities that this new school can offer. Her reflection also shows the struggle that she encounters within herself. On one hand, she wants independence and self-sufficiency but nestled in her thoughts are self-doubt; she concludes that her mother does not love her. Throughout Precious’s interaction with a variety of false and true surrogates, she often comes back to the fact that her mother has never represented a nurturing presence in her life. The alternative school, due to its status in the community, offers Precious hope. Multiple interpretations possibly exist for Mrs. Lichenstein’s forwarding of Precious’s paperwork to the new school. Initially, it can appear that she has transcended from the role of a false surrogate to one who seeks to assist Precious find a more suitable educational position, but it can also be viewed as a last ditch attempt to account for a child through the paperwork maze of the public system. By introducing Precious to the alternative school, Each One Teach One, in her role as school counselor, Mrs. Lichenstein has removed her from the burden of the traditional public school system and visual accountability.

Precious’s new school home offers her an alternative family and ultimately the path into a world of surrogates. When Precious first enters the alternative classroom of Ms. Rain, she experiences the physical illness that she has associated with school in the past. Historically,

school for Precious has been a traumatic experience. When she arrives for her first day, her old negative associations surface but shift as she recognizes that the environment is drastically different. Precious is late to school because she had to escape her home without waking her mother. She steals food from the chicken place in her neighborhood since her mother does not provide her with money to get food for just herself. As Precious is on the elevator at the Hotel Theresa building where her alternative educational program will begin, she realizes that “I left my notebook and pencil in the chicken place! Goddam! And it’s 9:05 a.m. not 9:00 a.m. Oh well teacher nigger too. Don’t care if she teacher, don’t no niggers start on time” (38).

Throughout Precious’s narrative are numerous stereotypes. This “nigger teacher” stereotype for Ms. Rain is startling and important since she never once hinted that Mr. Wicher would start class late, but would associate this lack of professionalism with a black teacher. Precious has limited association with black people in the role of authority. It appears earlier in the text that her main exposure to black people has been limited to her immediate family and to the blight of her neighborhood. The closer Precious gets to her classroom, she realizes that she is “walking across the lobby real real slow” (38). She is “full of chicken, bread; usually that make me not want to cry remember, I feel like crying now” (38). This is a change for her. Her mother has always used food as a self-soothing tool for her and a weapon against her. In this instance, the food is unsettling to her as she enters a traditional institution that did not bring her comfort or safety in the past – school. As her anxiety increases, she describes her physical associations/traumas as “My head is like the swimming pool at the Y on one-three-five. Summer full of bodies splashing, most in shallow end; one, two in deep end. Thas how all the time years is swimming in my head” (38). She associates the pool image with school and a drowning overwhelming feeling. Precious begins to catalogue her early school experiences with “First grade boy say, Pick up your



lips Claireece ‘fore you trip over them. Call me shoe shine shinola. Second grade I is fat. That when fart sounds and pig grunt sounds start. No boyfriends no girlfriends” (38). Her classmates isolate her. To cope with this isolation and teasing, Precious begins to pretend. She “stare[s] at the blackboard pretending. I don’t know what I’m pretending – that trains ain’ riding through my head sometime and that yes, I’m reading along with the class on page 55 of the reader” (38). She admits that “Early on I realize no one hear the TV set voices growing out of the blackboard but me, so I try not to answer them” (38). The pool image of being overwhelmed and drowning in her school environment engulfs her. Her inability to hear in the classroom is evident in her feeling of being “Over in deepest end of the pool (where you could drown if not for fine lifeguard look like Bobby Brown) is me sitting in my chair at my desk and the world turn to whirring sound, everything is noise, teacher’s voice white static” (38). The physical reaction that Precious has to this trauma and isolation in the traditional classroom is to urinate on herself. In her self-hate, she reveals, “My pee pee open hot stinky down my thighs sssssss splatter. I wanna die I hate myself HATE myself. Giggles giggles but I don’t more I barely breathe I just sit. They giggle. I stare straight ahead. They talk me. I don’t say nuffin” (38-39). The image of drowning, the fear of teasing and the dread of repeating her urination are traumatic for Precious. The silence that occurs for Precious in grade school echoes back to the principal’s response to her peeing on herself in class and her mother’s undocumented response:

Other kids run all round. Me, Claireece P. Jones, come in 8:55 a.m., sit down, don’t move until the bell ring to go home. I wet myself. Don’t know why I don’t get up, but I don’t I jus’; sit there and pee. Teacher ack all care at first, then scream, then get Principal. Principal call Mama and who else I don’t remember. Finally Principal say, Let it be. Be glad thas all the trouble she give you. Focus on

the ones who *can* learn, Principle say to teacher. What that mean? Is she one of the ones who can't. (37)

The school institution as a whole has abandoned Precious and passed her along. She remembers getting an A in English when she knows that she is illiterate.

It takes the presence and coaxing of Ms. Rain to help Precious gain enough courage to enter into a new type of educational institution and ultimately, the physical classroom. Throughout this period, Precious is also attempting to cope with the various flashbacks of not only the trauma at school in her earlier years, but also the sources of the trauma, her reaction to the trauma, her father. She reacts by overeating, urinating on herself and spreading feces on her face. She describes how when she was “Seven, he on me almost ever night. First its just in my mouth. Then it’s more and more. He is intercoursing me. Say I can take it. Look you don’t even bleed, virgin girls bleed. You not virgin. I’m *seven*” (39). Precious has no childhood, but a forced adulthood. Now, out of her desire to try something new for herself and her future child, she makes her feet move. As she takes these steps, she shares,

I don’t say anything. Nothing in my mouth to say...I stays standing at door. I swallow hard, start to, I think I’m going cry. I look Miz Teacher’s long dreadlocky hair, look kinda nice but look kinda nasty too. My knees is shaking, I’m scared I’m gonna pee on myself, even though I has not done no shit like that in years. I don’t know how I’m gonna do it, but I am – I look at the six chairs line up neat in the back of the room. I gotta get there. (39-0)

Precious has always sat in the back of the class, out of the way. This has been one of her coping mechanisms to make herself invisible. Invisibility she thinks offers her some protection. As she tries to get to the back of the class and to her position of safety, she notes,

The whole class quiet. Everybody staring at me. God don't let me cry. I takes in air through my nose, a big big breath, then I start to walk slow to the back. But something like birds or light fly through my heart. An' my feet stop. At the first row. An' for the first time in my life I sits down in the front row (which is good 'cause I never could see the board from the back). (39-0)

Never before has it been mentioned that Precious has vision challenges. Symbolically and literally speaking, this is the first time a teacher sees Precious and guides her past her fears. Ms. Rain's initial intervention and guidance helps Precious see herself in a different light. As a result, Precious finds courage to enter the classroom. Her previous trauma and nervousness makes her claim the first seat. This proves to be another step as Precious continues her transformation into her new life and ultimately her new identity. Once Precious is established at the alternative school with a safe new family, Ms. Rain inquires if she has ever been tested for her hearing to which Precious responds no since she has been focusing on surviving.

Ms. Rain represents an alternative to how Precious has seen black women and teachers. As Precious acknowledges to herself, "[m]an don't nobody know it but it ain' no joke for me to be here in this school," Ms. Rain seeks to create a safe place in the classroom by leading introductions (40). The circle in the classroom represents a sphere – a family extension of safety. Ms. Rain is the head and maternal keeper of the circle illustrated by her method of holding the young women accountable, and by her nurturing spirit. When asked what she does good, Precious responds, "Nuffin"(46). This negative response is embraced by "'Everbody do something good,' Ms Rain say in soft voice" (46). Precious begins to revert into herself similarly to the way Pecola sought to make herself invisible. She describes her physical response of "shake[ing] my head, can't think of nuffin'. I'm staring at my shoes"; however, Ms. Rain does

not allow her to disappear. Ms. Rain witnesses this desire to disappear and gently prompts Precious with “One thing” (46). Precious grasps to this lifeline with “‘I can cook,’ I say. I keep my eyes on shoes. I never talk in class before ‘cept to cuss teacher or kids if they fuck wif me” (46). The verbal contribution of Precious removes her from the previous “policer” role and places her in the student, contributor role in the new classroom environment. It also allows her to discover that there is something that she is good at doing. This removes her from the negativity that has always surrounded her and her abilities. Also during her first break, she experiences kindness from the other girls who will become her sister-surrogates. One of the students purchases potato chips for Precious which almost causes Precious to cry again.

Ms. Rain proves that she can manage her classroom. After a confrontation in the classroom regarding another student’s correct classroom placement, Ms Rain directly asks, “Well Precious, how about you, do you feel you’re in the right place?” (48). Similar to her previous desires to tell Mr. Wicher about her illiteracy, Precious thinks, “I wanted to tell her what I always wanted to tell someone, that the pages, ‘cept for the ones with pictures, look all the same to me; the back row I’m not in today; how I sit in a chair seven years old all day wifout moving. But I’m not seven years old. But I am crying. I look Miz Rain in the face, tear is coming down my eyes, but I’m not sad or embrass” (48). This release allows Precious’s feelings associated with school to shift; she is able to claim her space by responding, “‘Is I Miz Rain,’ I axes, ‘is I in the right place?’ She hand me a tissue, say, ‘Yes, Precious, yes’” (48). Precious not only claims a seat in the first row, but for the first time she claims her education by speaking up for herself.

In the newly presented alternative spaces, Precious begins to define and to shape her own model of motherhood. As Precious, in her first class at the alternative school, reflects back to the overwhelming feelings that often accompanied her previous educational experience, she says,

I feels little music in my head. I know I'm tripping I feel the baby in my stomach. Don't feel good. I try not to think about my stomach big like this – the heavy pressing down on my bladder parts, like a fucking watermelon under my skin. See a doctor? My muver want me to go get on welfare. But I'm on welfare – hers. It's like you know, I know she ain't gonna get money for me I ain't in school; she gonna always get money for my daughter 'cause she retarded. Maybe somethin' gonna be wrong wif this baby too. I don't care, maybe if new baby Down Sinder I can get my own check. (51)

Precious begins to see herself differently and separately from her mother. She feels more aware of her relationship to her mother, and the financial dependency that her mother has created based on the welfare system. Precious's distorted inheritance from her mother connects a long-term check with a special needs child. Precious will begin to adjust in her role as mother as she experiences kindness and motherlove from others.

After her first day at school, Precious begins to assert herself with her mother. Mary is extremely displeased when as soon as Precious returns from her first day at the alternative school, she demands, "Bring your fat ass in here!," and "Where did you sneak your ass off this morning?" (55). Unlike most mothers, Mary pretends that she is unaware of where Precious has been and when Precious reminds her of her first day of school, her mother responds, "'You was school?' Mama mimic me how I talk. O hate that! She know what I mean. 'You lying whore!'" (56). Mary reveals the source of her negativity and accusatory questions as, "The welfare done

called here, saying they is removing you from my budget 'cause you not in regular attendance at school" (56). Precious thinks to herself, "JeeZUS! Where she been! I told her I got kicked out. I been home three weeks, twenty-four seven. She here when Mrs Lichenstein's white ass come here. I mean Mama what's the deal! Who stupid, me or Mama?" (56). That Mary chooses not to focus on the fact that Precious has been home and out of school or the intervention by the school counselor reinforces her disconnection from her daughter. This new school schedule will not fulfill Mary's desires and demands as Precious mimics her mother's response of "I ain' had no breakfast" (56). Precious can relate the behavior to the fact that

Oh, so that's it. She want me to cook. Mad 'cause I ain' cook 'fore I left. Shit, get tired of cooking for her. It hard for Mama to stand up long. I look at her. She ain' circus size yet but she getting there. Usta be when I go to regular school Mama make me fix breakfast, bring it to her room 'fore I leave. But since I be outta school I just fix it a little later. She know today I was goin' to alternative. (56)

Precious, the child and mother herself, remains in a caregiver-role to her own mother, Mary.

The more Precious seeks to improve herself, the more her mother seeks to confine and reduce her. Mary dismisses the fact that Precious has enrolled in school and dwells instead on the affect that it will have on her own quality of life. She tells her daughter to "Forget school! You better git your ass down to welfare!," and "Fool fuck a stipend! What's that. I said take your ass down to welfare NOW!" (56). By disregarding the value of school and reducing the value of the stipend that Precious will get to attend school, Mary creates the modeling of the welfare queen for her daughter and hopes her daughter will abandon school. In order to escape her mother's escalating madness, Precious decides to appease her mother by saying, "I go to

welfare tomorrow – Tuesday. Wednesday I go to school. Monday, Wednesday, and Friday I go to school” (57). Precious asserts herself in this interaction with her mother but complies with the request to go to the welfare office. Precious resists giving up school but admits to herself that “this gonna end, even if it end by me stop breathing” (57). She acknowledges that her environment is not healthy and possesses a continuous threat on her life. Precious thinks about her life ending sometimes, but at other times, she wants to live a full life. No one in her immediate family encourages her; therefore, Precious stewards herself and self-mothers. This interaction with her mother brings back images of her father. Often when Precious is around her mother, her mind questions how her mother is complicit in her abuse. She acknowledges her mother’s slothful-ways and ill regard for her outside of the sexual, economical, and home-keeping abilities that Precious provides. Her mother’s selfishness highlights her father’s selfishness and her parents’ overall disregard for her.

Part of Precious’s coping mechanism is to limit her time around her mother. She desires to go to her room, look at her picture of Farrakhan whom she distinguishes as “a *real* man, who don’t fuck his daughter, fuck children” (58). This valuation of Farrakhan initially functions as a contrast to her father and his actions. Later Farrakhan and his policies become problematic due to the surrogates in her life. However, Precious is unable to go to her room and rest. She tells her mother that she is tired, but she acknowledges to herself, “Why I say that, she don’t care” because her mother orders her to “Fix us some lunch, it’s way pas’ lunch. You done ate? I don’t know, see what’s in there. If not nuffin’ in there, get stamps out my purse and go to store ‘n get us’es somethin’ to eat” (58). This common interaction between the two illustrates that Mary equates Precious with food, food that Precious must fix and serve her mother. Ensuring that meals are prepared is one way that Precious cannot limit her time with her mother. This need to

create a mirror image is destructive. Precious is given money to feed them but not for school or for her appearance. The withholding of funds for appearance is the punishment for Precious disclosing her incestuous relationship to the hospital. Precious's development stopped at her abuse. Precious resists the image of mothering that her mother established.

Mary continues to discourage Precious from going to school. Exposure to the outside world gives Precious a connection, and this connection helps her continue in school. This connection affords Precious with a different type of independence. She begins physically and mentally to move away from Mary's control. Like most abuse relationships, isolation keeps the abuser in control of the abused person. For Mary keeping Precious isolated and adding to her invisibility by not being an agent in her life, empowers Mary and cripples any sense of agency in Precious. The alternative school provides a new opportunity for Precious to alter her reality, which echoes in her reflection of

Mama say this new school ain' shit. Say you can't learn nuffin' writing in no book.<sup>137</sup> Gotta git on that computer you want some money. When they gonna teach you how to do the computer. Mama wrong. I is learning. I'm gonna start going to Family Litearcy class on Tuesdays. Important to read to baby after it's born. Important to have colors hanging from the wall. Listen baby, I puts my hand on my stomach, breathe deep. Listen baby (I write in my notebook). (65)

With her "hand" on her stomach, Precious literally touches her maternal charge and connects with her baby. She documents taking control of her life. She ultimately pens her own story and future. Precious begins to challenge her mother and her mother's logic. The tool of literacy

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<sup>137</sup> Precious gains literacy to tell her life story in a way similar to Ellen who uses her lists to catalogue and maintain connection with her sister-friend Starletta. Precious uses her journal to reconnect with herself. Her journal is also used as a connection to her surrogate-mother, Ms. Rain.



becomes her weapon and path to independence. She dismisses her mother's negativity toward learning through writing. Mary's own literacy is unclear. This is again a prime example of a mother not wanting better for her daughter. Precious is using her education to create her model for motherhood. When the class is stunned to know that she has not had any prenatal care, they assume the role of mother and offer motherlove to alert her to how important it is.

