

AN ABSTRACT OF THE THESIS OF

Linda C. Jackson for the degree of Master of Arts in Interdisciplinary Studies in English, English, and Education. Presented on April 1, 1994.

Title: Who We Are and Will Be.

Redacted for Privacy

Abstract approved: _____
David Robinson

The protagonists in the fiction of Paule Marshall, Alice Walker, and Toni Morrison illuminate American cultural perceptions of black women and illustrate how the creators of these characters hope to change those perceptions. I studied Paule Marshall's *Daughters*, Alice Walker's *Meridian* and *The Color Purple*, and Toni Morrison's *The Bluest Eye* to learn what the writers of these novels have to say about the women they hope black girls can grow up to be and to learn what potential for self-development they see for black women. For example, in order to become whole people, what do black girls and black women need from their parents and their community? What do black women need from their intimate relationships?

"Part One: Political, Historical and Religious Identity " surveys politics, religion and history for views of black women. Politically, they appear disenfranchised; historically they were property. In reference to religion, I found that a white male religion does not serve black women well. Walker sees god within her female protagonist Celie, and Marshall has a belief in a Caribbean/African diaspora that provides a sense of spiritual and cultural continuity.

"Part Two: Childhood Identity" explores childhood and the community's role. Childhood appears as a critical time for self-development. The adults in the community contribute to the child's self-awareness. Mistreatment of girls causes them harm throughout their lives. How well the community safeguards its children is a measure of how highly these children are valued. These authors want to see girls more highly regarded. Toward this end, they expose the abuse that takes place in the community. Morrison shows not only the abuse, but also the love. By showing concerned parents as well as neglectful ones, Morrison offers a fuller portrait of the community she knows. *The Color Purple* also tells a story of sexual abuse of a girl, but this abuse is overcome by the inner strength of the victim combined with the loving support of Shug Avery and the supportive community context of the juke where Celie is accepted. The portrayal of childhood in *Daughters* involves a Caribbean island culture where the roles of the women that the child Ursa observes offer few role models.

"Part Three: Adult Relational Identity" looks at the dilemma in communication between the sexes and across the generations from mother to daughter. Step-fathers and husbands are abusive characters in Walker's writing, while Morrison shows a loving father and an incestuous father in *The Bluest Eye*.

"Part Four: Language Identity" discusses Black English, orality and dialect, looking at the role of language as an aspect of self-definition. James Baldwin's view of language is presented: rejecting a child's language is rejecting the child himself. Baldwin's view supports the attitude toward language as self-defining that appears in the writing of Marshall, Morrison, and Walker. These authors show pride in Black English, and they demonstrate their ability with edited English through their own writing.

© Copyright by Linda C. Jackson

April 1, 1994

All Rights Reserved

Who We Are and Will Be

by

Linda C. Jackson

A THESIS

submitted to

Oregon State University

in partial fulfillment of
the requirements for the
degree of

Master of Arts in Interdisciplinary Studies

Completed April 1, 1994

Commencement June 12, 1994

APPROVED:

Redacted for Privacy

Professor of English in charge of major

Redacted for Privacy

Instructor in Liberal Arts in charge of co-field

Redacted for Privacy

Assistant Professor of Education in charge of co-field

Redacted for Privacy

Chairman of department of English

4/14/94

Redacted for Privacy

Dean of Graduate School

Date thesis is presented April 1, 1994

Typed by researcher Linda Jackson

TABLE OF CONTENTS

| | |
|---|-----------------------------|
| INTRODUCTION..... | 1 |
| PART ONE: POLITICAL, HISTORICAL, AND RELIGIOUS IDENTITY..... | 19 |
| PART TWO: CHILDHOOD IDENTITY..... | 39 |
| PART THREE: ADULT RELATIONAL IDENTITY..... | 56 |
| PART FOUR: LANGUAGE IDENTITY..... | 72 |
| SUMMARY: A PORTRAIT OF THE BLACK WOMAN..... | 91 |
| WORKS CITED..... | 101 |

PREFACE

I wrote this thesis in an atmosphere of support from my colleagues, and I would like to express my gratitude to them. I want to thank Dr. David Robinson, Professor of English and Director of American Studies in Oregon State University's English Department, for over-seeing the production mode of my writing process. He reviewed endless drafts and always smiled. I would like to thank Dr. Jon Olson, Coordinator of Oregon State University's Writing Center, for his patience during the polishing and editing phase of the writing. He encouraged me to expand my writing at critical points, posing as my confused reader who needed to know more in order to understand. (Or was it a pose?) I would like to thank my graduate council representative, Dr. Robert Iltis, Associate Professor of Speech Communication at Oregon State University, for his invaluable contributions to the section on history, politics, and religion. I would also like to thank Dr. Steve Stoyneoff, Assistant Professor of Education at Oregon State University, whose questions during my oral defense pertaining to the language section assured me that I had raised issues concerning Black English that were of collateral interest in my third area, Adult Education in English as a Second Language.

I want to acknowledge my family's loving support. Thanks to my father, Edwin Purdy, for the newspaper clipping he gave me, and which I taped to my office wall, about Toni Morrison winning the 1993 Nobel Prize for literature. Thanks to my mother, Mildred Purdy, for being my cheering section, as always. Thanks to my daughters, Lisa and Amy Singh, for loving me throughout, even when I started writing postcards instead of letters as the writing progressed. Most of all, thanks to Diz Greer for saying "I know you'll do just fine" whenever I was convinced I could not complete this paper.

WHO WE ARE AND WILL BE

INTRODUCTION

Black women novelists are establishing a community context for their female characters which parallels the sense of community they envision for themselves. These novelists are redefining what it means to be a black female American and are establishing what the black community should provide for their growth. What black women writers have to say about their self-definition can be assessed through a review of a representative sample of their writing. With that purpose in mind, the works studied here include: Alice Walker's *The Color Purple* (1982) and *Meridian* (1976), Toni Morrison's *The Bluest Eye* (1970), and Paule Marshall's *Daughters* (1991). Zora Neale Hurston's work frequently provides historical context and background, particularly in the section on language as an element of identity. An analysis of the main characters in these novels can establish what these black women writers see as essential elements of the self for black women. Although the feminist milieu within which Walker, Morrison, and Marshall write asks them to be pro-choice and pro-lesbian, and the political orientation they share requires activism, these writers *choose* these affiliations and are, therefore, comfortable writing within these constraints. For that reason I feel that Alice Walker, Paule Marshall, and Toni Morrison represent a new awareness of self for black women that is demonstrated in their female main characters. Understanding their protagonists will help me to know what black women novelists think constitutes an identity for their racialized, genderized, cultural selves.

Of the three writers, Morrison is most conscious of "the duality of black consciousness--of how blacks must see themselves on their own terms and through the eyes of others" (Baechler and Litz 326). She also most directly questions the view of

white culture and the view of some members of the black community. All of these writers, while aware of the way others see them, seek to inform that view. They do not want to become squeaky clean like Morrison's Southern black girls gone North. They don't want to be afraid to swing their hips when they walk, even though they are aware of the way society sexualizes them. They came out of a heritage where their great-grandmothers or great-great-grandmothers were slaves who could not sexually refuse the men chosen for them; who were often raped by white masters. Society placed the responsibility for these actions on the victims: black women slaves. This legacy was extended to black women after slavery by a society that assumed black women were sexually wanton. This is one of the images of black women that Morrison, Marshall, and Walker seek to counteract by offering an alternative view. I believe that black women authors such as Morrison, Walker, and Marshall are developing the idea of a community that would foster the growth of a black female self independent of old constraints.

Black women writers are dreamers whose subject is themselves. In reference to the works of white American authors, Morrison writes: "As a writer reading, I came to realize the obvious: the subject of the dream is the dreamer" (*Playing* 17). These women are redefining themselves as agents through their own discourse, finding themselves as people and sharing what they discover with an audience long ignored: black women like themselves.

Other black women, readers and critics, are the community theater within which Morrison, Marshall, and Walker write. The black community--men, women, and children--are the whole context. For their main characters, who represent black women generally, the community is a cast of supporting characters: neighbors who often see little black girls as "niggers" instead of "Negroes" (as in *The Bluest Eye*), church members who don't talk to the girls as they are growing up and fail to discover that these girls' stepfathers are raping them (as in *The Color Purple*), people talking on the store front

porch, people drinking and laughing at the juke, families who give loving support (as in *Daughters*), and friends who affirm life choices and share problems (such as Shug Avery in *The Color Purple*).

As you can see by the examples in the cast of characters, the community is not a place where everything is right. Yet the writers tell the reality in which black women live in order to hold the community's problems up to the light and to effect change. Change is needed to improve the growing ground for black girls who are becoming black women. The community is being reassessed and rebuilt within the writing of these women as a place apart from the engulfing white culture in order for these authors to effect changes within black community for themselves as women and writers. This new community will be a safer and more nurturing place for black girls and black women. It is a place where they can live within an accepting home culture.

The black community becomes important as a safe harbor for black culture. The black community is vulnerable to the cultural encroachment of the surrounding world. Toni Morrison addresses this forcefully in *The Bluest Eye* when she writes of incidents such as little black girls being given white baby dolls for Christmas. The important difference between black women writers and black male writers lies in the women's belief in the strength of black community and in their belief that their writing should contribute to the development of the black community. They do not write for white patrons. They do not color within the lines established by the white cultural view as black male writers such as Richard Wright have done in the past. They do write for black people---especially other women like themselves. They do write about the white culture's effect on their sense of themselves.

Toni Morrison's Pecola thinks her family would not be filled with conflict if she only had pretty blue eyes. Pecola feels she would be a better daughter in a happier family if she had the blue eyes that are a part of the advertising image of a happy child. She

feels that Mary Jane, the blue-eyed child on the candy wrappers at Yacobowski's store, is a child in just such a happy family. For Pecola, Mary Jane is the advertising media image who possesses all that Pecola longs for: a happy family, personal beauty, and social acceptance. Morrison also writes of Southern black women suppressing their funkiness, keeping themselves rigidly under control in order to counteract the negative white cultural view. They don't want to talk too loudly. Through rigid self-control, they try to avoid being seen negatively. The Southern black woman gone North provides a foil to the central character's awareness that denying themselves their sexuality and acting according to a rigid code is a reaction to the white world's view. The protagonist provides a true view through an analysis of the problems of other women's maladjustment. Black characters within the writing of black women authors have both relational and autonomous identities. These characters may define the self for black women. They help to provide an image of black women for those others who seek to know them. When black women see themselves through the eyes of others, this image becomes important to their self-definition.

Through the writing of Alice Walker, Toni Morrison, and Paule Marshall, I examine certain black female protagonists in order to explore how black female identity is being constructed through these characterizations. The black female protagonists are Meridian Hill in *Meridian*, Celie and her central supporting character Shug Avery in *The Color Purple*, Pecola Breedlove and Claudia MacTeer (who form the two poles of experience for one identity--Claudia's) in *The Bluest Eye*, and Ursa MacKenzie in *Daughters*. Celie and Shug are a polar pair as are Pecola and Claudia. Pecola's experience nurtures the growth of awareness in Claudia about her community's lack of support of black girls and about herself as a more perceptive person who will grow up to be different in important ways from the women of her mother's generation. Shug does not offer her experience to Celie; instead, Shug directly instructs Celie about female

sexuality and religion--among other things. Shug provides a mentoring counsel to enlighten Celie. These interactive pairs (Shug and Celie, Pecola and Claudia) are constructed as the two parts of one whole identity because of the shared nature of experience or philosophy. The main characters of Celie and Claudia are incomplete without their alter-egos Shug and Pecola. Through Pecola, Claudia discovers that there must be a growing ground; while through Shug, Celie finds nurture and ease.

Morrison, Marshall, and Walker have found fertile ground as writers for a culture seeking its own voices. These authors are structuring a support system for their work within the black community which includes a growing number of black women critics. These critics are in a uniquely insightful position for review of this writing. They are an important audience for Marshall, Morrison, and Walker to consider when they write, because these critics may develop a wider audience for the authors work by generating interest in their writing. If the critics are interested in the writing, then the writing becomes publicized and better known. I have chosen writers who are reviewed by such female critics extensively and novels I feel are important to the development of a self-image for black women.