Mary's involvement in Precious's life is increasingly problematic. Nowhere does the novel hint or mention that Mary is engaged in Precious's life and the well-being of her children. The interest that Mary assumes concerning Precious's school is to undermine her progress. She attempts to devalue the school by making Precious assume what she is learning is wasteful, outdated, and not progressive. Precious ignores her mother and again chooses herself. Mary's disregard and abuse surface as Precious learns to write. It is ironic that the two words that Precious knows how to spell-out in her journal when providing examples for each word in the alphabet are "dog" and "fuck" (65). Treated mostly like a dog and often called a bitch, Precious writes what she intimately knows. The shared family activity that she had been trained and modeled to fulfill is to fuck. The hand of her surrogate, Ms. Rain, enters to add spelling and clarity to her other examples. This provides Precious with another form of modeling.

Precious continues to distance herself from her mother to create a new reality. Mary's involvement is overly detrimental reinforcing Precious's marginalization. Mary's power and control rests on being all-consuming literally and figuratively in Precious's life. As Precious moves deeper into the maternal sphere of her surrogates, she becomes a stronger and more independent young woman. Early in her narrative, Precious did not see herself as a separate entity from her mother. She only saw herself in relationship to her mother's created world. Due to the confines of their small apartment, Precious had no identity outside of the image that Mary

and Carl created and maintained for her. As she begins to engage in school, Precious learns that she has value outside of her objectified state. As she gains literacy, she learns that exposure and power comes through the written world. Precious says, “I am happy to be writing. I am happy to be in school. Miz Rain say we gonna write everyday, that mean home too. ‘N she gonna write back everyday. Thas great” (62). Her journal functions as an umbilical cord to her main maternal surrogate figure, Ms. Rain. As her teacher, Ms. Rain, has influenced her and provided her with a larger perspective on life. The alternative school becomes like an extended family for Precious which is something new.<sup>138</sup> She confides that when

I go home. I’m so lonely there. I never noticed before. I’m so busy getting beat, cooking, cleaning, pussy and asshole either hurting or popping. School I a joke: black monster, Big Bertha, Blimp B54 where are you? ‘N the TV’s in my head always static on, flipping picture. So much pain, shame – I never feel the loneliness. It such a small thing compare to your daddy climb on you, your muver kick you, slave you, feel you up. But now since I been going to school I feel lonely. Now since I sit in circle I realize all my life, all my life I been outside of circle. Mama give me orders, Daddy porno talk me, school never did learn me. (62)

The loneliness and isolation, for Precious, is at the core of her relationship with her parents.<sup>139</sup>

She reflects upon the places in her life that have made her feel even more isolated and shameful: school and her parents. The notion of a safe place has been foreign to Precious. In this passage,

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<sup>138</sup> Donaldson and Hurley draw a similar connection to Ms. Rain and the other young women in the classroom as influences; however, they do not explore the full potential and power of the relationship in terms of motherhood and nurturing of Precious.

<sup>139</sup> See Liddell for a similar discussion on isolation; however, the importance as seeing the school as an umbilical cord to a maternal sphere is my different interpretation.

she acknowledges how the institution of school has let her down, but most importantly how her parents' destructive behavior abuses and limits her. Her exposure to the alternative school has given her the gift of perspective. The image of the TV in her head is important and symbolizes that it is not until now that she has been an active agent in her own life and development. The images inside her head have always been conflicting and never made much sense. Earlier in the novel, she imagines herself as a thin, white girl. She writes of her fantasy image in her journal. The alternative school provides her a way to interpret the numerous channels in her life by naming her abuse and abandonment.

Prior to going to the alternative school, Precious considered only her basic survival in her mother's world. Her mother senses that Precious's absorption with school is changing her outlook and her perception of her mother; ultimately, this exposure to school and Precious's new maternal realm is making her independent of her mother. Her mother is soon marked as "other" as the novel progresses. When Precious reflects back on her short time in the alternative school with her surrogate mother, Ms. Rain and her sister-mothers, she notes,

It been a month now. I runs in from school nowadays. I don't pretend I'm not pregnant no more. I let it above my neck, in my head. Not that I didn't know it before but now it's like part of me; more than something stuck in me, growing in me, making me bigger. I run past my muver into my room. I wish I had TV in my room. My muver never let me have TV. She say come sit with her. I don't wanna. (62-3)

Running past her mother is a way to escape the potential abuse that usually fills their interactions. The acceptance of her pregnancy is in stark contrast to the feeling and dread that her mother evoked in her in the scene when Precious fears her mother's accusations. Precious

admits that on two different occasions, “I don’t say nothin’. She been staring at my stomach. I know what’s coming. I keep washing the dishes. We had fried chicken, mashed potatoes, gravy, green beans, and Wonder bread for dinner. I don’t know how many months pregnant I am. I don’t wanna stand here ‘n hear Mama call me a slut” (9), and later, “This time I know Mama know. Umm hmmm, she know. She bring him to me. I ain’ crazy, that stinky hoe give me to him. Probably thas’ what he require to fuck her, some of me” (24). These two scenes illustrate Precious’s transformation. The notion of the pregnancy making her bigger is symbolic to the reality that her world is getting bigger and that she is becoming more accepting of not only herself but also of others who are different from her, and others are becoming more accepting of her and her abilities. For example, Precious wins the Literacy Award from the mayor as well as being described as a gifted poet (82). She now focuses on her own well-being and the future well-being of her two children.

Precious quickly realizes that her relationship with her mother cannot remain the same nor be saved. The more interactions that Precious has with others, the more she starts to realize that her family is distorted and that her family is not a healthy one. She starts to blame her mother and to acknowledge that the guilt that she has surrounding her relations with Carl are not her own. There are many spaces where a child would want her mother to be present; however, Mary is invalid for Precious. For example, prior to leaving the hospital for the second time, Precious makes up her mind that she wants to return to school. There is no mention of her mother coming to visit her during her second delivery. The person who does visit her is Ms. Rain. Her process of journaling continues even when Precious is in the hospital. This link to the school is critical since it lets Precious know that she is no longer alone. The alternative school is

a gift in Precious's life, but she suffers in invisibility to a variety of other institutions prior to joining to the alternative community with a diverse group of people.

Several individuals extend kindness to Precious prior to her participation in the alternative school. However, these individuals often function as the earlier described false surrogates. One of the first and most memorable is Mrs. West, the neighbor in Precious's apartment building. Precious shares two memories of Mrs. West's intervention, kindness, and offer of protection that recur as flashbacks when Precious is being traumatized. Mrs. West courageously intervened when Mary viciously beats Precious during her first labor in the kitchen. As she remembers begging for her mother to stop kicking her, she hears Mrs. West

pounding on the door, hollering "Mary, Mary! What you doin'! You gonna kill that chile! She need help not no beating, is you crazy!" Mama say, "She shoulda tole me she was pregnant!" "Jesus Mary, you didn't know. I *knew*, the whole building knew. Are you crazy-" "Don't tell me nothin' about my own chile"- "Nine-one-one! Nine-one-one! Nine-one-one!" Miz West screamin' now. She call Mama a fool. (9-0)

This intervention by Mrs. West probably saved the lives of Precious and her first child. It is ironic that no intervention or social worker appears at the house after this incident. It is almost as if the community protects Mary for the "perceived" sake of Precious. Members of the building probably previously observed the abused child.<sup>140</sup> The members of the community

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<sup>140</sup> A similar discussion of community responsibility takes place in Liddell's article and her critique of Patricia Hill Collin's "afrocentric feminist analysis of motherhood." I take exception with both arguments regarding the community. I agree with Liddell that the novel offers an unexplored examination of female supported communities, but the community as a whole does not intervene regardless of Mary's self-imposed isolation. The community chooses not to intervene on behalf of Precious.

function like Pecola's community in *The Bluest Eye* and the gaze of Ellen's teachers in *Ellen Foster*.

The second instance of Mrs. West's attention appears after Precious is put out of the hospital and is homeless with her second new born, Abdul. As she considers what to do after a night in the armory shelter, her mind immediately thinks about Mrs. West. Precious remembers that "Miz West! Live down the hall from us, stop Mama from kicking me to death when Mongo being born. She like me. I always did go to the store for her since I was little" (80). As Precious thinks back to her childhood, she remembers Mrs. West telling her, "Precious, bring me back a pack of Winstons and a big bag of pork rinds...Keep the change Precious" (80). This interaction with Mrs. West is the only one in the book regarding her childhood upon which Precious fondly reflects. The most important thing that occurs in this recollection is that Precious remembers, "One time she tell me, You ever wanna talk about anything you could come to me. But I never did. And I don't know her phone number now. How would she get in Mama's house to get my stuff out anyway?" (80). This offer to confide is similar to the offer that Bone's Aunt Ruth extends to her. Mrs. West attempts to draw Precious into a maternal sphere to offer some support. Her initial intervention is temporarily life-saving since there is no evidence that she reports Mary's brutal behavior to the outside authorities. Also, it is ironic that Mrs. West is the one who calls 911 for assistance, and the medic who responds represents one of the kind souls for Precious, but she does not provide the child with her number. Mrs. West provides Precious with kindness during their interactions by giving Precious an invitation to be closer and providing Precious with extra money for running errands; however, she does not fully embrace Precious by following-up and checking on Precious. Regardless, Mrs. West had made a positive impact on Precious because when she is alone and afraid, Precious remembers her.

Two medical professionals, the paramedic and the nurse, (false surrogates, however), offer some humanity to Precious. The medical institution treats Precious with both empathy and indifference. She delivers her first child on the kitchen floor as her mother beats and kicks her. During this traumatic experience, Precious meets the paramedic who instructs her to “RELAX![,]” and “he touched my forehead put his other hand on the side of my belly. ‘What’s your name?’ he say. ‘Huh?’ I say. ‘Your name?’ ‘Precious,’ I say. He say, ‘Precious, it’s almost here. I want you to push, you hear me momi, when that shit hit you again, go with it and push, Preshecita. *Push.*’ And I did” (10). In this scene of kindness in the midst of trauma, he even adds the “cita” as a term of affection, nowhere is her mother mentioned; her absence is glaring. No mention exists of her pretending to comfort Precious during her traumatic child birthing.<sup>141</sup> Childbirth and the experiences that follow, Precious must navigate alone. There is no mention of her mother entering Precious’s newly created maternal sphere or even visiting her at the hospital. This experience with the kind medic causes Precious to share how she always looks “for someone with his face and eyes in Spanish peoples. He coffee-cream color, good hair. I remember that. God. I think he was god. No man was never nice like that to me before. I asked at the hospital behind him, ‘Where that guy help me?’ They say, ‘Hush girl you jus’ had a baby” (11). This reflection reiterates that anytime someone is kind to Precious, she anoints him or her with God-like power. Even though the paramedic shows kindness to her, there is no report or deeper investigation of the details of the birth or perhaps the physical record of pain or bruises (“black and blue on the side of my head where Mama kick me” (18)) outside of her childbirth. It also would have been a space for Mrs. West to interject further aid as well. Precious experiences

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<sup>141</sup> This failure to appear mirrors Anney’s abandonment of Bone at the hospital. Anney leaves Bone with a nurse and does not tell the staff how the brutality occurs. Bone is able to craft her own story for the hospital. Precious is an unaccompanied minor who will be left to craft her own story as well.

kindness, but it is not until she firmly exists in the new maternal circle of the alternative school with her surrogate-mother, Ms. Rain, that she relinquishes fear associated with her mother.

Her second pregnancy surrounds Precious with a new support system. The women in her alternative program encourage her to dream big and to consider how she accepts her role as mother.<sup>142</sup> When she is asked the first day of class, “‘When you due?’ I say, ‘Not sure.’ She [JoAnn] frown, don’t say nothing, and go sit a couple seats away from me in the row right behind me” (41). This lack of knowledge of her due date is unacceptable. Her mother never tells her to go to the doctor, only to the welfare office, as Precious attests. The newly found maternal-family circle is a unit that works together to improve and to support each other. These women start to help Precious evolve in her own mothering by seeking to fulfill the mother-model role for her. As she rests in her room prior to having to return to her duties serving her mother, she notes,

I look down my stomach. I’m some big now. I’m only seven months but I know I look nine. I mean I am *big*. Scale just stop at 200 but I know if it a different scale like hospital scale it just keep going. I’m going to doctor tomorrow. Miz Rain fall out, I mean she fall out! When she finded out I ain’ been to doctor. PRENATAL! PRENATAL! The whole damn class is screamin’ *preeenatal!* What’s that! You gotta this, they say, and you gotta that- I don’t gotta though. I don’t tell them I had first baby on kitchen floor, Muver kicking me, pains whipping me. Who gonna believe some shit like that?” (63)

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<sup>142</sup> Later this guidance will be illustrated in Ms. Rain’s discussion with Precious regarding putting Abdul up for adoption. Ms. Rain recommends and reinforces Precious’s need to self-mother and then ultimately to consider giving her child a better life through adoption.



Precious understands the importance of going to the doctor based on the urgency of the sister-mothers. However, Precious edits her story not fully disclosing how her first child was born. This horrific image is unbelievable to her even though she lived through it.

After the birth of her second baby, Precious realizes her new path to independence will come with severing her relationship with her mother. The influence and maternal presence of Ms. Rain flourishes in Precious's thought process and decision-making. Precious shares that "Well, I don't know 'bout baby, I'm happy 'bout baby, I'm sad about baby" because she wants to continue her education but is unsure how this will work with a new child. The only thing that Precious decides that she no longer needs to do is protect her mother, so when the

Social worker come. I talk to her. She ask 'bout Little Mongo. I tell her Little Mongo wif my grandmother over on St. Nicholas Ave. I probably shouldn't have done that. But I was tired. Tired of game, lying. Miz Rain said she read the truth shall set you free; say she not sure she believe it herself. Well, this truth gonna cause Mama to get kicked off welfare. 'Cause what she been telling the 'fare is Mongo was living with her and she was taking care of bofe of us, so she was getting check for two dependent peoples and stuff. I don't know what's going to happen next. I know I gonna get my own money, but what that if I still in my mama's house? I need my own place, welfare don't give you that much. (67-8)

Unlike her mother, Precious realizes that living on the welfare system is not part of the legacy that will sustain her forever, mainly due to Ms. Rain's exposure. For example, Precious's grandmother provides modeling as a user of the system. This appears to transfer to Mary.<sup>143</sup>

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<sup>143</sup> Though no documentation in the novel confirms that Toosie is also on welfare, she is complicit in deceiving the system by keeping Mongo and appearing at times when the social worker will visit Mary's home falsely to provide the child as "physical" resident of Mary's fiefdom.