Modern black women novelists write to other black women, primarily, to black men, secondarily, and to white readers last and least. They write with an awareness of the white audience, often in reaction to that audience's preconceptions. This is who I am, they write; this is who we are; this is how you see us; this is where you are wrong; this is what you need to know to understand who we are. But the real emphasis is on establishing self--not on reacting to the misconceptions of others. Their writing exclaims: Black men treated us as less desirable than white women--this will change. The white world equated us with a loose sexuality that is really their own repressed wantonness--that isn't us.

These writers point out how black women have been seen and acted toward in the past and how this does not fit with their present conception of how they should be seen. The community context is related to the developing sense of a persona that is self defined. The white world is a hostile ground for a black girl to grow into a woman--a ground where marigolds cannot grow, according to Morrison in *The Bluest Eye*. Black men and the black community have not been a much better ground. These women authors are taking the black community in a new direction that will improve the ground black women will grow in: they are cultivating their growing ground. Within a black community context that supports their growth, these women have a limitless artistic potential. They are writing important novels with central characters who show the reality and the possibility of their lives. They define themselves and their position in black community, creating a black female identity for the future, questioning the present. They write to establish this black female identity and make it known to critics, make it known to black men, make it known to white people, make it known to the black community, make it known to American society.

In order to define themselves for themselves and for other black women like themselves, they must find a center, an identity for a black female character who serves as a prototype of wholeness for black womanhood. Regarding this self development, Morrison writes of her position as a black woman writer:

My work requires me to think about how free I can be as an African-American woman writer in my genderized, sexualized, wholly racialized world. To think about (and wrestle with) the full implications of my situation leads me to consider what happens when other writers work in a highly and historically racialized society. For them, as for me, imagining is not merely looking for or looking at; nor is it taking oneself into the other. It is, for the purposes of the work, becoming. (*Playing* 4)

This newly defined identity must become known to others who will reconceptualize black women based on what they have to say about themselves. Historically black women have been seen as objects of violence with no recourse to law, as martyrs and matriarches, and

as sexual objects accessible to black and white men without the necessity of consent. They have been seen by white women as caregivers who will place the white woman's concerns above their own while forgetting their own lives and families in the service of white families. Having been defined exclusively in terms of their use to others, they have lacked a sense of self.

Zora Neale Hurston's character Janie says, "Honey, de white man is de ruler of everything as fur as Ah been able tuh find out" (*Their Eyes* 14), and when Hurston sought to establish her literary voice, she was equally attacked by critics, white and black males alike. There were no black female critical voices raised in her defense. She was seeking to define her characters differently from the definition offered by society where "de nigger woman is de mule uh de world as far as Ah can see" (*Their Eyes* 14).

In addition to Hurston, Morrison considers the question of the black woman writer's unique perspective, and the careful assessment Morrison makes of her role shows an awareness of how writers shape and define, how they illuminate their lives and hold forth possibility:

My vulnerability would be in romanticizing blackness rather than demonizing it; vilifying whiteness rather than reifying it. The kind of work I have always wanted to do requires me to learn how to maneuver ways to free up the language from its sometimes sinister, frequently lazy, almost always predictable employment of racially informed and determined chains. (*Playing x*)

Far from romanticizing blackness, *The Bluest Eye* tells a story of incest and of the abandonment of a little girl by her community. It is also the story of how many black women, who once were such little girls themselves, are attracted to the quality of whiteness they are sold by advertisers who adorn their products with pictures of white people. The black women in the story offer no support to the little girls like themselves, instead rejecting them as they rejected their own black selves. One exemplar of this type of woman is Geraldine, who sees Pecola as a "nigger" and herself as a "Negro."

Morrison's characterizations of black women in *The Bluest Eye* suggest that black women who lack self-acceptance and positive self-imagery may push away little black girls who make visible what they deny about themselves. They do this in their attempt to embrace the white cultural ideal by distancing themselves from little black girls who remind them of their own child selves. They like to imagine they have grown away from their blackness as they have grown into proper Negro women, assuming "Negroness" is closer to whiteness than "Niggerness." Morrison writes a tale of a community whose absence in the life of a little girl ends in her madness.

Like Morrison, Alice Walker also writes a tale of incest. But unlike Morrison's tale, Walker's is one in which the bonds between black women are strong. A community of black women ultimately rescue the child Celie, an incest victim who is the novel's main character. Just as Walker develops a community of black women in her novel, she was part of a literary community as an author. She found part of her inspiration for the development of her black character Shug Avery in the real life character of Zora Neale Hurston. Hurston is present in the communal legacy of Paule Marshall as well, though I found no link from Hurston to Morrison. Hurston is a literary spiritual mother; therefore, she is important to my study, both as a literal figure and as a metaphorical one. Her absence in Morrison is as telling as her presence in Walker and Marshall. Blues singer Shug Avery talks like a man, according to Celie, who becomes Shug's protégé in the matters of knowing men, god, and self. Hurston, like Shug, was a straight talker who could trade tales like the men on the store-front porch. Hurston also appears as a basis for the character of Ursa MacKenzie in Paule Marshall's novel, *Daughters*. Ursa, like Hurston, has trouble in the academic realm.

Hurston was not able to reconcile her need to tell the true story of the rural black South with the scientific rigors of anthropology. She differed in her approach from her mentor, Franz Boas. Boas relied on historical documentation; Hurston sought an oral

record of the folk that she could record on tape. This difference parallels the experience that Marshall writes into the story line for her character Ursa in *Daughters*. Marshall incorporates real events from Hurston's life in the fabric of her fictional character's life. The result is a character who illustrates the emotional impact of those events, telling what it felt like to be rejected in the academic world for seeing things differently, telling what it felt like having the best insights rejected by a methodology invented by a dominant society of which that character is not a part. Perhaps Marshall saw within Hurston's biographical material a common struggle for black women who find themselves in possession of a perspective not shared in the university atmosphere dominated by white men.

Marshall's character Ursa, like Hurston, does not easily fit into the white male academic realm. Her professor, like some of Hurston's, is a liberal progressive supporter of black people. Yet she finds herself in conflict with this man whose support she has anticipated; she is perplexed by unexpected opposition to her goals as a senior writing her major paper. "And the man was known to be the most progressive-thinking member of the small history/sociology department and the friendliest" (*Daughters* 12). This is similar to Hurston's relationship with Franz Boas at Barnard College. Hurston's style emphasized the folk telling the way they remembered events rather than the traditional method of historical documentation, which created tension between Hurston and Boas. Hurston believed the orally transmitted stories were as true as the historical documents; Boas believed people had faulty memories and their stories were inherently less accurate than events written down. This also put her into conflict with Carter Woodson, another anthropologist she worked under. Hurston asked Woodson for money for a tape recorder; Woodson refused the allocation, because it was not a known method of transcribing studies of folk tales and folk speech. Woodson was in charge of the money, so Hurston was forced into line with his thinking, as biographer Robert Hemenway explains,

Woodson was "mystified by his folklore scholar who kept talking about buying a recording machine so she could record what really happened in black history. Woodson knew that people's memories were notoriously unsound and must be checked carefully by reference to written documents" (95). Hemenway would write of Woodson and Hurston that they "did not get on well" (95).

Ursa MacKenzie has a similar conflict that causes her great anguish as a senior in university. Her thesis for her senior paper is rejected by the professor with whom she has felt the closest trust and confidence. Ursa's thesis is related to a slave named Will Cudjoe, an obvious reference to one of Hurston's biggest academic conflicts which centered on an interview of a former slave named Cudjo Lewis. Ursa's professor rejects her thesis: "It was unacceptable, he informed her. Her topic, the sources she intended using, her methodology, and most of all her thesis--which he found highly doubtful--all were unacceptable" (*Daughters* 11).

The basis of conflict between a black woman's reality and white male academic criteria concerns what is of value. The woman values what the folk say, which is an attitude derived from a black culture that could not write down its view of history's events. Academic criteria is based on history--the written record. The academy values written records over oral traditions. There is an implicit judgment that what is written is true, while what is spoken is unreliable. The academy thereby eliminates much that these women value when it excludes oral traditions from serious consideration as factual accounts. This polarity between black female idealism and white cultural domination is a recurring element, shown in *Daughters* in a college setting and at other times in business or legal matters (frequently at the level of the community vs. the police). The resolution comes sometimes in giving in and passing through, but the apotheosis of the black female identity comes when the woman rejects the attempted domination by walking away from the situation and establishing her own context.

Because she wants to graduate and please her father, Ursa writes her senior paper on another topic. She passes through. But first she pleads her case:

Pleading with the man and trying to fathom the change in him: the eyes that were suddenly as remote as the sky outside and the same grayish New England blue, and the expressionless voice that kept repeating whenever she paused that the proposal was unacceptable and she would have to find another topic. *Why?* What was wrong with the one she had? She didn't understand his objections. She didn't buy the reasons he had given. I don't buy them, you hear! Her inner voice rising to a shout as her anger began to build. Her methodology? Why not? She wanted to try something different. Her sources? The slave narratives and oral histories, the old plantation records, Aptheker, the Angela Davis article. Why not? They were just as valid as the scholarly texts. (*Daughters* 12)

What may attract Marshall and Walker to Hurston as a source of identity is shared reality. In Hurston's biographical material they may find incidents that put at one remove similar happenings in their own lives. These incidents allow them to analyze in the life of another woman what is happening in their lives as black women. This commonality of experience, seen more clearly from the distance of Hurston's life, serves as a common thread tying together over time the central issues in their lives, allowing a consensus to emerge that unites the issues central to black female identity

Anger is an important part of this identity; the "inner voice rising to a shout" (*Daughters* 12) is the true self. Hurston and Marshall express all of the indignity of being invalidated by white cultural views established without input from women like themselves. For Hurston this may be why we see the image of the sensuous free-speaking woman in a folk genre instead of an image of the more sophisticated academic she surely was becoming. The happy bluesy Zora was loose in the world, but the angry thwarted academic stayed inside. Hurston's folk persona found acceptance, but the analytic and questioning young woman she also must have been found no expression in a world long dominated by men and white cultural norms. Her persona suggests a woman screaming, frustrated that she knew oral history should be recorded, not merely transcribed; a woman thwarted, watching the true history of her people slip away, while

her methodology was questioned and her views about research were forced to become a hidden agenda.

In *Their Eyes Were Watching God*, Hurston has Janie say, "Mah tongue is in mah frens mouf" (*Their Eyes* 6). This seems true for Hurston herself, for she put her feelings into the words of the folk, while she herself had developed beyond those days in Eatonville when she was one of those folk. The educated person she became found no acceptance, because hers was a voice black men didn't stop to listen to. Black men dominated the Harlem Renaissance of Hurston's day. She didn't find anyone who would listen and hear what she had to say. She found instead opposition, from Richard Wright and others. There was no way for her to effectively articulate ideas that came from experience not shared by the critics of her day. There was no group of black female critics, no substantial number of black women writers.

Current writers, looking back at Hurston, see a commonalty between their experience and hers. The difference is that modern women writers have critics of their own gender to review their work. These critics and writers, as a group, still feel the rift that divides the writing community along sexual lines. If Hurston was an isolated individual, then they also are an isolated group, writers and critics alike. Marshall, Morrison, and Walker are writing this sense of isolation and separation into the identity of their main characters. These characters express the loneliness of real black women who so often face the world alone. They feel anger at this lack of support from the men who are often not present in their lives in stable ways and from their mothers who tell them they should martyr themselves because this is their role. They write about community support they hope to inspire.

Marshall has written a characterization of Ursa MacKenzie who can articulate the anger that Hurston must have felt and suppressed in her isolation as one of the few black females writing at that time. Like Hurston, Ursa keeps the anger inside (but she is

expressing it to readers, as Hurston's characters could not). Ursa does take stands, such as leaving the National Consumer Research Corporation where she works as the Associate Director of Research, Special Markets. Ursa is repelled by her survey work for special markets on behalf of American Leaf and Tobacco. The NCRC wants her to target the black community for cigarette sales, and Ursa finds herself recoiling from that tactic. She doesn't want to sell a cancer-causing product to her own community. I would extrapolate from her characterization that she doesn't want to sell cigarettes to anyone. She flips a computer switch, destroying the survey data, then writes a letter of resignation and walks off the job. Quitting might seem less satisfying than communicating and changing the situation, but changing things appears to be still out of reach for her.

The choice seems to be between financial success on the one hand and ethics regarding loyalty to self and community on the other hand. This is a hard choice, and it is an unfair one. *Daughters* defines the situation as it is, but it also shows a deeply interior life for a black woman with little communication possible except with others like herself. The only people who support Ursa's decision are her mother and her best friend, Viney. The black female identity Marshall portrays is one of caring black women who cannot bridge the gap between their self perceptions and those perceptions white culture and black men have of them.

Ursa's lover, Lowell Carruthers, doesn't understand why she leaves an enviable job. He doesn't listen. He doesn't want to know. Ursa keeps her ideas and feelings within herself when she is with Lowell; the barriers to her expression are too high for her expressive abilities to vault over them. She finds in her friend Viney a willing listener who does understand. She also receives support from her mother who, after hearing of Ursa's decision to leave the NCRC, sends a telegram saying "Hooray!" These black women stand together in a lonely separation from the world they are trying unsuccessfully to engage.

Hurston's real life provides a characterization of this conflict for Marshall and Walker. Hurston provides a foundation for black female identity for these two writers. Toni Morrison's *The Bluest Eye* does not seem to have found inspiration in the character of Hurston. Morrison strikes out more individualistically in her view of black women. Morrison's *The Bluest Eye* is a black Bildungsroman about the central protagonists Pecola Breedlove and Claudia MacTeer, who appear as the yin and yang of the black, Northern, urban, little girl seeking her identity while immersed in the American culture whose advertising media ideal is whiteness (like the lovely, blue-eyed Mary Jane of candy wrapper fame).

Walker's *The Color Purple* is also a black Bildungsroman, but in the modified version of the rural Southern black style established in Hurston's *Their Eyes Were Watching God*. Walker expands the scope of her writing into areas inaccessible to Hurston, who was writing under narrower constraints imposed by her sponsor and publishers. Walker narrows the community of acceptance to a black female community and introduces lesbianism as the relational context.

Paule Marshall writes with a focus on the political self-definition of her character Ursa MacKenzie, as Walker writes with a focus on the political self-definition of her character Meridian Hill. Meridian and Ursa have found themselves within political contexts, more fully than they have in their relationships with people. Their personal relationships fail to aid them in establishing who they are. The men they know do not provide support to them in their efforts to be true to the needs of the black community. Men are shown as less able to care for the community and more focused on personal goals. Women, by contrast, are other-centered but somehow still end up alone.

Daughters is unique among the novels chosen for study in the way it bridges several black cultures: Northern and Caribbean, folk and educated middle class, island and urban. Marshall's black women are more international, drawn on a bigger global

canvas than a single small community. Her characters, therefore, are seen less individualistically and less in terms of their proximate relational context, because their relational context is not the defining context. Her image for black women is one that includes a cultural and historical stream that provides them with a continuity for themselves in something bigger than their neighborhood or family.

Modern black women novelists are in a new era from Hurston, who had a white patron and found a publishing market that sought the share-cropper genre of story. Her white patron believed in a black primitivism and collected black folk lore through Hurston and others. This patron limited the scope of Hurston's writing, as did her publishers, who would not approve projects she proposed, such as writing about an economically well-off black family. Even though Hurston writes from a rich source of scholarly and personal experience in the folk genre she perfected, she cannot be seen as fully defining a new black female identity. She was not allowed to become what she was capable of becoming. She opened the door for those who came after. Walker's *The Color Purple* is anchored in the same genre, but she transcends Hurston's limitations and formulates a new black woman with a voice and presence that will not be denied.

Current writers have a relatively free opportunity to create a wholeness for black female identity, although there are surely current constraints from publishers and pressure from the feminist community to conform to an image they approve. Morrison, Marshall, and Walker are choosing their own constraints, which should encourage the development of a truer identity. They are writing within a feminist tradition begun by Hurston but lacking the hobbles put on by white patrons such as Hurston experienced.

While Hurston is a guiding spirit to Walker, and sometimes appears in the identities of Marshall's and Walker's characters, I choose to write primarily about the novels of current black women authors who are less compelled by others to write within a proscribed plane. Morrison is a writer of such unique talents and perspectives that she is

hard to compare with other writers. Morrison has both Walker's earthiness and Marshall's cerebral coolness; she uses both of these tonal qualities in her writing, depending on the nature of her writing audience. All of these writers, Marshall, Morrison, and Walker, write knowing the history of black women and knowing what troubles them about the way their lovers, mothers, communities, and white culture see them. Marshall, Morrison, and Walker all have something to say about the direction the self-development of black women should take. They have idealized a woman who is independent and free in the world to create wondrous things like the innovative pants Celie makes with an artist's flair. They want to love deeply and talk openly with lovers who listen. They wish black mothers would support black daughters who are stepping out into new ventures in education and employment. They want a compact with black men who represent black communities politically that will require those men to remain loyal to their black neighborhood constituency instead of being seduced into selling out to the rich white world. Through an analysis of Marshall's, Morrison's, and Walker's protagonists I will unveil the image of the black woman these authors envision.

Part One concerns the history of black women, concentrating on the Jacksonian era. It considers the black woman's relationship to a white male deity, citing *The Color Purple* and *Meridian* as the primary sources. The diaspora, the link between ancient black cultures and American black culture, is discussed, citing *Daughters* and *The Color Purple* as primary sources. The relationship between black women and a spiritualism based in tribal animist traditions is presented citing *Meridian*. This section also considers political violence, both by whites against blacks and by blacks against whites. The critical issue is: If she is violent, what does it change about who the woman is as a person? In this section, both religion and history are related to sexual identity, in the sense that religion blames women for human sexuality, and history has seen black women as wanton creatures tempting men.

Part Two concentrates on *The Bluest Eye*, *The Color Purple*, and *Daughters* in an analysis of childhood. . The writing of Joanne Frye is a strong secondary source for this section. I chose to emphasize *The Bluest Eye* in this section, because of its dramatic polarities. *The Bluest Eye* presents the very warm and good father in contrast with the very cold and bad father. It shows the abandoning mother along with the harsh but loving mother. *The Bluest Eye* importantly shows the difference the community's attitudes can make in how children's lives turn out. Through its contrasts, *The Bluest Eye* demonstrates the consequences of the mental images we have of our children, and it demonstrates the importance of seeing them as good and beautiful people who are worth protecting and loving. *The Color Purple* is studied for its presentation of the development of wholeness in the characterization of Celie. *The Color Purple* emphasizes the community of the juke and a loving personal relationship with Shug Avery as healing and supportive sources for Celie that enable her to overcome sexual abuse and the early social isolation she experiences as a young child in her church and in her school.

Part Three cites all sources in an effort to understand the adult female self development of black women. I wanted to know what they found important for their personal growth. The community continues to be featured as a place that can encourage or inhibit self actualization as it did in childhood. Similarly, mothers and fathers continue to be important to self development for adults as they were for children. Romantic relationships take prominence, however, for adult females. *Daughters*, in particular, emphasizes the importance of men in the lives of women, while *The Color Purple* places its emphasis on lesbian relationships.

Part Four introduces language as an element of personal identity. The language we use helps form who we are. The linguistic group we feel most comfortable with becomes our social set. Language both includes us and excludes us socially. It becomes

our context for self. James Baldwin is cited as support for the idea that the subject is the discourse: our language defines us.

I believe there is a commonality among all these writings that shows the self at its center. That self must be able to withstand loneliness, but it also desires the company of others. Marshall, Morrison, and Walker write about a black woman who wants a place in her community; who wants a loving relationship. This woman wants a better place for little black girls to grow up, where the people around them are more supportive than this world has been for black girls in the past. Community is one important context for the self. The family, friends, and lovers provide other important contextuality for self development. Although the self stands alone when it must, nurturing support facilitates personal growth, according to these authors. For the self most fully unfolds and becomes whole within the human relational contexts of community, family, friends, and lovers. Yet, as Ntozake Shange writes: "i was missin somethin/a layin on of hands/not a man/layin on/not my mama/holdin me tight/sayin i'm always gonna be her girl/a layin on of hands/the holiness of myself released" (Shange 62). It is the self of black women that I am looking for in this study.

PART ONE: POLITICAL, HISTORICAL AND RELIGIOUS IDENTITY

It's time to leave you and enter into creation. .And your dead body
just the welcome mat I need.

--Celie to her husband in *The Color Purple*

In Walker's view, and Marshall and Morrison share this view also, our gods reflect ourselves. In seeking god we find ourselves; it is the self we truly seek in our quest for god. Therefore, religion is vitally important as these writers shape the identities of their characters and, by extension, African-American women in general. These writers cannot be content with a religion that has as one of its major tenets the acceptance of a male god and as a corollary the obedience of women as the handmaidens to men. To successfully find themselves they need a new religious paradigm. Marshall, Morrison, and Walker clearly believe that in order to construct a new religious model for themselves, they must first depart from the white man's religion.

Black women have historically embraced white-based Christianity, and they are often active in the church. But these novelists challenge this condition of accepting Christianity as a part of black female identity. Walker's Meridian Hill considers the question of religion and chooses a rational rather than a religious orientation for herself. Meridian frequently breaks from her mother's views, and this is one important aspect of the emergence of a new form for the black female self-concept to take. Meridian views her mother's religious beliefs as willfully ignorant and superstitious. Her father, on the other hand, has calmer views:

For all that her father sang beautifully, heartbreakingly, of God, she sensed he did not believe in him quite the same way her mother did. Her mind struck on a perennial conversation between her parents regarding the Indians:

The Indians were living right here in Georgia," said her father, "They had a town, an alphabet, a newspaper. They were going about their

business, enjoying life. . . . It was the same with them all over the country, and in Mexico, South America . . . doesn't that say anything to you?"

"No," her mother would say.

"And the women had babies and made pottery. And the men sewed moccasins and made drums of hides and hollow logs."

"So?"

"It was a life ruled by its own spirits."

"That's what you claim, anyway." (29)

This conversation shows Meridian her mother's inability to face reality. Her mother doesn't want to question the white man's religion. Her mother also doesn't want to know about the Indians or about the reasons for Meridian's activism. Meridian's mother feels she has sacrificed her own life's potential for her daughter. She feels her daughter must, in turn, sacrifice her own future for her own child. Self-sacrifice appears to Meridian's mother as the only option open to a black woman. Mrs. Hill's ideas of a woman's obligation to sacrifice herself to her children's interests may arise from her church-based view of gender roles.

Because Mrs. Hill is a product of white male religious teaching she is not sensitive to presence of the old Indian spirits. She has accepted, instead, the white man's god. Meridian feels those Indian spirits and is looking for her own god. There is an inevitable and an understandable parting of the ways between a thinking black woman like Meridian and a white male deity.

In *The Color Purple*, Walker's character Celie, like Meridian in Marshall's fiction, also reaches the point of questioning the existence of the white male deity when she discusses god with Shug Avery. "All my life I never care what people thought bout nothing I did, I say. But deep in my heart I care about God what he going to think. And come to find out, he don't think" (200).

Shug shows Celie a view of god in which god is not a white male: "She say, my first step from the old white man was trees. Then air. Then birds. Then other people" (203). There is also an acceptance of sexuality and sensuousness in Shug Avery's view that is antithetical to white Puritan traditions. Shug tells Celie that god approves of

sensuality: "God love all them feelings. That's some of the best stuff god did. And when you know god loves 'em you enjoys 'em a whole lot more. You can just relax, go with everything that's going, and praise god by liking what you like" (203). This representation of a pantheistic sensual god-view coupled with an emphasis on community demonstrates a link with the African tribal tradition, taking religion back to a black historical base.

There is a spirituality in the writing of these women, an animistic religious view that stands in opposition to white male Christianity. As women, they seek to establish a spirituality that does not align them to a male view. As blacks, they seek liberation from the white cultural religion that Christianity represents in America. Shug Avery puts it this way:

Man corrupt everything, say Shug. He on your box of grits, in your head, and all over the radio. He try to make you think he everywhere, you think he God. But he ain't. Whenever you trying to pray, and man plop himself on the other end of it, tell him to git lost, say Shug. Conjure up flowers, wind, water, a big rock.