When Precious is recovering from the delivery of her second child, she writes in her journal entry “Grandmother come visit and say only a dog will drop a baby and walk off...say later not even a dog” (71).<sup>144</sup> Ms. Rain questions her grandmother’s harsh judgment of Precious for considering giving up Abdul for adoption, and asks, “Where was your grandmother when your father was abusing you?” and “What is going to be the best thing for you in this situation?”(71).<sup>145</sup> Precious is fortunate in this journal entry to have Ms. Rain reassessing the judgment of the invisible grandmother who rarely appears in Precious’s life. The grandmother in this scene echoes Mary’s desire for Precious to maintain custody of her children in order to gain more assistance dollars for the household. Precious believes these dollars are a good thing to support her children. Ms. Rain’s influence helps alter this perspective.

Precious views the removal of her first child from the apartment as a negation of her motherhood on multiple levels. Initially, she sees this removal as her mother would interpret it, as a way for her not to be troubled with a handicapped child. The birth of a disabled child is traumatic but as the novel progresses, and love and support of the various surrogates surrounds Precious, her concept of motherhood expands to include Mongo in her family with Abdul.<sup>146</sup> Precious associates female children with being handicapped or retarded. She often questions whether she is retarded. Authorities remove Mongo from her grandmother Toosie’s care and place her in a state facility. This transfer of Mongo to a state institution increases Precious’s desire to claim her child even more. Precious thinks, “I gotta get out this mutherfucker soon. I wanna finish at Each One Teach One ‘n gone get my G.E.D. I want maybe git Lil Mongo out

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<sup>144</sup> The quotation is the corrected version from Ms. Rain’s pen. Precious’s original entry reads as “Gr\_\_\_ cme vit sa onle dog dro babe an wak off...say lat no evn(circled) a dog” (71)

<sup>145</sup> Rountree also addresses the grandmother but does not assign any blame to her.

<sup>146</sup> Precious fears that her second child will be a girl as well and perhaps retarded like Mongo. Also, girl children from her experience and support groups appear to be more victimized.

retard house where she lay on floor in pee clothes” (132). Precious believes that education will afford her with job opportunities and ultimately greater independence. Her hope is that she will obtain non-menial work allowing her to support both of her children and to leave public assistance.

After Precious’s disclosure of Mary’s fraud, Precious must flee her mother’s house and count on the sister-maternal sphere of the alternative school to assist her in finding a safe place to stay. Following her first delivery, Precious tells the hospital about her incestuous relationship with her father mainly due to her being young and naive at the age of twelve; however, now with the birth of Abdul and the desire to live a truthful life regardless of the ramifications, Precious discloses the fraudulent care of Mongo and exercises her own agency. She also challenges her outlook on herself as being intellectually limited; she fosters an inner pride. She ponders employment after finishing school to support her and her two children. This is one example of her rejection of Mary’s mothering modeling. Precious is establishing her own maternal sphere by looking out for her children. She recognizes on several occasions that the only reason Mary tolerates her presence is over these checks. Precious would not have been able to make this decision or to develop the logic to protect her child without the support and exposure from her surrogate family. While in the hospital, Precious is preoccupied with the “main thing above everything else I want to go back to school. Thas all I think about – what they doing? What they reading? Did I miss the feel trip. I think I did” (68). The alternative school has provided Precious with a new lease on life, identity, and purpose. Since being at the school, she has not only refined herself but also allowed herself a voice and visibility. She is able to acknowledge her grandmother’s lack of active intervention, but also that the grandmother plays an important role as caregiver for the special needs child and shields the child from the potential abuse from

Precious's mother. Mary seeks to disengage Precious's development and maintain her lowly status, as does her grandmother. While Precious is in the hospital, she communicates with Ms. Rain through her journal. Unlike Precious's mother Mary, Ms. Rain provides Precious with maternal guidance and love. Ms. Rain questions Precious's logic with "When you are raising a small infant you need help. Who is going to help you?" to which Precious responds, "The welfare help Mama. It help me" (73).<sup>147</sup> Ms. Rain provides the outside perspective of "When you get home from the hospital look and see how much welfare has helped your mother. You could go further than your mother. You could get your G.E.D. and go to college. You could do anything Precious but you gotta believe it" (73). Ms. Rain addresses this journal entry with "Dear Precious Miss" and signs it "Love Blue Rain" which places her surrogacy of mothering in a loving context (73). Mary never addresses Precious with such warmth and love. Ms. Rain fulfills the mother role, and unlike Mary, she encourages Precious to strive for a better life.

However, Precious's truth-telling revelations enrage her mother; Mary violently expels her from her "home." Precious leaves the homeless shelter and heads to the alternative school to "wait for Ms. Rain in lobby. Maybe it be one of those days she come in early...She is shock when she walk though door and see me sitting on floor of lobby in Hotel Theresa wif Abdul in my arms. I almost forgit about me for a minute, I feel sorry for her. She just ABC teacher, not no social worker or shit, But where else can I go?" (79). Precious places Ms. Rain in her traditional experiences of teachers who do not serve as a resource outside of teaching; however, she says, "I can tell by Ms. Rain's face I'm not gonna be homeless no more" (79). Again, Ms. Rain proves that she is an active force in Precious's life as she "mumblin cursing about *what* damn safety net, most basic needs, a new born child, A NEWBORN CHILD!" (79). Ms. Rain

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<sup>147</sup> "Th wfr hlp mma it help mi" (*Push*, 73)

takes action, and Precious reports, “No class, all of Each One Teach One is on the phone! They calling everybody from Mama to the mayor’s office to TV stations! Before the day is up, Ms. Rain say, you gonna be living somewhere, as god is my witness. As GOD is my witness!” (79). Ms. Rain’s rage causes action and results on behalf of Precious. When it is discovered that the placement will move Precious away from Harlem, Ms. Rain’s boss intervenes and Precious says, She “git on phone. She is West Indian woman, don’t take no shit. Boyfriend sit on some council. She hang up phone, say, They can take her tomorrow” (79). The quick and direction action of all the women at the alternative school secures housing for Precious. Precious obtains a position at a group home with childcare and continues her education. The day without a place to stay becomes an experience as Precious sees first hand how her surrogates will assist. As an extension of her sister-surrogates, Precious reports that “everyone says I can stay over their house” to provide a safe place until she can assume her place at the group home (79). Due to a friend of Ms. Rain, Precious ends her traumatizing experience of being homeless with an infant and stays at the Langston Hughes house in Harlem for this one evening. This is important and links Precious back to the new learning experiences that the alternative school has provided. Precious excitedly shares that “I SPEND ONE NIGHT IN LANGSTON HUGHES HOUSE HE USED TO LIVE IN. Me and Abdul in the Dream Keeper’s house!” (80). Precious’s sister-mothers and Ms. Rain provide her with the basic necessities that she needs in her new home. She shares that “Most of what we got Ms. Rain give us. I would like a job, a paycheck – be able to buy what I want when I want it” (80). As Precious describes her room, points out the “main good thing” about her placement at Advancement House, the group home, is “they got somebody we can trust to take care of our babies while we go to school for four hours a day, three times a week” (80). This safe place for Abdul is as critical to Precious as she embraces her role as

mother as is her acknowledgment that had she gone to the first group home in Queens, it would have meant “no Ms Rain, no school” (80). Precious places these three things (safe place for Abdul, school, and Ms. Rain) as her main priorities and blessings. This leaves Precious dependent on the goodness and safety provided by her surrogate family.

After Precious escapes her mother, Mary attempts to re-enter her life. When Mary appears at the group home, Precious gazes upon her. She allows herself to see the similarities between them, but she witnesses the grotesque person that Mary represents. Her mother is uninvited and is an intrusion upon what has become a safe space. “Your daddy dead” is the message that Mary delivers (85). Then, she bluntly gives the reason for his death with no empathy or buffer as she tells Precious, “Carl had the AIDS virus” (85). Precious thinks, “You know, so, what, why you telling me” (85). When Precious realizes the reasons for the disclosure, she grasps the urgency with “Then oh! No! Oh no, I get all squozen inside. Carl fucks me. I could be done have it. Abdul could be – oh no, I can’t even say nuffin’. A long time I don’t say nuffin’, jus’ look at Mama” (85). Precious judges her mother and their lives, concluding, “[t]his what I come out of? Like Abdul and Little Mongo come out of me. If she ever said a kind word to me I don’t remember it” (85). Precious’s inability to recall any kind words from her mother diminishes any possible empathy for Mary. In her disbelief of her mother’s behavior, Precious acknowledges that for “[s]ixteen years I live in her house without knowing how to read. Since I was little her husband fuck me beat me. My daddy” (85). Precious directly blames her mother for her illiteracy and indirectly blames her for the incest. Like many incest victims, Precious is conflicted.<sup>148</sup> This deep conflict surfaces when she says, “I want to hate him – but it’s funny I, he, give me the only good thing in my life aside from Ms Rain, ABCs, and girls at school; Abdul

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<sup>148</sup> Studies show that incest victims question if they are the cause for the abuse. See Hurley and Hurley, McNaron and Morgan, and Peter.

come from him, my son, my brother” (85). Precious embraces motherhood by accepting the complex mother-sibling relationship regardless of the circumstances that gave her the children. The children for Precious function as an opportunity. They provide her with purpose. It is clear that Precious sees her role as a mother very differently than does Mary. And she places the most dangerous sin at her mother’s feet, “But Mama give me to him. This my mother. Carl come in the night, take food, what money they is, fuck us bofe” (85). Exposure in alternative school has allowed Precious to read literature as well as to begin to learn how to think critically. Precious draws strength from the community trauma that has been around her at the alternative school and her support groups (incest survivor and HIV/AIDS). As a result, she can process that “[s]omething cross my mind now. Man rape Celie [Walker’s *The Color Purple*] turn out not to be her daddy...Carl, was he my real daddy? Was you married to him for real?” (85-86). When Precious poses this question to her mother, Mary interprets it as an assault on her womanhood and fidelity with “He your daddy, couldn’t no one else be your daddy I was with him since I was sixteen. I never been with nobody else” (86). Mary discloses that she is also the other and marginalized by Carl with “We not married though, he got a wife though, a real wife, purty light-skin woman he got two kids by” (86). As the long-term “other” woman groomed by Carl, Mary is totally disconnected from identifying her own objectification. This interaction also brings to light Precious’s legacy and legitimacy. Precious in her repulsion to this discloser wonders, “Hummm, they got special kinda AIDS for yellow bitches?” and then quickly asks, “Mama...’You got it?’” (86). To which Mary responds with “No. “We never did, you know – You know...What you got to do to get it” (86). In utter disbelief and shock, Precious directly asks her mother, “He never fuck you” (86). Mary simply responds, “Oh, yeah,” and makes a point to clarify her response with “But not like faggots, in the ass and all, so I know” (86).

Precious sees the discrepancy in her mother's logic. She also recognizes the destruction that Mary brought to her by her association with Carl. Precious fully internalizes her feelings and thinks, "Her voice trail off, stupid bitch. I'm jus' staring at her. I wanna kill her. I remember what I know from AIDS Awareness Day at school. Look at Mama, say 'You better get tested'" (86). This interaction with her mother is again another example of the reverse parent-child role. Precious assumes the role of mother in the conversation. She distances herself from her mother's disregard and makes a possible lifesaving suggestion to her. Mary reveals her isolation with her erroneous knowledge regarding AIDS/HIV (86).<sup>149</sup> Mary's comments about Carl's legal wife and family as pretty further exemplifies her illusionary life. Mary falsely believes her heterosexuality protects her from the death sentences of AIDS.<sup>150</sup>

Precious must learn to look past the presence of the architect of this family, her father, Carl Kenwood Jones, in order to claim her own agency and identity. Carl represents the devil that created a living hell for a child. Outside of knowing that he was born in the Bronx at the same hospital as his illegitimate daughter, the reader knows nothing else of Carl's life. He is silent in the text outside of Precious's flashbacks or Mary's painted image. Several scholars highlight this startling omission but tend to devalue it by expressing that Sapphire's portrayal of Carl is sufficient.<sup>151</sup> His deceitful nature of appearing only at night throughout the novel reinforces his double identity. The tone in which Mary shares with Precious that the man she has known as her father has another family is startling. During this confession, Mary also divulges

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<sup>149</sup> This negative response and discriminatory language probably influences Precious initial perception of gays and lesbians until she develops a bond with Ms. Rain and Jeramine. This language usage mirrors the earlier usage of "cunt."

<sup>150</sup> This is a historical emphasis since during the 1980s many thought the HIV/AIDS virus was limited to the homosexual/bisexual communities.

<sup>151</sup> Liddell's argument highlights Carl's lack of character; however, the lack of information that the narrator has on her own father makes the weight of protection even more focused on the mother who allowed this "stranger" into their lives. Also, Carl's disconnect is grossly evident by his wanting to marry Precious during sex (24).



that she has never been with another man, a defense against Precious's suggestion that he might not be her father (86). Mary's confession and defense does not articulate the reality that Carl has been both their daughter's and her own sexual partner. Precious describes him like as a night intruder who created a false family (85). Mary fails her only child by risking her long-term health. Carl "goes away" for long periods, sometimes years especially around Precious's pregnancies, so it was not odd that he had been missing from the picture.<sup>152</sup> It is almost as if the image of his pregnant daughter/rape victim is too much to witness which is quite different from Mary who chooses a life of isolation in her fiefdom of her welfare-subsidized apartment, or it is perhaps the fear that some outside authority will actually act on behalf of the child. Mary also reduces her child to a slave-like commodity to sustain her own distorted existence. Precious describes her life as tumbling like a washing machine at a laundromat. The laundromat is a place one visits. Precious's comparison of her life as spinning machine is a visual metaphor of their house and their physical bodies being like a Laundromat for Carl, a place to visit to commit his atrocities. His visits further reduce a marginalized woman, Mary, but it takes Mary to actively engage and allow his behavior to influence her parenting.

Carl establishes a destructive form of parenting; Mary becomes a willing follower by surrendering her role as the mother and protector under his influence. The child becomes the negative center of the household. The potential age difference is missing between the two; also, missing is any objection or commentary from Toosie, Mary's mother and the assumed female figure in her life. This is the first model behavior, welfare, that Mary follows, and Carl's parenting of sexual and physical deviance is the next; however, she holds the responsibility for

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<sup>152</sup> This is a similar image of Cholly covering Pecola after he rapes her in *The Bluest Eye*.

the outcome and journey of her daughter into a new found hell.<sup>153</sup> Mary's initial outlook on motherhood shifts as she allows Carl to enter her realm of motherhood.