But this hard work, let me tell you. He been there so long, he don't want to budge. He threaten lightening, floods and earthquakes. Us fight. I hardly pray at all. Every time I conjure up a rock, I throw it. Amen. (204)

Shug believes in herself and a god that is everywhere and in all things. Shug has created her own religion, while Celie has accepted a white male religion that suppresses her. Winchell makes the point that Celie evolves from a self centered on white cultural religion to an apotheosis of self. Celie's letters to god are really to herself. It is Shug Avery who leads Celie to this understanding that god is within the self. Winchell writes:

Celie has become the sort of self-invented character...and her creation of self is one sense in which she will achieve her goal of entering creation when she finally leaves her husband. In another sense, she will enter creation by becoming one with created things, and in her climactic and mystical departure scene she does. (93)

Celie, guided by Shug Avery, finds her god within. Celie learns to see god also as a part of the beauty of nature: in the purple of a flower, the shape of a rock. God has become a thread tying Celie into the world around her safely, securely. Celie has this god-center, this ego strength, that has allowed her to survive and become a whole person.

The idea of god within establishes an internal right to self-definition for black women that frees them from external views that are impeding their development as people. There is another aspect of Walker's writing that offers an avenue of personal growth, a sense of historical continuity within a black African cultural lineage. This is the link to an idealized African spirituality in *The Color Purple*. Celie's sister Nettie is hired to care for the children of black missionaries in Africa. Her experience alters her religiosity over time. Nettie writes to Celie, "God is different to us now, after all these years in Africa. More spirit than ever before, and more internal" (264).

An historical spiritual linkage with ancient cultures can be found also in other novels such as Marshall's *Praisesong for the Widow*. In that tale, the central character Avey Johnson becomes the living embodiment of an ancient Caribbean spirituality, an avatar: a god in bodily form. Marshall's character Ursa in *Daughters* also has a spiritual nature. Ursa learns to meditate to the sound of Ke'ram, which she repeats silently to herself. "Ke'ram that is nothing more than a sound designed to quiet the mind and suspend all thought. Peace; be still. Ke'ram, that when it's working, takes her head down to Triunion and a beach there that's her favorite in all the world. A two-mile stretch of sand, sea and sky that's so perfect and peaceful no thoughts can reach her there" (17). Ursa begins this meditative practice through the encouragement of her friend Viney. Once again, as in the case of Shug Avery's mentorship of Celie, we see a woman leading another woman to a new spirituality.

But the true master of this new religious awareness is Walker. Meridian Hill, her central character in *Meridian*, is a mystic. Throughout the novel, Meridian is in a period

of inner reflection seeking enlightenment, like Buddha on his path through the forest, Christ in the wilderness, or Guru Nanak Singh on his travels throughout India and Egypt. The demons she wrestles with are her guilt at allowing her baby to be adopted, her struggle to break from the matriarchal role, her awareness of the inconstancy of affection she receives from young black men, the object role she finds herself in with older black men who seek to use her sexually while offering protection, and her indecision regarding violence/nonviolence in her role as a political revolutionary. She is in a stage of metamorphosis as she is awaiting self-knowledge.

Like most mystics, Meridian is attacked from all sides and supported by only those in whose cause she sacrifices herself--poor, rural, black folk. Meridian is beaten by the police during her early civil rights era. She is verbally abused by her mother before setting out for college. Her mother doesn't think Meridian should give up a child and go on in school. Anne-Marion, Meridian's former college roommate, writes to Meridian telling Meridian everything she can that will hurt Meridian. Meridian tapes these letters on her walls, like heaping ashes on her head. Meridian is, in short, ridiculed by most of the people she knows. Such is the life of a seeker after truth.

Meridian's story of her period in the South on a lone civil rights vigil among the folk is a parallel to the wandering-among-the-folk/praying-in-the-wilderness phase of many major religious figures. She lives alone during this time. Her living conditions and the jobs she takes to support herself decline steadily as she moves throughout the South from little town to little town. She gives up the world, casting off her concern for survival as her spiritual quest intensifies. An old lover, Truman Held, finds her living in a monastic style in a room where "the sun through a tattered gray window shade cast the room in dim gray light, and as he glanced around at the letters--walking slowly clockwise around the room--he had the feeling he was in a cell" (24).

Meridian is living at the edge of existence, not caring about her living conditions or her health. She is in bodily denial, not caring for herself physically during this period of spiritual growth. This is another characteristic of spiritual quest. The body is denied as the soul is developed, like a period of growth within a cocoon. Meridian says, "I must look like death eating a soda cracker" (25).

Meridian pushed down the blaming voice within her as she attended Saxon College. She felt fortunate to have a chance to be at Saxon, so she repressed her guilt feelings. During her Saxon years she wouldn't listen to the inner blaming voice; she determined that she would value the opportunity to become educated. But inside herself she felt unworthy of the history of black motherhood. This is partly because she gave up her son in an adoption in order to go to Saxon, where:

After she had figuratively kissed the ground of the campus and walked about its lawns intent on bettering herself, she knew for certain she had broken something, for she began hearing a voice when she studied for exams, and when she looked from her third-floor dormitory window. A voice that cursed her existence--an existence that could not live up to the standard of motherhood that had gone before. It said, over and over, until she would literally reel in the streets, her head between her hands: why don't you die? Why not kill yourself? Jump into the traffic! Jump off the roof, as long as you're up there! Always the voice, making fun. It frightened her because the voice urging her on--the voice that said terrible things about her lack of value--was her own voice. It was talking to her, and it was full of hate. (92)

When Meridian searches for god within, she is seeking herself. Much of the world around her tells her she is not a good person, and most of the people surrounding her see the various masks they project upon her, not her real face. Her mother says, "You should want Eddie Jr. unless you're some kind of monster" (89). Meridian's revolutionary friends are angry for another reason: they embrace violence; Meridian does not. Meanwhile, the man she loves, Truman Held, leaves her for white women and returns to her when those women leave him. (She does not accept Truman back as a lover, only as a friend.) Her ex-husband wanted her primarily for sex, which she didn't enjoy. Her

former in-laws made her into a daughter, but they didn't look behind the daughter mask to see who she was.

Meridian has to find herself, and she has to find the strength to walk on alone. It is this interiority that creates her mystical nature. She is looking to herself as the source of her own nurturing. This inward-looking spiritual quest for the god within brings on mystical visions. Meridian takes up the family legacy as a seer. Her father had developed a spiritual link to a serpent-shaped Indian mound on his property: she had watched him "enter the deep well of the Serpent's coiled tail and return to his cornfield with his whole frame radiating brightness like the space around a flame" (58). He, in turn, had inherited this visionary role with the serpent and its mystical aura from his grandmother, Feather Mae, who "had fought with her husband to save the snake" (57). The serpent mound is a bridge to Indian spirits, spirits who are not bound to the white cultural religion. This link to the serpent mound is important to Walker's characters because it is a link to a religion older than the white man's religion and one that is truer to their souls' source in black tribal religions. The passing on of the spiritual ecstasy of the serpent mound from generation to generation in Meridian's family provides a cultural and historical continuity for Meridian's life centering her heritage in her family's bond to old spirits. Meridian recalls the story of her great-grandmother's religious experience at the serpent mound. The day the Indian spirits had accepted Feather Mae, she had been watching:

some squirrels playing up and down the Serpent's sides. When they disappeared she rose and followed them to the center of the Serpent's coiled tail, a pit forty feet deep, with smooth green sides. When she stood in the center of the pit, with the sun blazing down directly over her, something extraordinary happened to her. She felt as if she had stepped into another world, into a different kind of air. The green walls began to spin, and her feelings rose to such a high pitch the next thing she knew she was getting up off the ground. She knew she had fainted but she felt neither weakened nor ill. She felt renewed, as from some strange spiritual intoxication. Her blood made warm explosions through her body, and her eyelids stung and tingled.

Later, Feather Mae renounced all religion that was not based on the experience of physical ecstasy--thereby shocking her Baptist church and its unsympathetic congregation--and near the end of her life she loved walking nude about her yard and worshipped only the sun. (57)

Meridian goes to the serpent mound, seeking to repeat the experience of her great-grandmother', Feather Mae. Now, as she seeks for herself a mystical experience within the tail coil of the mounded serpent, Meridian is aware of being in a place of the dead, with the bones of Indians in the sides of the mound that surround her. She's afraid.

But she remembered Feather Mae and stood patiently, willing her fear away. And it happened to her. From a spot at the back of her left leg there began a stinging sensation, which, had she not been standing so purposely calm and waiting, she might have dismissed as a sign of anxiety or fatigue. Then her right palm, and her left, began to feel as if someone had slapped them. But it was in her head that the lightness started. It was as if the walls of earth that enclosed her rushed outward, leveling themselves at a dizzying rate. and then spinning wildly, lifting her out of her body and giving her the feeling of flying. And in this moment she saw the faces of her family, the branches of trees, the wings of birds, the corners of houses, blades of grass and petals of flowers rush toward a central point high above her and she was drawn with them, as whirling, as bright, as free, as they. Then the outward flow, like the rush of images, returned to the center of the pit where she stood, and what left her at its going was returned. When she came back to her body--and she felt sure she had left it--her eyes were stretched wide open, and they were dry, because she felt she had been staring directly into the sun. (58)

Meridian, her father, and her great-grandmother all share in the mysticism of the coiled serpent. For Meridian, mysticism was not limited to her out-of-body experience in the serpent's coils: "Later in her travels she would go to Mexico to a mountain that contained at its point only the remains of an ancient altar... There would again be a rushing out from her all that was surrounding, all that she might have touched, and again she would become a speck in the grand movement of time" (59). And in this Mexican experience, Meridian is transformed into an animal spirit, through whose form she begins "to feel the bottoms of her feet curl over the grass, as if her feet were those of a leopard or a bear, with curving claws and bare rough pads made sensitive by long use" (59). This animism is particularly characteristic of Walker's writing, yet all the authors studied here have a discontent with borrowing a white man's religion. A new religious understanding is

integral to them as black women, and it is central to the identity they offer up for black women.

Before the new religion can evolve, the old religion of white male oppression must be seen for what it is. Meridian has many occasions to be judged and fall short of the glory of a white man's god. For example, Meridian's experiences at Saxon College show the problems she has resulting from the college's religious orientation that places blame for human sexual nature on women, seeing them as temptresses unless they are virgins. It is assumed that Saxon young ladies are virgins, by definition as Saxon girls. Consequently, Meridian hides the fact that she was married and a mother. Her past is assumed to be shameful because she had a woman's active sexuality.

The truth was that sex was not enjoyable to her as a young girl. She did not discover her true sexual nature then, but merely accommodated the desires of young men. As a college student, she has had an abortion, while "the doctor tore into her body without giving her anesthesia (and while he lectured her on her morals) and she saw stars because of the pain" (114). This doctor offers to tie her tubes if she will come later to have sex with him. This young black woman, Meridian Hill, becomes a scapegoat for the male religious idea of sexual sin being vested in the female form. Within a religion based on a male god, all guilt resides in the woman. Meridian, in her period of inner struggle, deals with this issue of sexual guilt where women are the repositories of sinful sexuality.

Meridian struggles during her time at college not only with her sexuality within an a repressive atmosphere, but also with her fellow revolutionaries' call to violence. The conflict she feels is between her church-learned non-violence and her fellow revolutionaries' call to violence. Meridian never resolves this conflict between her initial passive ideology and a need to protect people within her community and herself from white violence. She has a revelation in favor of violence at one point when she listens in a church meeting to a father whose son has been killed by whites.

She understood, finally, that the respect she owed her life was to continue, against whatever obstacles, to live it, and not give up any particle of it without a fight to the death, preferably not her own. And this existence extended beyond herself to those around her because, in fact, the years in America had created them one life. (200)

At this time, "she made a promise to the red-eyed man [the father of the murdered boy]: that yes indeed she would kill, before she allowed anyone to murder his son again" (200). Here Meridian is developing an ego, a core, that believes in her own right to existence and the right to existence of other members of her black community. To continue developing in this way, she has to push away the values of the surrounding white culture and tune out the voices of those within the black culture who have internalized white values. She has to see her own worth and the value of other lives similar to her own. So she rejects the long-standing stoicism and acceptance of self as passive target for violence that black people have assimilated along with white religion. White religion said turn the other cheek; love your enemy as yourself. Therefore, black people generally tolerated violent attacks, hoping to avoid injury through passivity. Meridian has a revelation about the need to stand up and fight for one another in the battle for human rights, and although she never becomes comfortable with this vision, she is permanently changed--radicalized. She sees the necessity for the preservation of self, even if this means killing.

Recognition of the need for self defense comes when Meridian concludes that the black boy's life and her own life--any black person's life--deserves defending. They have a right to live, and anyone who threatens their lives can be killed in self-defense. This realization is a part of becoming a whole person. Meridian understands finally that she and all the others in her community have worth. Achievement of wholeness is a trait of Walker's writing. Walker not only seeks to guide her characters to wholeness, but also to provide a connection for them to an older black culture by giving them an animistic religion and by plot elements such as placing Nettie and Celie's children in Africa. This link to an older black culture is even more evident in Marshall's *Daughters*, a highly

politicized novel set in the Caribbean and New York. *Daughters* tells the personal history of Ursa MacKenzie (which includes her abortion--a political act) and the history of the slave revolt on Triunion.

Meridian's vigil as an isolated civil rights activist silhouettes the loneliness that black women feel as a part of their psyche in what is for them a self-denying world. Meridian is a solitary woman, without even the support of her mother or other women, as she seeks to find a center for her beliefs and an answer to the question of whether or not violence must be a part of the social revolution she seeks. Her non-violence, rooted in civil rights tradition, is challenged. Still, Meridian recalls the history of her people and the virtues of the Southern blacks she has seen and been uplifted by the sight of:

Old black men in the South who, caught by surprise in the eye of a camera never shifted their position but looked directly back; by the sight of young girls singing in a country choir, their hair shining with brushings and grease, their voices the voices of angels. (*Meridian* 26)

These young girls' voices lead Meridian to a choice between violence and non-violence, a choice critical to her identity as a civil rights leader:

When she was transformed in church it was always by the purity of the singers' souls, which she could actually *hear*, the purity that lifted their songs like a flight of doves above her music drunken head. If they committed murder -- and to her even revolutionary murder was murder -- what would the music be like? (*Meridian* 26).

Walker seeks to answer crucial questions: what does violence towards whites do to the self? What is the cost of violence in psychic terms to this woman, Meridian Hill, and, by extension, to other black women? Will the identity of black women remain a non-violent identity? Throughout the book, Meridian answers these questions many times, but the answers are not always the same. At one point she decides she will kill before she will watch another black person die in racially motivated violence. But there is no anger in her motivation, only a desire to protect. At another point, she decides she cannot take a human life, even to save her own.

Writing on the topic of violence, Morrison concludes in *The Bluest Eye* that violence toward whites is a disinterested violence that doesn't serve any value to her character Claudia. Claudia feels anger, but directing it toward little white girls will not ease her sense of alienation from the American culture that so angers her by its refusal to admit her into a possibility of existence as an accepted person in the broader world beyond her community. Claudia's anger toward white girls and lighter colored black girls is understandable given the privileged position they hold. Claudia knows the privilege is color-based, and that she is as good as the girls her teachers favor in school because they are white. Claudia never acts on her homicidal urges toward girls who have nicer clothes because their lighter-skinned parents are more successful in a world that bases upward mobility on lighter skin. Only the lighter skinned have access to better jobs in the depression-era Morrison writes about in *The Bluest Eye*. Morrison explains that Claudia learns to love Shirley Temple, just like the other girls, forgetting that Shirley is dancing with *her* uncle, forgetting that isn't fair.

Daughters emphasizes social revolution and violence is never considered as an aspect of that revolution. It is, rather, a revolution of taking issues to the streets and promoting political activism. This activism is to improve conditions in the black community. Often in *Daughters* this means keeping white "progress," such as new roads and resort developments, from tearing down black communities to make way for economic expansion in the white world. Marshall's *Daughters* is oriented to activism that Marshall historically situates as modern black activism arising from a tradition that began in the slave revolts. Marshall writes a fictionalized slave revolt on Triunion into the plot line of her novel, and she alludes to real life slave revolts through mention of Herbert Aptheker. Aptheker is perhaps best known for his *A Documentary History of the Negro People in the United States*. He also wrote *American Slave Revolts* which chronicles how slaves initiated revolts when they became unwilling to continue in

bondage, desiring their own freedom. Aptheker presented a new view within his work of the nature of slaves that changed the direction of scholarship toward a recognition that Nat Turner and other slaves revolted against slavery of their own volition, not as participants in abolitionist inspired revolution. This introduced an aspect of self-determination into future analysis of the era by later historians. But, more importantly for the issue of characterization in the novel, Aptheker recognized a new view of the nature of slaves as people. The image of blacks under slavery that predominated before Aptheker's thesis was one in which they were seen as "generally contented, racially inferior, subjects of paternalistic planters" (Shapiro 53). Aptheker's new image is one of blacks who were not content under slavery but united in resistance to slavery. One slave revolt in particular interested Aptheker. He wrote extensively about Nat Turner, concluding that there was no evidence of abolitionists inspiring Turner's revolt. It is this aspect of self-determined revolution that Marshall idealizes in *Daughters* when she creates the Triunion slave revolt.

Morrison historically situates *The Bluest Eye* in the Great Depression. Understanding the impact of the Depression on the black community helps in appreciating the concern of Morrison's characters with being out on the street. This was a real possibility. Economic security, which Morrison indicates through home ownership, was a real preoccupation in the thoughts of black people in the Great Depression. William Sundstrom details the unemployment figures for ten black communities during the depression and concludes that "among black men, black unemployment rates ranged from a third above to about double white rates, averaging 50 percent higher....the unemployment rates of black women ranged from twice to more than four times the rate of white women" (Sundstrom 418). These statistics easily explain Morrison's characters worrying about keeping out the cold wind of winter. There was a harsh wind blowing through the community that threatened everyone's survival who lived there. Fear of the

winter cold and concern with the cost of heating, like fear of being out on the street, were manifestations of an atmosphere of worry over basic survivability.

Morrison was also concerned about the outside pressure of white culture pressing in on the black community. She shows this in her awareness of advertising ideals based on white women's features and coloring. Historically, the black community has not expanded outward into the white culture as much as white culture has encroached into black culture. Some measures of success in black culture are based on a model provided by white culture. In the black community in the past, economic success has meant being able to keep a wife in the home as white people ~~w~~ere able to afford. Black women have been historically expected by many males in their community to find their place in the home in a supporting role to men and children (Harley 12). They have freely been discounted by men of all colors and placed lower in the scale of social order than white women and children whose servants they were. The personal merit of individual black women was usually exemplified by matriarchal martyrs who sustained everyone else in a caretaker role. Walker presents this issue through her writing.

Walker shows her character Meridian feels unworthy of this tradition. While Meridian feels guilty of robbing her mother of her chance in life, she doesn't know why she feels this guilt. She becomes haunted also by giving up her child for adoption, abandoning the martyr role. Meridian is unable to value her own achievements, because she has sinned and fallen short of this role as matriarchal martyr. Meridian emerges from childhood not as a fully autonomous self, but as a woman in transition away from old expectations. "What you see before you is a woman in the process of changing her mind" (*Meridian* 25). She is metamorphosing from the expectations of old roles. Meridian pioneers a new way of becoming.

The old ways of being for black women in the U.S. began in slavery and moved next to a period in which most black women were domestics (modified slavery). During

the Jacksonian era (about 1815-1848), black women were encouraged by black male leaders to remain at home when possible as wives and mothers. This was viewed as social progress away from domestic service. The economic reality was that many black women needed to work because many men in their community were unemployed. These women were often washerwomen or other domestics: "since household or domestic work was considered degrading by white women, these jobs were reserved for black females" (Harley 8). But there were exceptional women who entered other forms of employment or owned businesses (such as hairdressing salons). Sarah Johnson owned a hat cleaning business; Elleanor Eldridge was a dairy woman at 17 and also learned to spin and weave; Sarah Mapps Douglas was a schoolteacher and activist (Harley 11-12). These women provide a basis in reality for the characters in novels, many of who are similar to the entrepreneurial women of history. Celie develops a pants company as a cottage industry, Shug Avery is a blues singer, Squeak (in *The Color Purple*) helps Harpo to run a juke, Meridian goes to college and becomes an activist, and Ursa becomes a freelance researcher.

Such women were truly unique in the Jacksonian era, when the societal view of women, white or black, was paternalistic: "Women were considered to be inferior, socially and legally, and were called minors, if single, and if married were under control of their husbands" (Harley 5). Society does not change quickly, and the legacy of paternalism was still felt in the 1950's, 60's, and 70's: the time period of the novel *Meridian*. Paternalism recurs as a theme throughout *Meridian*. Meridian Hill encounters a black doctor who performs an abortion on her while lecturing Meridian on her morals (and asking for sex with Meridian at a later time in payment for tying her tubes). She is groped by a black professor when she is hired to help him at his home office, while he warns her against other men. She is automatically assumed to be solely responsible for her baby by its father, who leaves her for someone else and leaves all paternal

commitment at the same time. His view of this as *natural* is the only view. "He assumed, naturally, that the baby would remain with her (this was, after all, how such arrangements had *always* gone), and he did not intend to see much more of either of them. On her side there was just--a continuation of her lethargy, an unwillingness to put forth effort for anything" (*Meridian* 71-72). Meridian accepts the situation in a fog of inertia. Nothing more is expected of her husband, but she must be a good mother.

The Jacksonian era provides a clear example of the genderized and racist social inequity that burdened black women historically. Although inequity is certainly not confined to that period, I have chosen this period of history for the examples of inequity it offers, and because Harley presents the era as a time of change in black males' conception of their place in family toward acculturation within a white male originated paternalism. This intrigued me, because it would explain why my authors sometimes express the feeling that black men and women were closer under slavery. This change of black male self-perception, which Harley identifies as an aspect of the Jacksonian era, would explain a breakdown of the solidarity between black men and women forged earlier by slavery. The Jacksonian era was a time when a small group of white entrepreneurs formed a factory system that placed them in paternalistic control over much of society.

The Jacksonian era also marked the continuation of a view, begun in slavery, of black women as immoral. Because of this view of black women, they were not allowed to work in the growing factory system of that time. Factory owners assumed the moral standards they set for their employees excluded black women: "The widespread sentiment among whites was that the entire black race was generally corrupt and degraded" (Harley 9). This continuance of the view of black women as immoral into the Jacksonian era shows its persistence in American society and de-regionalizes the view, enlarging its influence into the North-Eastern factory system.

Slavery generated this attitude toward black women; black women were considered immoral because they had sex without marriage under slave conditions where they were treated as objects for procreation. They were not treated as women with a right to reject advances from men. This way of seeing black women as sexually accessible without the need for consent extended beyond slavery, evolving into a belief that black women were inherently immoral. I have given examples of this from slavery and from Eastern factories, because I hope to de-regionalize this issue. It is not a purely Southern belief system. The presumption of immorality in black women is a prevailing ethos of American society. This shows in Morrison's work through her reference to black women's fear of swinging their hips or laughing too loudly. It shows in Marshall's writing about present day New York, where Viney is embarrassed by the police department's assumption that she is a welfare mother and her son has no father of record.

The legacy of a belief in the immorality of black women that begins in the sexually exploitive practices of slavery also shows clearly as a part of the sexism confronting the women in *The Color Purple*, where Celie is raped repeatedly by her stepfather without any intervention on her behalf. In the same novel, Squeak is raped by her uncle (a white man) who is an official at the women's prison where Sofia (the wife of Squeak's lover) is held. Squeak is sent to the prison to appeal to the white prison official on Sofia's behalf. Squeak is chosen for this mission because she is related to the white official. The white official denies his relationship to Squeak. When the official rapes Squeak, he says he is proving Squeak is not related to her by raping her. The logic being that he would not rape a relative due to incest taboos. There is no avenue of protest open to Squeak, who must endure this rape without being able to accuse her attacker in court. Squeak is a black woman; she cannot successfully accuse a white man of rape.