The outside alternative institution directly questions Mary's role and motives as mother. Ms. Weiss, a counselor at the grouphome, reveals Mary's surrendering of mothering and protector roles. Mary has been repeatedly calling the group home to talk to Precious, and as part of her therapy, Ms. Weiss suggests that Precious "*should see her*" (131).<sup>154</sup> Precious, unsure of the benefit, asks, "Why I should?" (131). Ms. Weiss attempts to place Precious in a position of control with "For your own good, for yourself, to see what she has to say" (132). Precious is still distrustful of Ms. Weiss and the entire social service system which is echoed in "I think Ms Weiss jus' freak mind. Lie to Mama, bullcorn me. Probably Mama think coming here talking to Ms Weiss in counselin' session gonna git me back, me'n Abdul" (132). Precious sees the social worker as a trickster because she feels Ms. Weiss probably led her mother to believe there was a hope in retrieving her. As a result, Precious has difficulty surrendering to this process and trusting the intervention from Ms. Weiss. Precious's distrust becomes more evident throughout the therapy session. As Precious focuses on making a better life for herself and her two children, Ms. Weiss desires for her to reflect back to her earliest memory of her mother. This memory written through Precious's own hand in her journal is revealing

whut is my erlist ~~memory~~ memory of my mother? a room that's small fillt up wif  
my parents. it smell. can of mackerel left open in kitchen on hot day that's what  
makes me remember. that smell. he put his ball in my face. years like wash

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<sup>153</sup> Though not mentioned in the text, it would be interesting to consider if Carl's HIV/AIDS was a result of another type of double lifestyle as a gay male similar to the images that Morrison crafts of Soaphead Church in *The Bluest Eye* who could not bear the thought of physically being with a man but used young girls to satisfy his sexual fantasy as a pedophile.

<sup>154</sup> Italics my emphasis – an outside force will again be a catalyst to Precious's journey.

machine aroun and around. mama jaw open like evil wolf. the smell deeper than toilet. her fingers pick apart my pussy. night. poisoned rat. don't have dreams.

(132-3)

The journal carries her back to the trauma and connects her to the current revelation of trauma that she is about to hear from her mother.

The social worker, Ms. Weiss, directs the therapy session. Signaling Precious is present in the moment of trauma, after she reads her documentation of her abuse and closes her book, Ms. Weiss directly questions her mother: "Well Mary, you want to begin by talking a little bit about the abuse?" (133). This is the first time that someone publicly outside of Mrs. West's intervention asks Mary about abusing Precious. Mary replies, "What 'buse?" To which Ms. Weiss uses the record that marks Precious's life, the institutional file as the foundation for her disclosure, "Well according to Precious' files she has had two children by your boyfriend, the late Carl Kenwood Jones, who is also *her father*?" (133). Ms. Weiss then shifts the accountability directly to Mary by saying, "You've been calling here saying you want to be reunited with your daughter and grandson, that you want them to come home. Well I think you'd better explain just what happened in that home" (133). Precious responds to this line of questioning, thinking, "Oh Mama, please don't go for this!," and "Mama please be quiet" (133). Precious seeks to control the situation and to protect her incest secret through her thoughts. Though Precious has started to come to terms with her identity as a raped and abused child, she is not ready to surrender and to allow an outsider from the larger culture to judge and to pry any further into her life. Her pleas in her mind seek to protect her abuser and also herself. Mary responds seeking to reclaim Precious with "Well, I, Precious, b'long at home" (133). What Mary

describes makes the notion of home into a living hell. Mary discloses in her defensiveness how it all started and the shift that came in her motherhood

I guess, he come over you know. I wake up at night, moring he not wif me, I know he in there wif her. When it first start? I don' know. I'm a good mother. She had everything. I done tole her that. Pink 'n white baby carriage, little pink bootie socks, dresses; everything I put on her pink. Precious, she, so smiling and healthy. A day don't go by I don't take her out wheeling in the air. Even when it's cold I take her out, to church, to somewhere, me 'n Carl – my husband, I call him – loves Precious. I loves him. I dream of day we gonna you know, git married, git house wif grass, color TVs in all the rooms. Precious born about the same time as Miz West son that got kilt. You remember him don't you Precious.

(133-4)

This memory links Precious directly to a false surrogate, Mrs. West, who loses her maternal connection through the death of her own child. This description resembles the child-like fantasy life that Precious has created for herself as her own defense and coping mechanism. Initially, Mary's story seems normal.

Mary paints a picture of the perfect triad and family. She describes Precious in anointed pink, ideal color of little girls. When does it shift to become the image that Precious remembers with semen on her dress? Precious's memory is "I see me, first grade, pink dress dirty sperm stuffs on it" (18). However, Mary attempts to reframe the initial start of Precious's abuse with happiness. She carefully constructs her re-telling as a picture-perfect story where the abuse appears sudden, subtle, and random. Mary's references while telling of the story of Precious's abuse are a mixture of painted pride and happiness, "But ooh whee! Precious fast! She walkin'

talkin’ - everything ‘fore Miz West son. Her teef, everything. Teef growing like Bugs Bunny or something!” (134). Mary’s created story also harbors deceit, “He born summertime ‘bout same time as you” (134). Precious interrupts the painted story with “‘I born November.’ . . . Least that what I always thought” to which Mary continues “Yeah yeah thas right. My little Scorpio chile! Scorpio’s crafty. I ain’ sayin’ they lie, jus’ you cain’t always trust ‘em” (134). These two contrasting images are important. Mary does not typically refer to Precious in loving ways because her typical designations suggest limited intellectual abilities or sexual references. The suggestion that Scorpios lie reinforces that she considers Precious a trickster and hence that Precious invents her abuse.<sup>155</sup> This attempt to deceive does not work and causes even Precious to wonder, “What is she talkin’ about!” as Mary delays any sort of responsibility to when and to how the abuse started, and then continued (134).

Mary’s recollection of Precious’s childhood seeks to coach Ms. Weiss. Precious does not recall or associate any of these perfect childhood pictures with her life. Her mother attempts to use this intrusion in Precious’s life as a way to recast the image and memories of childhood and the time that the “family” has spent together. By reinserting and stressing “you remember” in her story, “She can do little dance steps and he hardly walking. I put on Kool and the Gang, remember Precious, *you remember?* I put on Kool and the Gang and you disco to that?,” she hopes to alter Precious’s thinking away from a totally negative and destructive childhood (my emphasis 134). This recasting of memories also includes the main architect for the parenting model, Carl. Mary says “[s]he had a happy childhood all ‘n all, Carl jus’ a high-natured man...” (134). Describing Carl as “high-natured” is a vast understatement to describe the man who introduces sexual abuse into their illusionary “family” triad in his role as adulterer. As Mary

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<sup>155</sup> See Peter for discussion of challenges to validity of incest especially mother-driven incest.

focuses on the question of when the abuse started, Precious thinks to herself “I don’t believe Mama! Why don’t she jus shut up with this diarrhea shit” (134). This disbelief is partly because Precious remains distrustful of the overall system, and she does not want to have the full abuse disclosed. It is too painful to hear, to know and to acknowledge that one’s mother is complicit and actively engages in one’s sexual abuse. Mary draws Precious and the gazing Ms. Weiss deeper into her defense of the abuse by this “high-natured” man. “When? I don’t know when it start. When I remember it? She still little. Yeah, around three maybe. I give her a bottle. I still got milk in my bresses but not for her but from Carl sucking. I give him tittie, Precious bottle. Hygiene, you know?” (134). The notion of a man rather than a child getting milk from a mother’s breast is odd, even grotesque. The reoccurring theme of milk as a symbol of nurturing that bypasses daughters in favor of men reiterates the lack of priority, protection, nurturing, and sustenance from the mother-daughter relationship. It casts men as patriarchal thieves.

The lack of logic in sustaining a man-child extends into Mary’s description of her relationship with Carl. A reoccurring motif in the previous novels is the relationship of the actual mothers with their claimed men. These feminized men who are man-children seek to claim their manhood and mark their territory on the female children in their lives. This description is also evident in the life stories of the other girls at Each One Teach One. As a result, these girls offer little resistance or support and receive little from the traditional protectors of children, their mothers. As Mary tells of the transference of her breast milk from her child for nurturing to her man-child, Ms. Weiss responds with “‘Huh?,’ and Mary responds back with “‘Huh?’” hinting that Mary sees nothing wrong with this action and resents Ms. Weiss judgment (135). To the outside world, Mary’s microcosm of parenting causes disbelief. It is in complete contrast to the motherhood that Precious establishes outside of her mother as her motherhood

model. Ms. Weiss attempts to connect and make sense of Mary's story by inquiring, "You mention something about hygiene in connection with...with ..." but as Precious witnesses, "Ms Weiss can't finish" (135). Her inability to finish the sentence, to press the illogical nature of the thought is another example of Mary escaping full accountability and remaining in her crafted world. Mary also avoids her own sexual transgressions and instead tells on Carl. Mary seeks to clarify her own logic by defending her choices with "I bottle her, tittie him. Bottle more better for kidz. Sanitary. But I never git dried up 'cause Carl always on me. It's like that you know. Chile, man- a woman got bofe. What you gonna do?" (135). This reference gives Mary, the mother, a dual allegiance instead of one main role as mother to Precious. This image of a child and a man completes the family triad, but the actions and explanations that follow destroy Mary's perfectly painted image that she attempts to create and reinforce her willingness to comply with Carl's parenting models.

The re-telling that follows directly places Precious's hellish existence at the gates of Mary's motherhood. Mary explains, "'So we in bed. I put her on one side of me on pillow, Carl on other side me.' Ms Weiss look like she done stopped breathing" (135). This places the mother in the center of the relationship, and ultimately, the one held symbolically accountable. Mary continues her story under the gaze of Precious and Ms. Weiss to attempt to explain "IT" with "Carl got my tittie in his mouf. Nuffin' wrong wif that, it's natural. But I think thas the day IT start. I don't never remember nothing before that. I hot. He sucking my tittie. My eyes closed. I know he getting hard I see him wifout my eyes, I love him so much" (135). Mary associates love with sex. Precious recognizes the problematic nature of the description and thus wonders, "Umm hmm, I was raised by a psycho maniac fool" and responds to Mary's description "He

climb on me, you know. You unnerstand?” with “No, tell us some more stupid bitch” (135).<sup>156</sup>  
 Mary then vividly discloses how she, the center of the family, allows “IT”:

So he on me. Then he reach over to Precious! Start wif his finger between her legs. I say Carl what you doing! He say shut your big ass up! This is good for her. Then he get off me, take off her Pampers and try to stick his thing in Precious. You know what trip me out is it almost can go in Precious! I think she some kinda freak baby then. I say stop Carl stop! I want him on *me*! I never wanted him to hurt her. I didn’t want him doing *anything* to her. I wanted my man for myself. Sex me up, not my chile. So you cain’t blame all that shit happen to Precious on *me*. I love Carl, I love him. He her daddy, but he was my man! (135-6)

Mary defines her self-worth through Carl and not her child. Possession of a man was more important than protecting her Precious child. Words like “anything” and “cain’t blame” remove Mary from the confession as she attempts to place herself in the victim role but it does not work.<sup>157</sup> Mary represents another example of a mother who defines herself through the male lens.

The emphasis and blame that Mary places on the ruin of the family unit rests with Precious. The mother’s abandonment comes full-circle as she re-tells the initial rape of her own daughter in front of her own eyes by the intrusion from the institution. She tells about her compliance and her submission to her “husband’s” abusive language of “shut your big ass up”

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<sup>156</sup> Precious’s disbelief and annoyance with Mary is multi-faceted. The first issue is that this intimate conversation is occurring under the white gaze of Ms. Weiss. The second issue is that Mary’s “check-in” language does nothing to soften the impact of her words. And most importantly, it is unconscionable how a mother, Precious now being a mother herself, could allow something like this to occur. Mary builds suspense in her description of Carl’s parenting model but leaves her role in the abuse out. This is too painful for Precious to challenge.

<sup>157</sup> See Rountree, Hurley, and Donaldson for a discussion of Mary as a victim. This characterization is problematic since it relieves Mary of responsibility.



and accepts his parenting model of what would be “good for her.” Mary reduces Precious from a little girl in pink to a “freak baby” (136). She does not tell Carl to stop because of the trauma that her daughter will endure through this abuse, but she directs him to stop out of her own desires for sexual pleasure and fantasized ownership of a man.

In Mary’s world, having Carl completes the triad and defines family and legitimacy. She uses her position as the other to embrace her role as a consolidated Mammy/Jezebel figure. She continues to call him her husband even though she is well aware that he has another family. She accepts his behavior as normal. These choices allow the abuse to exist as a parenting model that then develops into an undocumented (in African American literature) vicious form of motherhood. After hearing this story and wishing that her mother would cease with the re-telling of the start of her own abuse, Precious says, “Ms Weiss look at me now. ‘Precious, you’ve been writing in your journal about this’ to which Precious responds ‘This and other stuff’” (136). This vague response from Precious is critically important since Precious’s entire life no longer revolves around the maternal sphere of Mary but also includes her hopes, dreams, and thoughts for the future which is illustrated in her various journal entries. When Mary attempts to interject herself back into Precious’s present life with “She write poems too, lady at Each One Teach One say,” Precious thinks, “This from Mama. Mama one hundred, not ninety nine, percent crazy” (136). Precious does not fall for the re-casting of Mary in the role of mother but rejects her presence in her present life, especially in opposition to the positive contributions and activities that she receives from her new maternal realm of the alternative school. Mary hopes that this act of caring will prove to Precious (but more importantly to the outside authority) that she knows and cares about the experiences in her daughter’s life as is reflected in her “maternal pride.” Based on her own pride and desire for privacy, however, Precious does not reveal her mother’s

direct sexual abuse to the outside authority. Precious allows her incest to rest with Carl, a male sexual predator. She mirrors her mother in placing and directing blame.

Mary attempts to enact a chameleon state of motherhood. Precious portrays a very different image of her mother; however, Mary seeks to shield herself from judgment. There are no soft endearing words from Mary offered to Precious as the shift in their maternal relationship goes from Mother-Protector to Sexual-Competitor. When Ms. Weiss asks Precious ““Would you like to share some of that in this session?,”” Precious responds, “No” (136). As the institutional authority, Ms. Weiss attempts to push Precious to share by challenging, “Why not?” to which Precious pushes back with “Ms Rain say journal completely confidential. Share if you want. If you don’t want to, don’t. I don’t want to” (136). This exercise of power by Precious frees her not only from her mother’s retelling and recasting of Precious’s own traumatic experience, but it also frees her from the gaze of Ms. Weiss, and, in a larger sense, any obligation to the previous institutions that have failed her. This act of defiance, or refusal to share, is another example of Precious choosing to self-mother and to self-nurture. What follows is an important part of Precious’s ongoing development of how she will continue to self-mother and access her own newly created maternal sphere for safety, nurturing, and protection.

Precious recognizes that no healthy space exists for her in Mary’s festering maternal sphere. After this therapy session with Mary, Precious escapes the presence of her mother and Ms. Weiss with “I’m gone. It’s 4:45 p.m....I hate Mama, she ain’t shit. I feel like nothing around her, like *minus* nothing, I gotta get out of here” (136). Being less than nothing is a powerful image. Mary confirms that there was no nurturing for Precious after she accepted Carl’s parenting model. Precious’s interaction with one of her surrogates, Ms. Mom, the housemother, further amplifies Mary’s abandonment. As Precious becomes less isolated, she has safe maternal

spaces to enter after her mother repeatedly rejects her. Associating and claiming this housemother in her maternal sphere grounds Precious. Precious feels safe with the housemother; however, the other women at the temporary halfway house and her birth mother do not garner the same response.<sup>158</sup> The housemother provides Precious with a sense of stability and support that their interactions illustrate. It is pivotal that Precious is able to enter this space after leaving her betrayer, Mary. Mary's hateful defense of her mothering is a complete rejection of the potential of Precious, the child and the young woman. The housemother attempts to calm Precious down with "Stop screaming!" she say. "What's wrong with you?" (136). Precious deflects the source of her animation with a request, "You could get Abdul from nursery, feed him, and keep a eye on him till I get back so I could go to Body Positive meeting?" (136). The housemother responds with "Tonight's not your night-" to which Precious enters a child-like plea of "Pleeezzze I gotta get outta here!" (137). Ms. Mama draws Precious into her maternal sphere, ironically, by asking "What happened with your mama?" which alerts the reader to the fact that she is intimately aware of Precious's life and happenings. Precious imitates her mother's victimless based defense "You cain't blame all what happened to Precious on me. I wanted my man for myself! I wanted my man for myself!" (137). Her housemother rejects Mary as mother and embraces Precious's need to get out of the environment that Mary has tainted: "Now ain' that one to go down in the history books. Yeah, I'll keep that little ol' bad boy! You got a lot of time before six-thirty, why don't you git you some dinner before you run out of here?" (137). The housemother also recognizes that Precious is attempting to self-mother/self-nurture by placing herself in a safe place and seeks to become as helpful as possible as a conduit. Precious discloses again, the importance of her journal as a lifeline for her survival

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<sup>158</sup> Precious comments in the novel about the thefts that occur within the half-way house as well as the attitude towards her by some of the girls after she knows she is HIV positive.

with “I was gonna take my journal book and write on the bus, ‘steadda taking the train.” (137). As Precious prepares to go to her group session, a source of self-nurturing and support, another revelation occurs. Precious describes the housemother: “She go in her pocket get out that ol’ blue change purse, so ol’ it look like somebody blue grandmother and hand me three dollars” (137). In her reaction to this kindness, Precious confirms that “Something tear inside me. I wanna cry but I can’t I think how alive I am, every part of me that is cells, proteens, nutrons, hairs, pussy, eyeballs, nervus sistem, brain”(137). This act by the housemother helps reinforce that there are people who care and love her. She reinforces this newly found embrace with the positive things in her new life with “I got poems, a son, friends. I want to live so bad. Mama remind me I might not. I got this virus in my body like cloud over sun. Don’t know when, don’t know how, maybe hold it back a long time, but one day it’s gonna rain. I start to cry but it’s ‘cuz I’m mad” (137). Precious describes how “Miz Mom wipe my face give me two more dollars! ‘Umm, I should cry more often!’ ‘Ain’ you about a mess! Git outta here!’” (137). Ms. Mom’s maternal act of wiping Precious’s face provides Precious with physical comfort that has been foreign in her developmental experiences. Precious realizes that she must distance herself from the space to join one of her support groups.

The clarity in Precious’s life comes from her exposure to other people and accepting that everyone is on a path to something. Precious says, “everybody in this house go to meetings, in ‘recover,’ but questions “What I’m in recovery for?” (138). Precious recognizes and accepts her housemates’ recovery; however, her growth will entail recognizing and accepting that her recovery is a direct result of her experiences with a destructive and bad mother. Precious continues, “I ain’t no crack addict. I git so mad sometimes. Mama jus’ pour my life down the drain like it’s nothing. I got all this shit to deal wif” (138). Unlike other people’s addiction that

results from personal choice, Precious is a defenseless child who inherits her mother's negligence and ill-regard. Mary turned her destructive desires on her daughter and left her to survive on her own. Nothing in this recreated image of motherhood is endearing.

Prior to her interaction with her surrogate family, Precious defined herself as an uneducated, traumatized black mother. The initial lines of the text introduce the reader to Precious in her own words. She shares, "I was left back when I was twelve because I had a baby by my fahver. That was in 1983. I was out of school for a year. This gonna be my second baby," and "I got suspended from school 'cause I'm pregnant which I don't think is fair. I ain' did nothin'!" (3). This description highlights how Precious not only sees herself, but also how she knows that she has not caused her current marginalization in society. We also learn that she got left back again in second grade as well "'cause I couln't read (and I still peed on myself)," and that she should be graduating, but she is not. By her own hand, Precious acknowledges the failures in her life (3). She at last introduces herself formally to the reader by name with "My name is Claireece Precious Jones. I don't know why I'm telling you that. Guess 'cause I don't know how far I'm going with this story, or whether it's even a story or why I'm talkin'" (3). This crafting of her story, and claiming of her life experiences, is part of the exercise that begins with her alternative school environment with her surrogate Ms. Rain. In her early description, the delayed acknowledgement of her own name mirrors her delayed development in literacy as well as her delay in recognizing herself as a victim. She enters the story as the storyteller of her experience. This first person account allows the reader to enter the narrative. Similar to the other young female narrators who are also adolescents, Precious is unsure of herself and her own story. She tells the reader

Whether I'm gonna start from the beginning or right from here or two weeks from now. Two weeks from now? Sure you can do anything when you talking or writing, it's not like living when you can only do what you doing. Some people tell a story 'n it don't make no sense or be true. But I'm gonna try to make sense and tell the truth, else what's the fucking use? Ain' enough lies and shit out there already? (3)

As she establishes the purpose of her story, Precious acknowledges that the process of talking and writing affords a different luxury to just living since living is in the moment. She takes on the responsibility as crafter of her own story and experience that it is a powerful assertion and shifts from the image she initially presents as a marginalized child. Precious claims her life. She also acknowledges her need to tell the truth and to dispel the lies that have been surrounding her very existence and perceived position in society.

Precious seeks to reclaim her own childhood by reclaiming herself and her mothering methods. In a pivotal scene, she attempts to reconnect with her robbed childhood. In a dream, she hears herself choking and

going a huh a huh A HUH A HUH A HUH. I am walking around trying to find where I am, where the sound is coming from. I know I am chocking to death I don't find myself. I walk to my muver's room but it look different. She is talkin' sweet to me like sometimes Daddy talks. I am choking between her legs A HUH A HUH. She is smelling big woman smell. She say suck it, lick me Precious. Her hand is like a mountain pushing my head down. I squeeze my eyes shut but chocking don't stop, it get worse. Then I open my eyes and look. I look at little Precious and big Mama and feel hit feeling, feel like killing Mama. But I don't,

instead I call little Precious and say Come to Mama but I means me. Come to *me* little Precious. Little Precious look at me, smile, and start to sing:

ABCDEFGF...(59)

This self-reclaiming only starts to take place when Precious has entered the alternative school whose environment provides a nurturing extension of the maternal sphere. Precious rejects the need to respond to the abuse by violent tactics inherited from her mother and father. She notes that her mother's voice is sweet like her father's voice which only occurs when they place their child, Precious, into sexual servitude. The directions that Mary gives Precious are teaching her to assume the role of "pleasurer." Mary nurtures her only as a part of her predatory control of Precious, sexually abusing her. Precious realizes that her own mother is a lost cause and that she can save herself; hence, she calls herself to nurture the inner child. Precious, through this dreamlike state, becomes her own savior since no one else comes to rescue her from the numerous days and nights of enduring sexual, mental, and physical abuse. She is able to overcome the abuse and the power of Mary by choosing to embrace and to respond to her own inner child with the kindness that never existed, her own maternal realm. By focusing on herself as a child, Precious creates a new modeling for her own motherhood and provides herself with her own motherlove, which will become more evident as she seeks to self-nurture herself and her son through gaining her education. Her literacy gives her a voice that those who should have been her primary protectors and nurturers, her parents, social workers and her traditional public school educators, robbed from her so many years before.

Through her literacy and writing, Precious is able to clarify the reasons for her nonexistent childhood and places these sources in their correct space by assigning responsibility. Her reflection in which she physically appears to be a mirror image of her mother is also

important. Previously, Precious had acknowledged and gazed at her body: “I stand in tub sometime, look my body, it stretch marks, ripples. I try to hide myself, then I try to show myself” (32). In this gaze, she sees the transference of her mother projected on to her. She also bears witness to the marks of abuse that appear on her body and should not mark her young frame. When she “ax [her] muver for money to git [her] hair done, clothes,” Precious discloses, “I know the money she got for me – from my baby. She usta give me money; now every time I ax for money she say I took her husband, her man” (32). Through her self-development and awareness, Precious desires to improve herself. These things, hair and clothes, might seem superficial, but they are things that allow Precious to embrace her identity as a young child, and not the projection of her devalued mother. Precious is able to absorb her mother’s misrepresentation with a staunch correction: “Her man? Please! Thas my mutherfuckin’ fahver! I hear her tell someone on phone I am heifer, take her husband, I’m fast” (32). Pointedly she questions and draws attention to the source of her problems and her painful existence, thinking,

What it take for my muver to see me? Sometimes I wish I was not alive. But I don’t know how to die. Ain’ no plug to pull out. ‘N no matter how bad I feel my heart don’t stop beating and my eyes open in the morning. (32)

Precious’s desire for visibility comes full circle as she painfully acknowledges that the one closest to her, her mother, is incapable of seeing her. This is like a silent death to Precious. Precious begins to connect to the outside world and can as a result comment on her mother in a new way. The trauma from Mary causes Precious to want to be dead. Mary’s lack of compassion and protection of Precious reinforces Precious’s marginalized state and causes her to greater disposition in her current reality. Though only hinted at in the text, Mary probably contributed to the state of Baby Mongo’s health (based on the lack of prenatal care and inflicting



physical trauma during labor – will clarify with genetic clarification) (17). Mary also displaces Precious as a mother. Precious confesses, “I hardly have not seen my daughter since she was a little baby. I never stick my bresses in her mouth” to which her mother coldly responds “what for? It’s outta style. She say I never do you. What that child of yours need tittie for? She retarded. Mongoloid. Down Sinder” (32). Highlighted in this example is the fact that Precious attempts to mother Mongo in a loving and nurturing way by breastfeeding, but her mother, as the other, dispels this need due to her previously quoted non-hygienic belief of the breast and that due to Mongo’s disability, the baby would not be worthy and would never know the difference. Mary’s dismissal of Precious as a mother is the continuation of her modeling of motherhood that Precious will fully reject by the end of her story.

The alternative school and numerous support groups help Precious see her trauma in the open and not in isolation. The images of the video princess and whiteness that have coddled her in the past become less important in her life and development. In addition, the destructive acts of cutting herself and smearing feces on her face as responses to camouflage her trauma also cease. Precious acknowledges, “I’m not happy to be HIV positive. I don’t understand why some kids git a good school and mother and father and some don’t. But Rita say forgit the WHY ME shit and git on to what’s next” (139). By absorbing her sister-mother Rita’s response, Precious is able to reject the need to claim another reality. Part of her healing through her interaction with her surrogate-mother Ms. Rain and her various sister-mothers develops from having a supportive environment in which to heal. This destruction of her previous invisible state saves Precious from the isolated motherhood model of Mary.

Part of escaping isolation for Precious is sharing and expressing herself. Precious documents this by writing in her own hand and proudly declaring, “Everybody know I write

poems. People respect me” (138). People recognizing her gifts and talents are a total contrast to the devalued entrapment with her mother. She also shares that “The meeting is good, it’s for HIV positive girls 16-21. Ms Rain say people who help you most (*sometimes*) is ones in the same boat” (138). Precious is also able to see that her abuse is not unique when she interacts with a diverse group of women accompanied by her sister-surrogate, Rita, in her Incest Survivors’ Group. Precious says,

It’s all kinda girls here! They sitting in a circle faces like clocks, no bombs.  
Bombs with hair and titties and dresses. Only sitting here doing whatever they  
gonna do will keep me from blowing up. Thank you Rita for git me here on time.  
“Hello.” She look like a movie star! Slim, long hair, eyes like stars, red lips. “My  
name is Irene. I am an incest survivor.” My mouth fall open. Someone like that.  
(129)

When she first considers attending the Survivors of Incest Anonymous, she reports that it is at the “Lesbian and Gay Center Building” and makes the distinction that “Rita not gay but this is where meeting is” which highlights her continued homophobia (128). She also discloses, “Ms Rain, Rita, Rhonda, and Jermaine and house mama, all say GO. So I am good to go!” (128).

Precious quickly explains that

When I git in the meeting I don’t say nothing. It’s people sitting in a circle. I’m  
suppose to talk. I will never talk here! To talk to tell how I feel in my body. The  
war. My body my head I can’t say it right. How cum I’m so young and feel so  
old. So young like I don’t know nuffin’, so old like I know everything. A girl  
have her father’s dick in her mouth know things other girls don’t know but it’s not  
what you want to know. (128-9)

Encouragement from her surrogates prompts Precious to go to the meeting, but then the recognition that there, the people are survivors from all walks of life gives her a voice to speak. As Precious listens to Irene describe how her father was “having intercourse with [her] three or four times a week” when she was twelve, Precious begins to visualize floating and flying birds. The visualization of herself “flying. Far up, but my body down in circle. Precious is bird” is her recognition that she is gazing herself in this situation (129). As Precious sits in the meeting, gazing, she feels “someone is holding my hand. It’s Rita. She is massage my hand. I come back from being a bird to hear beautiful crying. Smell Mama. Carl, the way his knees on either side of my neck” (129). In the safety of the circle and the recognition that she is not the only one who cries for the abuse her parents caused, Precious raises her hand. She says, “My hand is going up through the smell of Mama, my hand is pushing Daddy’s Dick out my face” (130). She then speaks, “I was rape by my father. And beat.’ No one is talking except me. ‘Mama push my head down in her . . .’ I can’t talk no more. Beautiful girl whisper to me, ‘Are you through?’ I say yes. She says, ‘Pick the next person.’ I look up from my shoes, Nikes; girl gots they hand up. I pick girl in overalls with blue eyes” (130). Precious is able to call her abuse by name – rape. She is also in this safe environment with other survivors able to start to give voice to the sexual abuse that she endures from her mother. She comes full-circle from the first days in the Each One Teach One classroom where she first claimed her voice in a positive way in school environment. By picking the next person, Precious is able to help give someone else voice to name their pain.

Precious also starts to shed some of her stereotypes that come from her mother’s inflicted isolation. Her realization after the hour half survivors meeting is “All kinda women here. Princess girls, some fat girls, old women, young women. One thing we got in common, no *the* thing, is we was rape” (130). By acknowledging that all types of women have been brutally

victimized, Precious joins the group of survivors and again accepts an alternative institution as a realm of support. After the meetings, Precious remains in the presence of her sister-surrogate, Rita, who exposes her to another new experience of going “out for coffee” which is refreshing since she now gets to be her own age and have a life (130). She comments after a “blond girl who is airline stewardess say, ‘Precious! That’s a beautiful name!’ I’m alive inside. A bird is my heart. Mama and Daddy is not win. I’m winning. I’m drinking hot chocolate in the Village wif girls – all kind who love me. How so I don’t know. How Mama and Daddy know me sixteen years and hate me, how a stranger meet me and love me. Must be what they already had in their pocket” (131). The transformation of Precious in the maternal space of her surrogates gives her the feeling of a bird triumphantly succeeding. Others see value in her and she embraces it. She is absorbing new forms of modeling from her sister-surrogates like Rita of whom Precious says, “I like how Rita is, she know the world, how to act and stuff. Sometimes I don’t have a clue” when Rita orders a second hot chocolate for her (130). Though she had previously politely declined the initial offer due to her fear of appearing “greedy,” she is thankful for Rita’s invitation. Precious’s new maternal journey began with her connection to Ms. Rain.