We also see this legacy when Meridian Hill has sex with her boyfriends without enjoying it, assuming it is part of the bargain in having a boyfriend. Having a boyfriend

protects her from other males: "Being with him did a number of things for her. Mainly it saved her from the strain of responding to other boys or even noting the entire category of men" (*Meridian* 61). For Meridian to have simply been allowed to be known as a friend to these males she had to have another male as protector. "And so, while not enjoying it at all, she had sex as often as her lover wanted it, sometimes every single night" (60). She doesn't consider her own feelings, but numbly goes along with what the other girls she knows are doing.

Her friend across the street becomes pregnant in early adolescence, and Meridian herself is a mother at the age of fourteen. She is blamed for her pregnancy by her mother, who treats Meridian as morally improper. Responsibility for sexual activity is placed on females who are not often in a position to refuse sexual advances. Meridian was molested as a child by the local undertaker, Daxter, and his assistant. They allow her to refuse actual intercourse while engaging in provocative sexual activities, wanting her consent so she will continue to return to them. They also assume that she will be seduced by their sexual stimulation of her body. "And yet their pawing over her and her refusal to do anything more than tease them had seemingly separated her from her young husband forever. For as much as she wanted to, she--her body, that is--never had any intention of *giving in*. She was suspicious of pleasure" (*Meridian* 67). Sex becomes a political act of control of the body and, by extension, control of the self.

Finding the right to refuse becomes important as an element of identity. When Meridian refuses Truman Held and rejects his easy assumption of her availability she gains individual power and control. Black women novelists are writing against a long standing belief in the immorality of women like themselves. They have the courage to allow their characters sensuality in the Hurston tradition. Hurston received criticism from black male critics and others. Some of this may have been in reaction to the sensuality of her characters, because black people were trying to overcome their role as scapegoats for

white sexual repression. They wanted other elements of their human nature to be seen besides their sexuality alone; consequently, sexuality was expected to be underplayed by black women in their real and fictitious lives whenever the white world was looking in. Black women were treated as though they had a reputation to live down.

The black woman's early reaction to this stigma can be found in the novels under study. Many have reacted by being too good, too godly, and too clean. Morrison vests this reaction particularly in the Southern black women who

go to land grant colleges, normal schools, and learn how to do the white man's work with refinement: home economics to prepare his food; teacher education to instruct black children in obedience; music to soothe the weary master and entertain his blunted soul. Here they learn the rest of the lesson begun in those soft houses with porch swings and pots of bleeding heart: how to behave. The careful development of thrift, patience, high morals, and good manners. In short, how to get rid of funkiness. The funkiness of the wide range of human emotions. (*Bluest* 64)

For black women who came out of a tradition where they were property without the right to refuse sex to white owners or the mates chosen by these owners for them, the first stage in identity formation may have been to become very rigid to reinforce a sense of their right to withhold themselves from men. They may have wished to establish their moral character, but in this reaction they were denying their own sexuality in order to hide their sexual nature from a world that would have interpreted it as proof of an innate immorality. And, like Celie in *The Color Purple*, they went to church and worked avidly for the approval of the pastor and to show the world they were virtuous and worthy of the right to be left alone.

Walker's Celie knows that the other women in the church look down on her because she has had two illegitimate children while still a child herself. They assume her sexual nature without knowing the facts. She holds her head up when she goes to church and tries to prove her true virtuous nature through the maintenance of a clean home and children who are cared for, through the act of cleaning the church, and through

working hard for the pastor. She is paternalistically approved for her efforts by the pastor, is acknowledged as at least being cleaner than Mr.____'s first wife by the parishioners--and then is ignored. Then Celie discovers that God loves Shug Avery, who does none of these virtuous things: "You telling me God love you, and you ain't never done nothing for him? I mean, not go to church, sing in the choir, feed the preacher and all like that?" [Celie asks] "But if God love me, Celie, I don't have to do all that" [Shug replies] (*Color* 200).

Acceptance by god, in this case, means self-acceptance. Shug is saying that you can love yourself without working for the approval of the pastor or the ladies in the church. She is also saying it is healthy to have a sexual nature, and a black woman can admit to having one. This is part of the new identity these novelists present. Although Celie is still searching for herself as she grows into womanhood, she has learned that the person she must finally please is herself. Celie gains in autonomy as she accepts her sexual nature as a woman. Shug also helps Celie to accept the lesbianism nature of her sexuality.

Black women have to come to terms with their history and the ways in which the world has seen them. Much hatred has been directed at black people in the United States; for black women, especially, it has not been fertile soil in which to grow. An historical legacy lies behind the new identity being formed of black women by Morrison, Marshall, and Walker. They are fashioning their own context within a black female support community. They will provide fertile soil within that context for their daughters to grow within a framework of shared female strength.

PART TWO: CHILDHOOD IDENTITY

But before ah seen de picture ah thought I wuz just like de rest.

--Janie Crawford in *Their Eyes Were Watching God*

Black women writers have created their own discourse, shaping a black female identity. Black feminist critic Lorraine Bethel asserts that "the codification of Blackness and femaleness by whites and males is contained in the terms 'thinking like a woman' and 'acting like a nigger,' both based on the premise that there are typically negative Black and female ways of acting and thinking" (Bethel 178). What this means for the young, urban, black girl seeking her own identity is codified by Pecola Breedlove in *The Bluest Eye*. Pecola is the female racial archetype for blackness when perceived as the other in the white American male dominated culture. Her family represents what can become of black people if they allow the white other to define them to themselves: "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' " (*Bluest* 28).

Pecola Breedlove sees herself as ugly. Her feeling of ugliness isolates her from the community, and in her isolation Pecola Breedlove becomes a victim of incest. There is violence in Pecola's home, which she feels would not take place if she only had pretty blue eyes. After being raped and impregnated by her father and psychologically damaged by Soaphead Church when he pretends to give her blue eyes, Pecola goes insane. When he promises to turn Pecola's eyes blue, Soaphead Church acts not out of malice, but out of his own madness. Pecola has no one to guide her; she is a little girl who is blamed by her community for allowing her father's act of rape, and she has no adult on her side.

Pecola's mother, Polly Breedlove, retreats from her own home life into her white employers' more orderly world, adopting the Fisher's home and family in substitution for her own.

Pecola is abandoned emotionally by her mother and becomes the target for her father's twisted love, the object of his displaced anger against whites. Pecola therefore becomes the mere shadow side of the character Claudia, who does manage to grow up whole. In Morrison's view, not all black girls have an equal chance of becoming whole women. Morrison's characters have a polarity that shows the possible outcomes of a girl's life: Pecola Breedlove's life that fails through lack of family nurturing and community acceptance and a class difference or Claudia MacTeer's life that succeeds because of a more loving family and inclusion in a society of home owners. The Breedloves are renters; the MacTeers own their own home. Claudia's father is safe to love; Pecola's father is a "free man" and "free men are dangerous to love" (*Bluest* 163).

The critical difference between Claudia and Pecola is not skin color. Both are dark. The critical difference is acceptance and love within the community and the home. Morrison's argument seems to be that the black community and the black family have a role in determining the future identity of its daughters. Claudia is sure that Pecola's father, Cholly, loves Pecola. It isn't as simple as that. Cholly aims his hatred of whites at black women and at Pecola. He cannot react against white society; he turns his anger on his wife and daughter, because he is weaker than white people. Cholly is not as stable a father as Mr. MacTeer who sees his daughters as children under his protection. Cholly is freer than Mr. MacTeer. Morrison points out in the novel that free men are dangerous. Mr. MacTeer owns a home, which gives him a tie of place Cholly lacks. He, in contrast with Cholly, is a friendly presence. His sexuality is non threatening. He makes Claudia and her sister Frieda feel safe. When Mr. MacTeer gets up in the night and walks naked by the girls' door on his way down the hall to the bathroom, thinking them asleep, he is

not a threat. "When he had moved on, the dark took him away, not his nakedness. That stayed in the room with us. Friendly like" (*Bluest* 55).

Cholly's sexuality is not "friendly like" for Pecola as Mr. MacTeer's sexuality is for Claudia and Frieda. Cholly's love is not warm but cruel and hard. Cholly sees his daughter washing dishes and considers her as an affront to himself:

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. Guilt and impotence rose in a bilious duet. What could he do for her ever? What could a burned out black man say to the hunched back of his eleven-year-old-daughter? The hauntedness would irritate him--the love would move him to fury. How dare she love him? Hadn't she any sense at all? What was he supposed to do about that? Return it? How? What could his callused hands produce to make her smile? What of his knowledge of the world and of life could be useful to her? What could his heavy arms and befuddled brain accomplish that would earn her love? His hatred of her slimed in his stomach and threatened to become vomit. (*Bluest* 127)

What Cholly Breedlove does is rape his little daughter twice and impregnates her. He destroys her. She retreats into madness, trying to deny that any of this has happened--that she has allowed it to happen. The community blames Pecola as much as it blames Cholly, feeling she should have fought him off.

Following the first rape, Pecola's mother found Pecola unconscious on the kitchen floor with her panties hanging from an ankle. Cholly had left her there after covering her violated body with a blanket. But Pecola reports that her mother inexplicably didn't believe her when she said she was raped. Mrs. Breedlove, who has physically fought with Cholly over much less, does not defend or protect Pecola. When Pecola becomes pregnant, the community considers her a ruined girl. Only Claudia and Frieda care about the black baby they envision growing within Pecola.

Claudia and Frieda plant marigolds in a ritual of sympathetic magic. They believe the marigolds will grow and the black baby will live. But the marigolds don't grow and the black baby dies. "I even think now that the land of the entire country was

hostile to marigolds that year. This soil is bad for certain kinds of flowers. Certain seeds it will not nurture, certain fruit it will not bear, and when the land kills of its own volition, we acquiesce and say the victim had no right to live" (*Bluest* 160). Morrison's view, by analogy, is that the future for a black woman--what becomes of her and who she becomes--will depend upon the soil she grows in.

Looking back over that year when marigolds wouldn't grow, Claudia comes to a definition of herself. "Memory operates similarly in male and female," writes Joanne Frye, "as a part of the ongoing construction of self" (69). Frye addresses the idea of gender identity as a part of this process of remembering where "gender specific self-perceptions are used to interpret remembered experience, memory takes shape in interactions with notions of gender" (69). For children, gender defines their place in their family and in their community. Pecola's experience demonstrates that these family and community contexts are not always safe. Children should have a safe place for self-development as they grow so that they can become complete selves with a full range of expression.

The novels I studied are about children, perhaps because childhood is a more pristine condition, closer to a state of grace. Children start learning society's errors quickly, corruption starting sometimes even before birth in a world with alcohol- and drug-affected babies, but childhood is still nearer to purity than adulthood. Not all of our ills are absorbed at once by our children, which is how the community evolves; some ills are not absorbed by them at all. Children contain pockets of uncorrupted innocence. Celie is an innocent, no matter what is done to her; Celie is intrinsically a good girl. Claudia is likewise innocent, but Claudia's mind is more analytical. Claudia actively processes in an aggressive manner the harm the community does by shunning the Breedloves and by blaming Pecola for her father's actions. Celie, in *The Color Purple*, cannot see the community's role as clearly in her own life, due to the numbing of self

Celie must perform to buffer the pain of her life. Celie's rape by her step-father and her subsequent pregnancies allow the community to judge her in a similar manner to the way the community in *The Bluest Eye* judged Pecola. The victim is held responsible for the crime. For all the cold wind at the windows, Claudia's life is more protected than Celie's or Pecola's. It is from her position of safety that Claudia views the peril Pecola endures. Claudia does not feel a superiority of position; she dreams instead of the life of a baby conceived in rape and has hope for it. Claudia also differs from Celie in her ability to see the underlying assumptions of her community: that the victim entices the crime and that deviance must be shunned or it is encouraged. The community avoids admitting the Breedloves into a sense of belonging, shunning them instead when they allow themselves to end up on the street. The community also disassociates from the Breedloves because they are darker and have more "black features" in their countenances. When Pecola is raped, the community backs even further from the Breedloves and the act of incest they display. The community blames Pecola for allowing incest to occur, demonstrating to girls within the community that this cannot be tolerated and that incest victims will be shunned if they allow the crime. The community makes no distinction between Pecola and the crime that was committed against her: Pecola becomes her rape. Rejecting Pecola is part of rejecting incest; Pecola embodies a taboo of her community. Claudia feels the lack of empathy for Pecola from the adults of the community, and she perceives this as a lack in those adults. Claudia finds what is underneath the surface layers of her community's meanings by actively seeking understanding. Claudia rips apart the white baby dolls to find the hidden special quality of whiteness, and she finds nothing -- no special quality exists.