Precious also comes full circle in expanding her concept of love and acceptance. The use of sexual orientation as a marker for the socially deviant in the traditional cultural setting is as powerful here as it is during the historical rise of AIDS/HIV in the black community. The 1980s were also a time filled with gay bashing and the dominance of the Nation of Islam and its often-controversial leader, Louis Farrakhan. Because of her adoration of Farrakhan, Precious initially rejects Ms. Rain and Jermaine, a sister-mother, as social deviants who are not worthy to have a place in her life. However, the closer that she becomes to Ms. Rain and Jermaine, the more

accepting Precious grows to accept them as critical members of her extended surrogate family. She says,

Ms. Rain a butch. This still shock to me ‘cause you can not tell it, but I remember what she said – not homos who raped me, not homos who let me be ignerent. I forgets all that ol’ shit lately – Five Percenters, Black Isaleties, etc etc (etc etc mean yeah yeah). I never be butch like Celie but it don’t make me happy – make me sad. Maybe I never find no love, nobody. At least when I look at the girls I see *them* and when they look they see ME, not what I looks like. (98)

Precious accepts that in order to support the other members of the community that she must move past her homophobia.

Ms. Rain plays a pivotal role in the development of Precious. The end of the novel reflects a very different Precious. During one of her first interactions with Precious, Ms. Rain quotes an Asian proverb in class, saying, “the longest journey begin[s] with a single step” (49). This journey for Precious begins with the life-line of an extended mother-love. Dorothy L. Hurley and E. Anthony Hurley chronicle (in footnote) the construction of Precious’s story<sup>159</sup> in parallel with the impact of the incest not only on her physically, but also for the reader who tries to absorb the written trauma. Sapphire’s structure of the text and Precious’s journal as tools show how these pieces of writing are actually the extended life-line that Ms. Rain gives Precious as a model. By penning her own story and incorporating her various forms of exposure resulting from her escape from her mother’s narrow realm, Precious is able to accept that the world can

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<sup>159</sup> See Hurley and Hurley “Incest in the Raw: *PUSH*” for a critical timeline of the transformation of Precious and a comparison of the short-two year period to the author’s crafting the text.

see her.<sup>160</sup> Because of this exposure and support, Precious can also begin to see her world alter and become more accepting. For example, when she first meets Jermaine in the classroom she thinks “Uh oh! Freaky deaky here. I move a little way from her. I don’t want no one getting the wrong idea about *me*” (49). This homophobic perspective changes as Jermaine becomes one of her main supporters and helps her decipher one of her main fears --“her file” (117-120). By being exposed to others, Precious is able to witness and to accept that her reality is not an isolated occurrence. She observes abuse and trauma across race lines, economics, and sexual orientation. Toward the end of the text, Precious says, “I started putting my story in the big book at school. I want to get it done before I graduate out to G.E.D.” (138). This achievement is similar to the achievement of acquiring a sense of well-being and love from others, especially when those closest to you make you the other. She also learns to value the gifts of others when she shares, “For the past week or so Jermaine been putting her story in the book. Title, just the title done upset the class, Harlem Butch. What kinda title is that! Jermaine done wrote it like a poem, She bes’ writer. We can’t wait to read it” (124). Her new maternal realm exposes her to new experiences throughout the novel. One of the most uplifting passages in *Push* offers a view of Precious’s new perspective on life:

Last week we went to the museum. A whole whale is hanging from ceiling.  
 Bigger than big! Ok, have you ever seen a Volkswagen car that’s like a bug? Um  
 huh, you know what I’m talking about. That’s how big the heart of a blue whale  
 is. I know it’s not possible but, if that heart was in me could I love more? Ms  
 Rain, Rita, Abdul? I would like to. (138)

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<sup>160</sup> In response to Alice Walker’s *In Search of Our Mothers’ Gardens* title essay, Precious is able to through literacy to not only reclaim her identity and story, but she is also able to use the written word to express her own art form through poetry. This is an extension of Walker’s question of outlets for black women’s creativity. Precious incorporates her daily life into her poetry and uses her art as a method of survival and sanity. (*Search* 231-243)

Precious embraces being loved and loving others even when they are different.

The closing of the novel shows a transformation that is realistic and embraces the concept of the outsider and the surrogate. Ms. Rain remains the driving force behind Precious journey to recovery. Within this journey, Ms. Rain has not only introduced Precious to experiences detailed above and introduced levels of acceptance unthought-of, but she has also introduced Precious to various forms of literature and how transformative literature can be. When Precious discusses the class's reading of *The Color Purple*, she wonders "Where my Color Purple? Where my god most high?...Woman love? Any kind of love? Why me?" (87). Precious begins to filter her anger and her position to recognize that "I don't deserve this. I not crack addict. Why I get Mama for a mama? Why I not born light-skin dream?" (87). By questioning her position, she creates her own agency in her motherhood and evokes her deepest fears surrounding her own mothering in her vision of "I see Abdul running away from me, he is like little animal running toward cliff, I am running running too, all over is clowns with evil eyes laffing at me I can't run fast enuff...Don't see Abdul, A huh! A Huh! I can't breath" (87). The fear that she will not be able to protect Abdul is important. Precious places her son at the center of her world and fully embraces her role as mother to be the protector. Also, by interjecting another transformative incest novel, *The Color Purple*, Sapphire is able to connect her novel *Push* into the larger conversation of survival and agency. Precious has seen kindness in many people. Her exposure allows her to claim, "One thing I say about Farrakhan and Alice Walker they help me like being black. I wish I wasn't fat but I am Maybe one day I like that too, who knows" (96). When Precious is confronted with the blowing news that she is HIV positive, she joins the circle and shares, "But I look my friends in the circle and I tell them, test say I'm HIV positive. And all the tongues dead, can't talk no more" (96). The silence in this disclosure is not rejection as Precious

soon feels, “Rita Romero hug me like I’m her chile and I cry and Ms Rain rub my back and say let it out Precious, let it out. I cry for ever day of my life. I cry for Mama what kind story Mama got to do me like she do? And I cry for my son, the song in my life. The little brown penis, booty, fat thighs, roun’ eyes, the voice of love say, Mama, Mama he call me” (96). This release allows her a place of comfort and safety to release and be vulnerable. Her sense of humanity has expanded to accept others and to see that there are things that are god-given blessings. One of her claimed blessings is her motherhood of Abdul and one of god’s gifts is Abdul’s health.

Precious shares

Abdul get tested. He is not HIV positive. Something like that makes me feel what Rhonda, what Farrakhan, say – there is a god. But me when I think of it I’m more inclined to go wid Shug in *The Color Purple*. God ain’ white, he ain’ no jew or Muslim, maybe he ain’ even black, maybe he ain’ even a “he.” Even now I go downtown and seen the rich shit they got, I see what we got too. I see those men in vacant lot share one hot dog and they homeless, that’s good as Jesus with his fish. I remember when I had my daughter, nurse nice to me- all that is god. Shug in *Color Purple* say it’s the “wonder” of purple flowers. I feel that, even though I never seen or had no purple flowers like what she talk about. (138-9)

Motherlove expands her world to accept that outsiders can be blessings and the path to self-love even though her birth parents and nuclear family proved incapable. The end of Precious’s story is not bitterness, but a sense of how and wonder of what remains to be offered and discovered. Ms. Rain, as surrogate mother, comes full circle in illustrating Patricia Hill Collins’s concept of the village of motherhood and community othermothers (129). Liddell’s article, “Agents of Pain and Redemption in Sapphire’s *Push*” that includes a discussion of the Ms. Rain as a literacy



teacher and the role she plays in Precious's transformation, does not push far enough to explore the power that this relationship offers in Precious's life. Liddell says,

While Ms. Rain, the sympathetic and politically conscious literacy teacher, opens Precious's mind to her higher potential, Precious's discovery of her own agency ultimately saves her. The realization that she has choices and possesses the ability to act on these choices enables Precious to provide herself with the developmental and survival mechanisms that her mother denied her. Essentially, Precious must mother herself (144).

Through the novel there are numerous examples of Precious self-nurturing and mothering herself, she would never have gained this ability without the exposure and support of her multiple surrogates. The suggestion of the influence and impact of the active role of surrogacy in the novel suggests a self-birth instead of a re-birth by Precious. Liddell also limits the role of othermothering in the novel to Ms. West and shifts the responsibility for this not happening to Mary (140).

Precious grounds herself in her own motherhood. She has embraced the motherlove from her various mother-surrogates to form her own model of motherhood. She reflects that when, "I listen to song, I can hear it now. It's Aretha. I always did wish she was my mother or Miss Rain or Tina Turner; a mother I be proud of, love me. I breathe in, lay down on my bed. Bed, I remember, I finded for myself when Mama go off on me last time. Aretha singing, "Gotta find me an angel gotta find me an angel in my liiffie" (88). Precious is able to be proud in her reflection of motherhood and the various angels who now fill her life. As traumatized child, Precious learns how self-reflection and acceptance as a survivor mirrors the passage of her literacy and testing progress.

I don't know what's next. I took the TABE test again, this time it's 7.8. Ms Rain say quantum leap! Like I was one place and instead of step up, it's a leap! What does that score actually mean? I read according to the test around 7<sup>th</sup> or 8<sup>th</sup> grade level now. Before on test I score 2.0 then 2.8. The 2.0 days as really low days because I could not read at all (test just give you 2.0 even if you don't fill in nothing). I got to get up to the level of high school, then college kids. I know I can do this Ms Rain tell me don't worry it's gonna work out. I still got time.

(139)

Time for Precious is something new. Similarly to how she never felt lonely in her mother's entrapment before school, she now feels a sense of support to fulfill her long desire to learn. Gone from the closing pages of the text is self-doubt and labeling herself with negativity. In their place is the story of her life and her future. This hope also includes the extension of those in the circle from class whose stories all surround trauma, and how their familial bond has helped each find a new resolution for life. The circle of motherhood and motherlove exists in each young woman's story. Alice Walker's womanist theory of a community of women thrives in the closing pages. Even when Precious is frustrated and angry by her reality as a HIV positive woman, her maternal sphere does not shun or abandon her. Precious describes how "Rita go to her purse and get magazine call *Body Positive* say I got to join HIV community" (96). Precious is a little shocked similarly to her surprise at the incest survivors meeting and responds, "Jesus! It's a community of them? Us, I mean. But I tell her, Not now. I just need to think. Is life a hammer to beat me down?" (96). As Precious begins to feel sorry for herself, "Jermaine jump[s] up do boxing dance (she think she Mike Tyson) say fight back! I laugh, a little" (96). The one other student who Precious had felt she had the least in common with brings her laughter and

reminds her of her own power. As Ms. Rain says that it is time to write in their journals and says that “each of our lives important,” Precious tells her “I don’t have nothing to write today – maybe never. Hammer in my heart now, beating me, I feel I’m drowning. My head all dark inside. Fell like giant river I never cross in front of me” (96). Precious notes that “[Ms. Rain] don’t look me like I’m crazy, but say, If you just sit there the river gonna rise up drown you! Writing could be the boat carry you to the other side. One time in your journal you told me you had never really told your story. I think telling your story git you over that river Precious” (97). However, Precious reports that “I still don’t move” (97). When Ms. Rain orders her to “Write,” Precious lashes out and screams, “‘I’m tired. Fuck you!’ I scream, ‘You don’t know nuffin’ what I been through!’” (97). Precious confesses, “I never do that before. Class look shock. I feel embarrass, stupid; sit down, I’m made a fool of myself on top of everything else” (97). The response that she gets from Ms. Rain is that of a mother who sees her daughter’s outburst and pushes her past it. Ms. Rains says, “Open your notebook Precious” to which Precious responds, “I’m tired” (97). Filled with motherlove and determination, Ms. Rain tells Precious, “I know you are but you can’t stop now Precious, you gotta push” which Precious does (97). The feeling of drowning is pushed away by the maternal sphere.

The closing pages of *Push* depict Precious’s coming to a place of safety and not only actively claiming her own motherhood, but protecting and nurturing her child with her own motherlove

It’s Sunday, no school, meetings. I’m in dayroom at Advancement House, sitting on big leather stool holdin’ Abdul. The sun is coming through the window splashing down on him, on the pages of his book. It’s called *The Black BC’s*. I love to hold him on my lap, open up the world to him. When the sun shine on him

like this, he is an angel child. Brown sunshine. And my heart fill. Hurt. One year? Five? Ten years? Maybe more if I take care of myself. Maybe a cure. Who knows, who is working on shit like that? Look his nose is so shiny, his eyes shiny. He my shiny brown boy. In his beauty I see my own. He pulling on my earring, want me to stop daydreaming and read him a story before nap time. I do.  
(139-0)

This is the redemption, decades earlier, that Pecola and her dead baby never got. *Push* embraces outsiders courageously to place them in the role of the surrogate.<sup>161</sup> The novel represents a symbolic emergence from the horrors of the past for the black community, especially black women. The child Precious represents the trauma and degradation that has been acted upon the black female body. Her survival of the trilogy of abuse from her mother and the critical support system that the community of women provides allows Precious to reinvent herself as a loving mother who is able to accept her trauma and thrive after being embraced by outsiders who serve as surrogates. Because of the surrogates, she is able to break the cycle and use the unspeakable to create her own form of motherhood through the modeling received by her surrogates.

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<sup>161</sup> The horrific nature of *Push* confronts and attacks motherhood like no other novel. It also actively creates a story to share the evil, complex, and destructive nature of incest and its imprint on a child. This is an extension of the Liddell and Harris's arguments on the reinterpretation of the black mother.

## CONCLUSION

When I initially started this study, I hoped to be able to answer the following questions: What has the twentieth-century American woman writer “birthed” regarding surrogacy and the act of mothering? How has the birth and embracing of the surrogate by twentieth-century American women writers affected motherlove and the protection of children? Are surrogates the new figurative help books? Is the social deviant as an ideal surrogate a commentary on nurturing and acceptance to be learned from the twentieth-century American woman writer? I believe that the perceived social deviant as surrogates is the authors’ larger critique on the treatment of the “other” in society and their unique ability as marginalized individuals to recognize the traumatized child. These traumatized individuals seek to minimize and protect those that they can.

This study of *The Bluest Eye*, *Ellen Foster*, *Bastard Out of Carolina*, and *Push* illustrates that the late twentieth-century American woman writer crafted new models of motherhood. These various models replaced the mothers’ help books of long ago when the notion of motherhood included only those who possessed whiteness, wealth, and privilege, or those trapped in a previous servant-driven period that enlisted the help of historical figures like the mammy. The late twentieth-century American woman writer births a reality that previously existed only in the shadows. They peel back the complex myth of motherhood to unearth what happens when motherhood and the attempt to mother occur in isolation. They gaze at and judge institutions just as closely as the historically proper gatekeepers (schools, courts, and later, social services) gazed at and judged the mother. The writer turns her lens to examine just how far the mother has progressed in terms of their embracing and rejecting their roles as mothers, sister-mothers, sister-surrogates, and mother-surrogates since the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries

when the classification and title of motherhood typically anointed and signified white women of means.

As more have freely claimed the role of mother, the critique of motherhood is critical. The late twentieth-century American women writers examined in this study fearlessly look at motherhood in four critical periods: the Great Migration, the Civil Rights Era, Post-Civil Rights Era, and the 1980s. Historically, these periods represented great opportunity for women, and women have made great social strides, but these periods have also come with many burdens. They have left women to struggle within a model that no longer exists. The model of motherhood long birthed by the patriarchy called for women to carry the role and burdens of motherhood alone, or when wealth existed, to transfer the responsibilities and role to a black body or nanny. Whiteness and wealth allowed the thankless, undesirable parts of motherhood to be passed on to colored surrogates. The images of Dilsey from Faulkner's *The Sound and the Fury* are long gone in the later twentieth-century writer's depictions. Also, gone and dismantled are the images of the perfect Mama Lena from Hansberry's idealistic *A Raisin in the Sun*. The late twentieth-century American woman writer replaces the traditional doting mammy, the black mother who sacrificed for her children, and the white mother who could comfortably occupy the place of privilege while distancing herself from motherhood with the surrogate who represents the forgotten conscience, the memory of the community, and the historically marked invisible and powerless outsider. Such surrogates were previously not worthy of the mythic name of "mother."

The socially deviant or historical "other" has always existed on the fringes of family, and ultimately, of motherhood. These individuals were always seen as the "other" and used as examples of ill-conceived persons incapable of affection or lacking the ability to nurture. They

were isolated by the community due to fear and to judgment as being destructive to children. The writers take those considered the least of these, representatives of the socially marginalized and stereotyped, and bring them directly into the realm of motherhood to mother when birth mothers prove to be incapable. The outsider, or socially deviant, as they have been categorized based on social norms of their respective time periods, live outside the traditional, heterosexual marriage paradigm in the novels in my study. They are often lesbians who do not procreate, or single men and women who are sensitive to the child's situation.

The disappearance and reasons for the omission of the nineteenth-century help books in these writers' works is a historical response to a larger concept that could claim that motherhood began its devaluation process during several historical eras that gave voice and rights to societies' downtrodden. Post-slavery and reconstruction, motherhood was further reduced as it was during the Great Depression and World War I. When women as a whole entered the workforce, or when race seemed on the surface to be equalizing status, the high value of motherhood began its depreciation since it was no longer sacred to privileged white women as iconic in the society.

There was an increase of people outside of the historical cultural norm operating as surrogates in many twentieth-century American novels written post the 1970s. There also appears to be an increase in non-heterosexual, non-married, and male surrogates. More women had to claim the care of their children, instead of being able to pass the children on to hired help. The demands on women as a whole increased, but the responsibility of sharing parenting did not. Women moved away from their own maternal realms which decreased a community of women to help model and nurture, not only motherhood skills, but also each other's children. Communities began to shift as well. Neighbors became strangers.

There are hundreds of incest stories in our culture. Many will never be told. In American literature, incest is one of the most traumatic events that a writer describes for the reader. The ones depicted in this study stand out as unique representations of the act based on the mother and her role in the trauma. In the four books selected for this study, the mothers cast the blame on the female child. Marginalized as a young sexualized Jezebel, she, for the most part, must endure the physical and mental punishment at the mother's hand. The mothers as trapped onlookers mostly claim to be innocent of the abuse. Instead of rallying to protect their daughters, they remain isolated. This isolation even when family support exists causes them to abandon their maternal sphere, often to the abuser whom they embrace. The mother's behavior has become a projection of their interpreted reality that their role as mother has devalued them, and more importantly, devalued their relationships with the men in their lives. Previous literary depictions used metaphors and symbols to distance the reader from the level of trauma. The current portrayal of trauma and the mother's influence on this trauma provide no symbolic language as a buffer to allow the reader to disengage and distance himself or herself. The late twentieth-century American women writers examined in this study make visible the unthinkable, and as the stories told in the novels progress, the language used no longer allows a passive engagement with the text. Their writing attests to the rawness that has entered the maternal realm and illustrates the exact place of trauma in the maternal bond and the womb.

The shifts that occur in the concept of community and how communities relate have had a radical impact on motherhood. The increase of institutions has led members of the community to transfer responsibility and accountability for the notion of "community mother" or "othermothering" as Patricia Hill Collins discusses in *Black Feminist Thought* (128-129). Her discussion centers, as previously mentioned, on the community of women who help mother and



support mothering in the community and each other. The community watches abuse but fails to intervene. When they do, they distance themselves and do not follow through for the benefit of the child. In all of the novels, the traditional notions and members of community fail the four young female protagonists.

The ineffective and judgmental gaze of the institutions along with the community is a similar to the gaze that Pecola endures in *The Bluest Eye*. However, unlike Pecola's story where the third person narration occurs in retrospect, Precious's story in *Push* is uniquely her own as is Bone's first person narration in *Bastard Out of Carolina*. Critical to all the narrations is the absence of motherlove. Precious recognizes the gaze that she endures, and she does not attempt to camouflage the truth of her existence. Hers is initially a familiar depiction of a girl who endures abuse and neglect; however, the reader quickly realizes the uniqueness and defiantness of her abuse. Her mother's active role in her abuse becomes the ultimate betrayal of motherhood and renders Precious invisible. Unlike Morrison in telling Pecola's sorrowful tale, Sapphire interjects surrogates to bring forth Precious's potential and desire to survive in a rewriting of the theme of the invisible forgotten child who is deemed ugly and unlovable, the big black girl. Both girls, Pecola and Precious dream of new identities mirroring the dominate culture's ideals of white beauty. Losing themselves in alternative identities helps to camouflage their pain and abuse. Dissociation and fantasy become coping mechanisms for the girls. Similarly to Pecola, Precious dreams and fantasizes that whiteness, blue eyes with the addition of a thin frame, will bring her protection and ultimately, value (24, 29, 35, 45, 49, 64, 84, 87, 112, 113, and 114). She sees herself as valueless. Her family disregards and objectifies her. In her fantasy world, she is visible, and the unspeakable things that happen to her in reality do not occur

since she is valued and beautiful. Her use of dissociation often surfaces as she tries to escape being present during the various abusive situations driven by her parents.

The black and white writers deal differently with the girls' bodies as a result or as a residual of the abuse. The concept of breeding extends past its connotations of slavery into the contemporary work of the novels by Toni Morrison and Sapphire. In the study, the only two protagonists whose incest results in pregnancy were the black girls Pecola and Precious. This impregnation reinforces older myths of sexuality, breeding, and race. Morrison and Sapphire use the pregnancies of Pecola and Precious as metaphors for the girls' potential as well as an acknowledgement of the physical witness of the trauma of incest. Their pregnancies become proof of the continued assaults they endure and the historical marker of pregnancy as fallen women transfers to the black girls. Even as this proof exists with impregnation, the girls' birth mothers respond not with empathy but with rage. The adult-mothers accept the stereotypes of the over-sexualized black female body and transfer it to the black female child. Is it a re-entrapment? Both black women writers' characters are impregnated to illustrate and to prove the unthinkable, horrific trauma of incest and the still existing lack of value of the black female girl child. Empathy does not exist within the girls' natural maternal realms; they still draw the rage and physical violence from their mothers and not compassion, as forms of further negation and rejection of the black girl child. The disclosure of rape is met not with motherlove or protection, but with rage by Pauline in *The Bluest Eye* and Mary in *Push*. As do the nameless mother in *Ellen Foster* and Anney in *Bastard*, Pauline and Mary invest themselves in fantasy lives. The fantasies and projected images impede and destroy any sort of motherlove that these mothers could have offered. Abandonment of the "mother role" becomes their solution to their own

marginalization and invisibility by the larger society. However, this defense mechanism becomes destructive.

In *The Bluest Eye*, the hatred for blackness is so embedded in numerous forms in the community based on its historical setting that not even the socially deviant possessed enough agency to protect the children. Morrison links the self-hate that results from the value placed on whiteness to the downfall of the black community. Many assert that integration was the worst thing that could have happened to the black community. Others assert that the second migration that sent blacks in droves out of the South's rural communities and into the isolationist and white-plagued North caused the black family to further fragment and eventually erode black motherhood and the sense of community mothering. The authors use their narratives to demonstrate the extremes of what mothering in black society looks like when it is dismantled. Both Pauline and Mary are ramifications of these historical moments of the migration periods and indicative of the rise in social dependency on outside support agencies.<sup>162</sup> These migrations splintered the black community's sense of modeling and mothering. The community turning its back on Sethe (in Morrison's *Beloved*) who then had to live in isolation is mirrored in the eventual failure of community support in *The Bluest Eye*.

The community's disdain and a mother's isolation cause a black girl to become invisible. Pecola's covered body in the kitchen embodies multi-layered symbolism and reality. Resulting from the brutal rape, she endures from her father, Pecola's identity shatters. The image of Pecola on the floor is the final straw for Pauline in connection to her black child. The child is not

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<sup>162</sup> I am referring to the Great and Second Migrations of blacks as explained in Chapter II of *The Bluest Eye* and Chapter V of *Push*.

viewed as a victim but as an object of contempt that Pauline beats to near death after the rape.<sup>163</sup> She dissociates from her child and the reality of her assault. Mary in *Push* and Anney in *Bastard* will also employ dissociation when interacting with their daughters after trauma. Pauline represents a harbinger of what will happen to the disempowered black mothers in isolation away from the southern community roots. This foreshadows the illustration in Mary's destructive and debilitating mothering in *Push*. It is ironic that both of these beatings occur in the kitchen. The second and most brutal act of violence in *The Bluest Eye*, the incestuous rape, occurs in Pauline's own "home." Home is ironic since Pauline had previously abandoned the space as detailed in the novel and her family. Viewing the aftermath this time is not just the gaze of young blue eyes, or the horrified glare of Frieda and Claudia, but the community also witnesses the complete demise of the maternal-bond of Pauline and Pecola. No surrogate appears to help Pecola pick up the pieces, and as a result, she dissolves into a life of madness with no future hope or potential. The non-fertile soil parallels the sterile environment that Pecola was forced to endure.

When one looks at the various surrogates, the need to acknowledge the impact of class surfaces for the study as a whole. The four women writers create financially marginalized and fragile communities for their girl protagonists. Framing the girls in poverty makes the need for their protection clearer and the lack of typically appropriate surrogates even more startling. In many ways, the use of poverty seeks to situate the white characters into a black child paradigm, especially with Ellen Foster's descent in value as a white orphan to one cast as an outsider with ties to the black community. Her ties to the black community serve as a reenactment of the historical bond that existed between the white child and the black child and mothers, but it also

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<sup>163</sup> In an earlier scene under the collective gaze of Claudia and Frieda, Pauline beats Pecola in front of her white charge with the spilled pie on the white floor. That scene was inhumane, but the final documented beating after the rape is Pauline's ultimate fall as mother.

removes her from the southern value of being acceptable and legitimate enough for her wealthy grandmother to save her. Gibbons's inversion of value based on race is complex especially as she casts Ellen repeatedly into blackness for her mother modeling.

The motherlove embodied in Ellen's new mama who provides a home for those who are throwaway children. The new mama's sexual orientation is silent in the novel. There are several possible reasons for this omission in a novel where Kaye Gibbons spends considerable time establishing widows: Ellen's new nameless mother is a widow herself; she represents the classical "old maid" image; she is a lesbian like Aunt Raylene in *Bastard* and Ms. Rain in *Push*, and she herself was a marginalized and abandoned child. Ellen's female family members who have outlived her mother are without men. They seem to enjoy their own company and cannot consider opening themselves up to another woman's child even though it is their sister's daughter's child. Ellen's two aunts push her outside of the maternal realm due to their naïve nature and possible embedded resentment since Ellen's mother was grandmother's (mama's mama) favorite. Mama's mama thought her daughter had betrayed her southern status by marrying beneath her. Initially, the reader would assume that these women would assume the mother's role and protect the child. These women fully reject the role of mother for a child that they did not birth and whom they perceived as damaged. Gibbons's novel closely examines the inherited reduced value of a white child based on her diminished and valueless legacy from her father.

Bone's illegitimacy casts her into a valueless position and adds to the trauma of her abuse. Her documented illegitimacy frames her position in the community as poor white bastard trash. There was no mention of Anney attempting to take her elsewhere to protect her from such

scorn and judgment.<sup>164</sup> Bone's surrogates are also documented as being outside the norm and part of the undesirable fringe culture. The family's police records, difficulty keeping jobs, Aunt Raylene's travels with the carnival serve as examples of their unconventional behavior. Poverty reduces the white child to an object for displaced rage and sexual aggression. Anney's role as a widow is inappropriate because of the presence of her bastard child.

Each of these mothers uses fantasy as a way to deal with her marginalization and accepted powerless state. They remain resolved in these realities as if hope and improvement escapes them and the creation of fiefdoms is their only coping mechanism/device. The rare exception is Ellen's nameless mother who chooses suicide as her new fantasy life. The four mothers' projected embrace of fantasy identities causes them to lose focus and grasp onto their motherlove and protection of their female daughters. This works against the protection, and ultimately, ironically, leads to the devaluing of the child which further reduces the mother's value in the various social paradigms that they try to embrace. Because the mothers' rejections of their daughters are so public, outsiders gaze upon them, and ultimately, in three of the four novels, someone steps up to help. This public demise of motherhood allows the girls to have some visibility.

The appearance of surrogates varies in the different texts. Typically, the surrogate must appear outside of the family structure since the familial and maternal ties are severed. The exception for this occurs in *Bastard* where the surrogates are extensions of the family. The family allows Anney the freedom to make her decision, because she knows they will pick-up the pieces as they have always done. (Anney has been the chosen child like Ellen's unnamed

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<sup>164</sup> This relates also to my earlier assertion regarding Hawthorne's Hester who stays in the community and endures its gaze. Anney stays initially due to family support but negates the support in order to remain in a hysterical marriage plot as Hortowiz outlines.

mother). Bone no longer fits into Anney's image of motherhood and her image of her life. The illegitimacy of her bastard child was too much of a burden to carry any longer. The handing-off of Bone's birth certificate is a symbolic transfer of the marked daughter. Without Bone, Anney and Glen can have a new start with their Shirley Temple-adorable daughter, Reese. The outsiders in the family are the ones who accept Bone. Uncle Earle and Aunt Raylene both know huge losses like Bone. Allison chooses to place Bone with those who experience and know first-hand deep loss but are still central to the family core. Bone's namesake who is the only family member to ask directly if Glen had sexually abused Bone dies.

Even in the possible opportunity to stop the abuse by accepting Aunt Ruth's help, Bone is consumed with protecting her mother. The abused child has difficulty surrendering the role of caregiver even when this surrendering would allow her self-protection. As a whole, the Boatwrights are outsiders who depend on each other and not on outside authorities. They fiercely create their own law and justice within the family structure. Part of Bone's agency and healing comes from accepting that she is a part of this outlaw family. Her desires to protect her mother, she intertwines with learning to protect herself. The closer Bone becomes to her surrogates, the more self-assured she becomes in her placement as the lost daughter. Bone begins to transform her value as the tainted child into a capable young woman who learns that she must choose her own well-being for survival. Rejecting her prescribed place in Daddy Glen's family causes her trauma, but Bone understands that she not be safe within this family structure where she will always be valueless. Similar to Mary, Anney decides to choose the man in her life over her daughter. This systematic rejection allows Bone's surrogates to embrace her and to see value in her. This value becomes self-worth for Bone. She relinquishes her placement as daughter in order to embrace herself.