There is hope and despair in all of these community interactions. Only a child could navigate the polarities of hope and despair while remaining pure. And even some children, like Pecola, cannot safely find their way. These authors are asking for a safe

childhood for all children when they point out that safety for children doesn't exist in the communities they write about. By showing the presence of harm to children, they emphasize the absence of safety. No child should endure the assault by adults that Celie and Pecola endured. These novels are pointing out that girls are not safe. The authors indirectly mandate the need to face this reality and change it.

The present reality, in which Pecola Breedlove completely internalizes the rejection of her black female self by white male culture is harmful to children. Pecola's encounter in her neighborhood with the white male immigrant storekeeper, Mr. Yacobowski, adds to Pecola's conceptualizing herself as an other in reference to American norms (and Morrison says American means white). This "othering" of Pecola Breedlove is shown in the following scene between Pecola and Yacobowski:

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. 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? (*Bluest* 34)

Pecola has gone to Yacobowski's store to buy candy. Along the way she notices the dandelions and identifies with their common hardiness and beauty. Pecola was ready to see herself as one of many little black girls who are sturdy and growing beautifully, worthy of admiration even though they are found everywhere on the sidewalks where she lives, common but stunning in their presentation of abundant life just like the dandelions. Mr. Yacobowski cuts dead this positive self-imaging so completely that she no longer sees the dandelions' beauty. Pecola went to Mr. Yacobowski's store to buy a candy called Mary Jane's. Her encounter with Mr. Yacobowski causes Pecola to see the dandelions as ugly weeds and herself as an ugly little black girl, common and therefore of little worth. She learns to see herself through the deadening gaze of Mr. Yacobowski:

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. Perhaps because he is grown, or a man, and she a little girl. But she has seen interest, disgust, and 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. She has seen it lurking in the eyes of all white people. The distaste must be for her blackness. All things in her are in 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. (*Bluest* 36)

This passage defines the anguish of being a young, urban, black girl forming an identity for her race and gender. Pecola's solution is to eat the candies wrapped in the picture of the blue-eyed Mary Jane, to consume whiteness. The black community in which Pecola lives offers her no alternative self-view to counteract the white cultural view. There is no alternative vision of Pecola's blackness as right and natural to create an image for Pecola to hold in mind to help her to accept herself. The truth, Pecola believes, is that she should be other than she is. She should have pretty blue eyes. She should be white. If she had pretty blue eyes her mother and father wouldn't fight in front of those blue eyes. If she had pretty blue eyes everyone would be happy. Reversing this line of thought, Pecola believed that her eyes, being deep brown, were the cause of the disharmony in her life. Pecola thought her eyes were the wrong eyes; she was the wrong girl. She ought to be some other self she reasoned--a blue-eyed self similar to the white ideal for children. Nothing in her experience provided her with a clear and positive identity for a black, brown-eyed girl. The community offered no antidote for the poisoning white American culture within which Pecola's community was surrounded.

"Morrison's portrayal of Pecola is the most horrifying example of the mental distortion produced by being 'other' to white culture" (Wall 175). Wall sees Morrison's creation of Pecola as a transformation of "a little black girl caught behind a white mask into a little black girl whose mask becomes her face. Pecola's dialectical antithesis is, then, Claudia who tears to shreds the white mask society wants her to wear" (175).

Claudia tears down the white mask, destroying the white baby dolls she is given for Christmas, despising Shirley Temple (the icon of whiteness), asserting her own existence. Eventually, though, she begins to acculturate to the white model, learning to love Shirley Temple, finding the futility of violence against white baby dolls, the futility of violence against little white girls and white society. This would be disinterested violence of no value to Claudia in establishing herself or finding a culturally based place for herself.

Claudia is successful in defining herself because she rejects the white dominated world around her, at least for a time, and she is aware of the imbalance in her world. She sees the side-long glances from the black teachers at her school to the lighter skinned children. She sees the economic differences that create a class of homeowners whose more stable world she is a part of within her own family. Claudia knows that there is love for her in her home, where she perceives the loving hands of her mother as "somebody who does not want me to die" (*Bluest 7*).

It is through Claudia that Morrison writes to black women who will recall their own childhood in their experience. They can recall all the childhood empathy they had for the Pecolas they knew. Black women can begin to imagine themselves making a difference for the Pecolas they know in their communities now. This encourages imaging black women meeting the needs of the next generation of black females, providing emotional sustenance.

Morrison illustrates the way adults in Claudia's community let children down. And by extrapolating from their lack of support Claudia knows that adults could lift children up. Claudia and her sister, Frieda, were perplexed by the adults' reaction to Pecola's misfortune:

And I believe our sorrow was the more intense because nobody 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 with concern, but we saw only veils (*Bluest* 149).

In these lines we can see the grown Claudia looking back with empathy for Pecola, and we cannot believe she could feel this empathy unless it is still a part of the woman she has become. Claudia's experiences have made her grow up to be more sensitive to Pecola and others like her. In her reflections, Claudia writes about the adult women she observed as a child. She is particularly concerned by those like Geraldine, who called Pecola a "nasty little black bitch" (*Bluest* 72) and loved who her cat more than any person.

Geraldine was one of those Southern black women who are so afraid to be black that they wipe the funkiness of their female black selves away:

Wherever it erupts, this funk, they wipe it away; where it crusts, they dissolve it; wherever it drips, flowers, or clings, they find it and fight it till it dies. They fight this battle all the way to the grave. The laugh that is a little too loud; the enunciation a little too round; the gesture a little too generous. They hold there behind in for fear of a sway too free; when they wear lipstick, they never cover the entire mouth for fear of lips too thick, and they worry, worry about the edges of their hair. (*Bluest* 64)

Geraldine instructs her son in the difference between "colored people and niggers" (*Bluest* 67). Geraldine saw Pecola as a "nigger" and herself as a "colored person." Claudia, in her awareness of the harm caused to Pecola by this perception, will not grow up to be like Geraldine. In Claudia, we can see a new identity emerging for black women as they become more accepting of themselves as black people, sustaining a positive awareness of self in their children. Black women are being shown a potential role: defining a black selfhood for the next generation such that they will not "ask for the blue eyes that represent harmony, joy, and beauty, eyes that signal worthiness and belonging" (*Bluest* 17) like they do for Pecola.

Morrison's novel tells black girls to love themselves as they are and to be loved within their community for their true selves, so that they will not be like Pecola, who in vain "seeks self-respect and beauty to combat the 'ugliness' identified with her blackness"

(Otten 17). It might be better to identify beauty with blackness and to offer self-respect to girls for their true selves and not for their ability to become as advertised by Max Factor. One role of the community in achieving this could be to reassure girls that they are *correctly* constructed as they are without the need to install improvements. The hair, eyes, body, mind, and heart they possess are *the right stuff right now*.

For a black female identity to be formed in a way that will allow for the development of wholeness of that identity, the writers must alter reality, so that reality does not instead dictate character development. In reference to *The Bluest Eye*, Frye comments that:

A Bildungsroman that unquestionably follows the life premises of its traditional patterns is very unlikely to show its protagonist succumbing to the cultural norms about adult womanhood; to grow up female within such a pattern is to succumb to the femininity text, to grow into the enclosing grid of the known social expectations. In order to resist such entrapment, a Bildungsroman seeking new definitions of female identity in a social context must also subvert the cultural assumptions about growing up female. (78)

Reality itself requires invention, because reality, as influenced by a white culture does not support a positive self image for black women. The assumptions about growing up female are compounded by the assumptions about being black. Marshall, Morrison, and Walker have to write through these assumptions. They often accomplish this by remaining within a context of black community. Walker also writes a black Bildungsroman in the form of a young girl's letters to God (to herself). These letters serve as the narrative of Celie's childhood. *The Color Purple* is the story of Celie, a black girl growing up in the rural South. Celie is raped by her stepfather an act similar to Pecola's rape by her father. Unlike Pecola, Celie is able to find her core of self and to remain sane throughout experiences that would destroy the personality of a weaker person. Celie appears passive, but she has merely learned to endure.

Celie becomes pregnant twice by her step-father while she is still a girl herself. Her children are given to missionaries by the stepfather. Celie's younger sister becomes the step-father's new interest, and Celie acts to save her sister by putting herself forward to receive the step-father's advances instead. She acts also to tell her sister to study and better herself. She acts to help her sister escape.

There are many events that Celie must endure without alternatives. However, Celie is not a passive vessel for the world's abuse, but a stoic in the face of its indifference. Her community does not investigate her life in order to know what is really happening there. She is left alone to the mercy of men who are able to use her sexually and as household labor without valuing her as a person. She is treated as an object, but successfully emerges as a self, because she is able over the course of time to take actions that create a link between herself and others. "To choose is an action and to be able to choose is the decisive characteristic of selfhood" (Frye 69).

Walker's development of Celie reveals according to Thadius Davis "the girl, the female becoming totally a woman person who survives and belies the weak, passive exterior her family and community presume to be her whole self" (52). When Celie finally speaks out to Mr._____ and his family, telling them off at the dinner table one day, they see her true self for the first time. Unless the self is articulated, it is not apparent. Frye writes of women protagonists speaking out in novels: "The speaking 'I' claims her identity in process; in becoming interpreter of her own experience, she also claims both her femaleness and her autonomous self-definition" (Frye 76). When Celie discards her passivity and speaks up for herself she becomes an autonomous speaking voice -- a self at last.

Pecola, by contrast to Celie, is a doomed character. Pecola serves to illuminate for Claudia MacTeer the danger to the self for a black girl in succumbing to the values of a white world. Frye writes: "Pecola, then, is fixed at the center of the opening pages. Her

being is made 'static and dread' by the images and eyes of the white world around her. Her sense of self is finally submerged in the objectification she located in the mirror" (Frye 102). Pecola is the yin to Claudia's yang. Pecola's destruction comes about through her acceptance of the movie industry's and advertising media's view that whiteness is beauty. Pecola's final slide into madness comes when she thinks she has finally been granted blue eyes by god. Watching Pecola and the community's rejection of her as black and ugly, Claudia comes to a separate perception of her own. Claudia understands the community is wrong. She will not be just like her mother or the other neighborhood women when she grows up. As Frye writes, Claudia has learned through Pecola, and she incorporates what she learns into a new type of woman.:

Claudia MacTeer thus enacts a different version of black female selfhood than either the acceptance of cultural expectations or the freedom that destroys others. The narrative process enables her to claim agency over her own interpretation of the world and to assume human responsibility within that world. Like Cholly's Aunt Jimmy and the other black women, she has grown up and learned to claim her own interpretation of experience. (107-8)

Morrison's character Claudia exemplifies the same virtues of strong black community that Walker's characters exemplify. Claudia, however, places the black girl in a world within a world:

Certainly, Claudia's vision in *The Bluest Eye* of intertwined lives in the black community and especially among black women speaks to the need to claim selfhood within a shared social context. But it is important, too, to recognize that Claudia is also claiming a right to self-definition as a woman resisting the cultural negation often imposed on black women. (Frye 108)

The childhood self of black women has grown up through a black community culture. Black women learn to cope with an overwhelming rejection by white culture, which embraces white icons of beauty. It is imperative to these women that their bodies are looked upon as normative in their community. The community can strengthen their self-image against the assault of TV, movies, and Max Factor. If the black community does

not see black women's beauty, where can black women see their beauty reflected? The white cultural view of black women is harsh and devoid of love. These authors hope to influence the black cultural view and develop a supportive environment.