Bone's desire for revenge recalls *Appalachee Red*. Both illegitimate children must carve out identities after maternal abandonment. Red's and Bone's abandonments are so blatant that no mother could offer an excuse. Red never gets to confront his mother, who, it is hinted, knows he has returned but is too consumed with showing her black/blue baby to the deceased Big Man that she can no longer think to claim the child she gave away. Similarly, Anney is consumed with the legitimacy she believes that she can attain through the union with Glen even though she can no longer produce a child for him, but she must mother and nurse him over her own flesh and blood. Her value as a woman, especially as a southern woman, has been reduced as happens to Ursa in *Corregidora* because Ursa can no longer make generations. Glen becomes repositioned to the dead male child, and unlike Ursa, Anney has no art to comfort her, only her role as wife. The choices that these mothers make echo Mary's accusations that Precious stole her man, or Pauline's refusal to believe and to comfort Pecola after she discovers her raped by her father Cholly. Pecola's mother's response is to beat her. The twentieth-century American woman writer takes the notion of a man-child to a full extreme and shows women who enable men to stay in an infantile state and use their power to divide the female children. The question is, if Red had been a girl/female child would his fate mirror Baby Sweets's? The only people who truly see each of these characters are those who have experienced abandonment and recognize marginalization due to their roles in society as other, the socially deviant.

Mary has given herself and lost herself and her maternal sphere in the name of her man-child, Carl. As Mary creates her life around Carl, she leaves out the one she is supposed to protect. What was once a precious namesake for Mary, in her view, becomes a sexual competitor who must be reduced and controlled to feed her mother's emptiness. Mary's emptiness stems from being with one man who allows her to isolate herself in honor of him. She



gives what she has named valuable to him. This gift, her child Precious, is reduced enough in the mother's eyes that she no longer cares, past the first attempt to stop the abuse, to protect her daughter, but instead, the child becomes something to be acted upon. By physically, mentally, and sexually acting upon Precious with her own hands, Mary reduces her daughter to an objective substitute and increases Precious's shame. The instances of mother-daughter incest are so rare that Mary creates a reality that Precious struggles to acknowledge and to share such a reality.<sup>165</sup> Throughout the book, the real demon is not shared in the supportive realms that Precious is allowed to enter. Mary confesses her sins but deflects inquiry not to include her physical role in the abuse, thus failing to protect her child and removing both of them from Carl's life. Like Anney, Mary has allowed her male-dominated relationship to supersede her role as protector, mother. Sapphire, in her depiction, rewrites the traditional male blamed image of incest and abuse. She also deconstructs the image of the self-sacrificing black matriarch and mother. Through her construction of Mary, she gives birth to one of the most destructive and complex portrayals of the bad mother. The book's incorporation of the community of women (alternative school and group-home) seeks to offer a solution to the increasing demise of motherhood and lack of mother-models and support for mothers.

In *Push*, there are many examples of dysfunctional mothers and attempts at mothering in isolation. Sapphire's depiction of motherhood in the urban landscape is an important contribution since it deals with a variety of myths and issues. She is able to take the historical issues of the period - homophobia, welfare, racism, HIV/AIDS - to draw them into the visual impact of motherhood and the destruction of the mother-daughter bond. Each of the women in

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<sup>165</sup> These accounts are rare in fiction and in real-life. Statistics for this type of abuse can be found at <http://cacnd.com/uploads/resources/42/the-best-kept-secret-mother-daughter-sexual-abuse---julie-brand.pdf> The extreme illustration of abuse highlights the acceptance of surrogates outside of the traditional realm. Also, see Peter article which details challenges that children face when suggesting mother-daughter incest.

the alternative school experience some sort of severing of their mother-daughter bond. The modeling in *Push* entails looking outside of the biological mother-daughter bond and seeing that there are sister-mothers and surrogate mothers willing to re-create/re-birth a family bond. Ms. Rain is pivotal as the main surrogate mother because she is seen culturally as an outsider on many levels. She is a black lesbian who speaks against the dominant philosophies of the day (Farrakhan) and attempts to teach alternative histories. Through her role as teacher, she asserts guidance and support that the young women she encounters have never experienced. Sapphire's recreation of a maternal sphere through the alternative context incorporates a range of outsiders who must reenact the old African proverb of a whole village raising a child, except this village is not just for black women but for a community of women for many children. By incorporating women regardless of race, Sapphire's text shows how many girls have been marginalized and forgotten. It also shows how damaged mother-daughter bonds cross-racial lines as time has progressed, and how the demands upon women have fragmented motherhood.

The influence of men on the parenting models of the mother is clearly illustrated in Mary's destructive behavior. The attributions of maleness make maleness sacred while it displaces motherhood as non-sacred. This displacement causes strain on the motherhood bond and destroys this bond when isolated solely in the patriarchal societal confines. Motherhood within a supportive community creates a formidable opponent to the limited role the patriarchy seeks to maintain. As the roles of women become more complex, the fragmented mother becomes more isolated and the destruction of motherlove takes hold while the attempts of false surrogates become futile. The deterioration of the communal bonds also aid in this fragmentation. By establishing power in an alternative realm, Sapphire points to the traditional structures as being false surrogates and inept mothers in a complex culture that seeks to attack

and to disengage the black child. These traditional structures are capable of seeing and helping to a limited extent. They are often constrained by over-burdened urban systems that seek to warehouse instead of to assist. The text allows the reader to see how the generational criticism of poverty has validity but also how a child can be lost and unaffected by the resources of the public social service system that an adult may rely on for survival. Sapphire's use of poverty as an entitlement mentality tends to overshadow the system's intentions to help children. The judgment often camouflages the main victims, the children, and penalizes them based on their parents' dependency on the public system. The text as a whole is a critique of both the supposed systems put in place to safeguard and to protect and the ongoing motherhood myths that prevail in society.

The teacher, Ms. Rain, in *Push* is reminiscent of Aunt Raylene in *Bastard Out of Carolina*. The emergence of Ms. Rain in the alternative school is critical. She is representative of the extreme of the stereotypically oppressed and is the only one who can guide and nurture to create a maternal sphere to nurture "throw-away" girls. Ms. Rain and Aunt Raylene both represent historically socially deviant women who embrace their lesbian identities. These two additions add a needed dynamic to the discussion of motherhood and concept of surrogates because they challenge the reader to reassess heterosexuality as the normative for motherhood. The portrayal of Ms. Rain's lesbian identity is more of public statement than is Aunt Raylene's depiction. Incest and motherhood parallel Precious's journey of sisterhood and survival.

Kaye Gibbons' *Ellen Foster* also critiques the outside power of institutions and the dysfunctionality of mother-daughter relationships. Ellen is considered a throw-away girl who is rescued in many ways by the social service system, but only after, she has made the choice of claiming a new mother. The burden of nurturing is on the child. In this story, as in several of the

others, the mother-daughter relationship is reversed with the child being put into the main nurturing position. Gibbons provides a multi-level view and model of motherhood through Ellen's child-like gaze on the generations of women in her family. Her grandmother and two aunts exist as models; however, an outsider surrogate, Mavis, provides Ellen with a glimpse into her own mother's life. Mavis as a black mother herself embraces the communal notion of motherhood and seeks to shield and assist Ellen on her journey in multiple ways. Mavis provides details about her nameless mother while they work together in the field working, and Ellen spies on Mavis in the evenings to witness her mothering with her family. Gibbons employs several inversions in the text.

Gibbons deconstructs the historical image of the white orphan, and casts her title character into blackness. The themes of value and social standing are part of this study in the examination of the value of the child to the nuclear family and to those outside of the maternal sphere. Gibbons's placement of Ellen in her initial surrogate realm of the reconstructed mammy, upholds a traditional southern image of motherhood. It is from this experience that Ellen is later able to compile her list of the characteristics of motherhood. Ellen's acceptance of others and especially blacks, through her interaction in two maternal realms, Mavis and Starletta's mother, supersede her own weak, sickly mother whom Ellen must nurture. Ellen must also seek to nurture the memory of her mother against the stereotypical and critical backdrop of white motherhood. Her extended nuclear maternal sphere does not provide any support and makes it known that she is not a legitimate part of their lives.

Ellen uses her own family history of parenting to create her own list in her search for a new mother, and she uses her experiences with the black women to formulate her desired characteristics. This is a clear difference in modeling the ideal. Gibbons's text steps outside of

the traditional white southern definition of motherhood to create a new model of the mother; however, she has Ellen pick a white female as her new mother as the socially acceptable southern solution for the novel's setting.<sup>166</sup> Though the text is set in the time of the Civil Rights moment, Gibbons does not push the envelope to an unrealistic level, but does provide someone outside of the traditional nuclear realm to love and to care for Ellen. Resembling the outside institutions and alternative resources for Precious, Ellen finds herself in a group-home setting with a housemother who becomes her legal foster mother. Ellen remains without a last name and legacy until she claims Foster as her new name, and a mother -- creating a new legacy. Little background is given about Ellen's foster mother except that she relies for help on the goodness of the public through the church. Gibbons also includes a pregnant teen in the novel, a pregnancy that differs greatly from the other pregnancies in the other subject texts. As an active example of surrogacy, most of Ellen's mother modeling comes from the new mama who claims the teen's child as her own to serve as a model. (Precious has this type of direct mother-modeling later with her housemother, but not before with her own.) The young woman in *Ellen Foster* is assumed to be white in the text and hence the only representation of a white child who becomes pregnant, but with this pregnancy, the teen is afforded by the white surrogate mother a resemblance of childhood where she still goes to school and interacts as a child. The new mama uses her mother sphere to shield the teen and to protect her from the full responsibility of motherhood.

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<sup>166</sup> Fox-Genovese details the various historical roles of white southern womanhood and motherhood. Several of her descriptions and depictions appear in *Ellen Foster*. Gibbons's takes the traditional image of the head of the household and the separation of public and private spheres similar to the roles explained in Fox-Genovese's text (61,110) in the novel to evolve into the new mama who unlike the traditional image has no fears of managing children especially infants (Fox-Genovese 113). The new mama's personal identity is expanded out of the white women's prescribed "personal and social identities" (Fox-Genovese 277). Laura McAdoo defines southern mothers as "prone to live entirely in the lives of their children, giving themselves over to the domestic life, and glorifying in their subordination of self" (qtd by Warren and Wolff 2).

Toni Morrison's *The Bluest Eye* remains the one novel of this study in which a surrogate does not appear. Due to the crippling effects of self-hatred in the community, no one has the power to see Pecola and the need she has to be loved. It is the only portrayal where the false surrogates, (the prostitutes, Soaphead Church, Mrs. MacTeer, Claudia and Frieda) are too powerless themselves to protect or influence the established destructive modeling in the text. The blight of the black child and her demise is the only thing that survives in *The Bluest Eye*. The responsibility rests with the collective "we" who abandon Pecola as a representation of the undesirable black child. Pecola's destruction is beyond maddening. The insane reaction confirms that insecurity crosses all classes and women see the rape of their daughters not as wrong, but as something their daughters brought on themselves and should be punished for.

In each of the stories, the girls fear that the adult women in their lives, especially their own mothers will blame them for the sexual abuse. It is assumed based on their position as valueless that it will be believed that as they encouraged the incestuous relationships and that their mothers often unconsciously reinforced this position. Pauline in *The Bluest Eye* does nothing except continue to exist in her ordinary and mundane life. She clings to her falsely adopted tradition, her everyday personal experience, as if nothing has occurred. Nothing productive comes from their lives, but they merely exist. Pauline has fully accepted and defined her black existence as being alienated from her children, family, and community to fulfill her place as Polly servicing and ensuring the comfort of the white family she chooses. For Pecola, her potential dies, and she exists trapped in insanity and greater isolation. One of the most powerful lines in the novel comes after rape of and subsequent miscarriage by Claudia, a young girl Pecola's age: "We tried to see her without looking at her, and never, never went near. Not because she was absurd, or repulsive, or because we were frightened, but because we had failed

her” (Morrison, *Bluest* 158).

The illustrations in the various texts are unlike many traditional stories of mothering. The witnessing of the abuse of the child by the mother or the actual mother abusing her female children as exercised in these novels is not presented in earlier texts that developed the image of motherhood for societal consumption. Various forms of abuse occur throughout American literature but none as brutal as through the mother’s gaze upon her biological daughter. A mammal eating her young is termed filial cannibalism. In each of these stories, Pecola, Ellen, Bone, and Precious are consumed, not nurtured, by their mothers. Their mothers use their presence to feast upon them and to devour them in order to save their own fragmented and marginalized identities. Some of this behavior is inherited from previous generations and from their mothers; furthermore, each of these mothers lacks a firm model for mothering even from their communities. A surrogate steps in to claim and to save the child. The surrogate establishes a new model of mothering for the now -- abandoned and injured child.

Surrogacy dismantles the idea of a loving nurturing motherhood as innate. It dismantles acceptable and nurturing motherhood as solely biological. The writers neither camouflage nor seek to over-empower the myth of the superwoman and the all-powerful ideal mother. Through the work of the late twentieth-century American woman writer, the realm of motherhood is expanded. The writers call to question the concept of motherhood in isolation. They illustrate through these four stories the destruction that comes when the burden of motherhood is placed on marginalized women who are further isolated by their stations as mothers. The help books of the previous century that prepared women for motherhood did not encompass women outside of financial means, whiteness, and social standing. Morrison, Gibbons, Allison, and Sapphire provide realistic, often gritty, perspectives of motherhood and

the reality of a needed expansion of motherhood that includes those who have been excluded from the nurturing realm, who have not participated in the maternal development of motherhood, and who lack any healthful concept of the purpose of mothering. By embracing the stereotyped socially deviant as one capable of providing a new form of maternal surrogacy, these late twentieth-century American women writers seek to influence and to expand the concept of nurturing and motherhood. They seek to push for accountability in the realm of motherhood and the need for protection of girl children.

Literature mimics and embraces the desired, the seen, and the unseen in life. By examining the destructive, non-protective mother and the surfacing of surrogates or, alternatively, the non-interjection of surrogates in the novels, these authors help shape the now growing numbers of women who are engaged in some form of mothering whose methods perhaps psychological or methodologically lead to the bad mother or filial cannibal-mother. The rise of surrogacy also provides a model of how the definition and responsibility of mother is not innate and can occur outside of the biological sphere. Most importantly, the rise of surrogacy shows the generational impact that isolation has on creating and maintaining a mothering model. By focusing on the “other” as an important and viable community member, these writers bring sensitivity and a sense of inclusion to mothering that has not previously been acknowledged. The late twentieth-century American woman writer not only embraces the socially deviant as acceptable motherlove figures, but more importantly, stresses the need for communal mothering as a form of protection for those who have been devalued, in particular, girl children. With communal mothering and a redefinition of the mothers in their relationship with their daughters and the men in their lives, the decision to protect is not so complicated. These writers also point to the ill-served result of the intrusive patriarchy on the realm of motherhood. A woman-



centered, defined and sustaining environment can bring clarity to collective mothering in complex times. These novels remove the institution of motherhood from the sacred realm and alert the audience that these depictions of the bad mother can help nurture and reinforce the new models of motherhood that are inclusive of all community members.

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