Walker successfully avoids the trap of presenting a reality so harsh that it limits her character's growth. She writes instead of an unlikely apotheosis of character, similar to the white American male writers' tradition of the apotheosis of the common man. Celie represents the apotheosis of the black female. In *Living by the Word*, Walker asserts that "In writing to God she is writing to the part of her personality growing progressively stronger until she is able to acknowledge the God within herself and demand the respect due her" (89).

Winchell offers her assessment of Celie's progression from a character with an almost wooden affect to an active participant in life. Winchell points out that Mr.____ also undergoes a process of personal growth:

The book becomes Celie's growth from her initial passivity to self-affirmation as recorded in her letters to God. Walker argues, however, that what her critics have failed to see is that Mister, too, changes, that the novel is about the dis-ease that both Celie and Albert ____ suffer from, an illness that derives from the experiences that early shaped their personalities and from their culturally derived sex roles.

By the end of the novel, Mr.____ comes to understand and value Celie. He asks her to marry him again for the right reasons this time. Mr.____ comes to love Celie, and he recognizes the harm he has done to Celie as his child bride. There is an important lesson from childhood for the community and for black women: a community context that accepts and loves its children is what girls need to grow into strong women who believe in themselves.

Marshall's *Daughters*, by contrast, shows a child who was loved and accepted by her parents and the community and who still grew up conflicted by her love for her father. Ursa feels estranged from her father because of his political exploitation of the black

community. She is also upset at the PM's marital infidelity that demonstrates his lack of respect for her mother. The conflict is acute because Ursa's father, the PM, is a loving father. He is also a demanding father who wants his daughter to succeed. The PM began setting high expectations for Ursa early in her life. When Ursa was a small child the PM watched her swimming laps in the swimming pool of the resort he owned. He always wanted her best performance, he always asked for greater effort. When Ursa grew up, the PM pushed her to strive in her work to become a company president.

Ursa's mother, Estelle, understood that Ursa was ethically based, and that Ursa would not be content with power that was gained at the expense of other people. Estelle knew this about Ursa, because she instilled these values in Ursa when Ursa was a child. Estelle sent Ursa to high school back in Estelle's old neighborhood in New York. When Estelle decides to send Ursa to stay with her folks and go to school, she writes to them saying that they should prepare Ursa for a place in a social revolution.

Ursa's mother is a loving mother, but her marriage is troubled. The PM expects public support from Estelle for his political views, but he does not respect her own political views. Ursa sees this example of uncommunicative adult role models. This effects her own ability to communicate later in life with men in interpersonal relationships. Also, the PM is unfaithful to Estelle, and he makes little pretense about the woman he is keeping at Mile Trees, his resort motel where Ursa goes to swim laps in the pool. The motel is managed by the PM's mistress, Astral Forde. Ursa learns of the PM's infidelity and this knowledge lessens her respect for her mother.. Ursa feels her mother should walk off from the marriage.

The women Ursa observes during her childhood offer poor models of empowerment. Astral Forde, for example, is a beautiful woman who as a young woman is raped on a date and becomes pregnant. She has an abortion, and she suffers the leers of men in the street when she is on her way to the back-street abortionist's house. Astral

Forde is used by the PM just as much as Estelle is. She allows herself to be used in order to gain security and safety for herself.

Not all of the ideas about childhood and its place in self-acceptance and growth center on Ursa. Ursa's best friend Viney Daniels, an assistant vice president in annuities at the Metropolitan Life Insurance Company, has a son named Robeson. Robeson plays little league ball with his best friend, Dee Dee, who is "from the unsightly group of walk-ups and old-law tenements that sits like a wart at one end of the gentrified brownstones that occupy the rest of the street" (*Daughters* 60). Marshall writes in *Daughters* that Dee Dee and Robeson "were inseparable as toddlers. And even now that they're older and go to different schools, they still spend their weekends together. Viney sees to that" (60). The important phrase is "Viney sees to that," because Marshall often chooses in her writing to idealize, to show how it can be.

Dee Dee contrasts sharply with Pecola Breedlove, although she resembles Pecola in some ways. Dee Dee is very black and she is poor. The big difference between Pecola and Dee Dee is that Dee Dee has the loving attention of Ursa and Viney. Marshall describes Robeson and Dee Dee at the table in the Daniels' kitchen eating a lunch of chicken sandwiches and crab-meat with pasta salad while talking with "Aunt" Ursa:

Ursa listens, and inspects the two pairs of eyes crowded in on her. The whites in Robeson's match the milk in his glass and at the corners of his mouth. Eyes so clear, so unmarred that when they're brought up close like this they always cause a little flutter kick of anxiety around her heart. Why? She can't say. Not so with the eyes across the table. They appear to be on twenty-four-hour guard duty under the beaded curtain of hair. (64)

Dee Dee has the same potential to see herself as ugly that Pecola has, but instead she is a child filled with promise, although more guarded in her view of the world than Robeson. Dee Dee is a pitcher on the little league team, and she is an actor in a play. Both Robeson and Dee Dee are in a play at the neighborhood center. Dee Dee plays Harriet Tubman and Robeson plays Tubman's father. Dee Dee says, "I'm the star. I play her so I'm the star.

There's a price of forty thousand dollars on my head....They call me the general" (66-67). Dee Dee is not isolated from her community, but embraced by it.

Robeson is also a child whose experiences tell something of what it means to grow up black in America. His mother sends him to a good private school, but she and Robeson live "in the neighborhood" so that Robeson will have a sense of fitting in with his community. Viney doesn't want him to be the only black child in a white neighborhood. She also doesn't want to abandon the black neighborhood. She remains there with Robeson to help bring the neighborhood up through her participation. But, when Robeson is falsely arrested by a white policeman, Viney starts to doubt all of her ability as a parent. Viney tells Ursa:

You know, I see the way some of the black mothers in the walk-ups on the block, where Dee Dee lives, treat their kids in public, yelling at them over the slightest thing, threatening them with a whipping, going upside their head--just so quick with that hand. And it always makes me so angry. I want to go over and slap them. And so ashamed, especially if there're white folks around. To have them see us treating our kids that way....I'm thinking that they're not just being too strict or taking out their frustration on the kids....Maybe it's their way of teaching them how to behave around the Pirellis out here. That might be part of it. So they'll know better than to go right up in some white cop's face talking about their constitutional rights and running the risk of being blown away. Maybe I haven't been teaching him what he really needs to know. I've let him think that the world is like this house and this block and the Belfield School where all the little white kids and teachers think he's so great. Perhaps I'm not such a good mother after all. (Daughters 328-329)

For black parents who are raising children who must go out into a world that isn't always safe, there is a dilemma in knowing how best to shape the child so that he or she can protect himself or herself from dangers such as white policemen. Parents may want to teach their child to hold his or her head up with pride, but they may fear the end result might be having that head bashed by a policeman. Robeson was not hit by the policeman, but Viney saw the potential for that happening. Robeson stood up for himself, and Viney wonders if she did the wrong thing teaching him self-assertion. What Viney decides to do is take the policeman to court, which will be one factor a white policeman may learn

to consider. Marshall's story regarding Robeson and the policeman makes the point that a black woman can stand up for her child as Viney did. Taking action as Viney did, if repeated enough times by enough black parents, might go further in making their children safe than teaching their children submissiveness. This appears to be Marshall's implication.

PART THREE: ADULT RELATIONAL IDENTITY

You are free to be whichever way you like, to be with whoever, of whatever color or sex you like--and what you risk in being truly yourself, the way you want to be, is not the loss of me. You are not free, however, to think I am a fool.
 --Meridian Hill to a former lover, Truman Held

Mothers, lovers, and a community of friends form the relational context and men generally provide the relational conflict, for the characters Meridian Hill, Celie, and Ursa MacKenzie. Mothers function primarily as warnings about the possible future. Mothers illustrate what you don't want to become, while men are a special cause for aggravation.

Marshall writes of Ursa's mother, Estelle, who raises Ursa to take her place "at the barricades" (*Daughters* 223) and of her friend Viney, who takes into court the white policeman who falsely accuses and arrests her son, Robeson. Women, in *Daughters*, are political activists and remain true to the causes of their race and community. Black men, in *Daughters*, including Ursa's father the PM, start out with black community interests at heart, but eventually betray these interests and lie to the people in their communities. Black men turn their backs on black female political supporters, and these men greedily sell out community interests, abandoning their role as caretakers to the people who trust them. Betrayal by black men begets betrayal of black men, when Ursa gives out information that leads to her father's political end, resulting in his loss of an election without ever allowing him to know who causes this to happen.

Daughters is a revealing tale of the schism between black men and women. It is disappointing for what it says about the state of communicational disharmony between the sexes. As an element of the black female's identity, it sends this message: we cannot talk to black men to affect their actions. Marshall's fiction shows distrust of black men by black women. Marshall laments this communications break between the sexes; she looks

back on slavery as a time when black men and women were united. This is a lament for something lost,. Marshall's heroine expresses a wish for a return to the unity between men and women that existed under slavery. In Ursa's view, the present situation clearly shows black women standing alone in their concern for their communities and in their ethical political position.

Ursa's break with the PM is not an open one; no communication takes place to let the father know what he has lost in his daughter's eyes by acquiescing to and potentially profiting from the building of a resort area that will tear down poor black neighborhoods, displacing people. This lack of honesty and the character's inability to voice her political position directly to her father indicates that black women lack the political strength to enter into a dialectic with black men that can bring about change. It is a story of women disenfranchised by the men in their community.

Sandy Lawson is another black male character in *Daughters* who betrays his community, Midland City, and his black female supporters, especially Mae Ryland. He supports the building of an expressway that is not in the interests of his supporters because it will level their apartments and homes without providing jobs within the community or any other compensation for their loss. These people elected him, but Lawson abandons their interests to entrench himself with politically powerful people. Mae Ryland used her influence in the community to help Lawson become elected, but she opposes the expressway, and Lawson puts her out of her Community Relations Office in the South Ward. Ryland depicts Lawson as a man swayed by the "collar-and-tie black folks" (295) who don't care about the black poor as much as they do about development and progress.

These elements of plot in *Daughters* send a message that black women have a higher ethical concern for the urban black poor than black men do. Black men have lost their way politically, and black women have a role through their own unity in halting the

erosion of the poor black community. They fight the corruption of male politicians and stand against a system that considers only the value of an action to the haves while ignoring the interests of the have-nots. This is a lonely vigil that finds black women facing injustice as women alone, unsupported by black men.

Marshall's character Ursa is placed within the tradition of activism by her mother, Estelle. Estelle gives Ursa the internalized imagery of Will Cudjoe and Congo Jane and encourages Ursa to aspire to their standard when she tells her to reach up to touch the toes of the great statue of Congo Jane. Thereafter throughout her life, Ursa nostalgically recalls Will Cudjoe and his consort Congo Jane, two slaves who led an uprising together against white oppressors. They were united in their efforts to overthrow white slave owners. This is the historical perspective that Ursa carries inside her. What Ursa finds in the present day is not as heroic. Middle-class blacks and black male politicians stand with monied interests. The poor blacks and black women like Ursa who remember them are not supported in their efforts to preserve the communities. The message for the black female to internalize here is not one of hope (for black men and women returning to the unity that the oppression of slavery forged), but a message of nostalgia for what, however much hoped for, appears irretrievably lost.

The works under study frequently refer to slavery as a time when black men and women were together in their motivation. It appears that black women have found less access in some ways into white culture than black men, because they do not emulate whites and they do not abandon the people they come from. These novels show women being supported by other women, but seldom by men. Not all women are a source of support, but many are.

This rift in the political cohesion of black males and females is evident in Walker's *Meridian*, where the central character, Meridian Hill, remains politically involved long after the sixties are over, in an old-style civil rights activism, a personal

mission to the rural South. Conversely, the black male character, Truman Held, abandons his activism. This division between black men and black women is Paule Marshall's rendition of the male/female relational context from a black woman's viewpoint. It is a complex relationship, one that does not invite easy generalizations. There is the obvious message that black men are often absent from the lives of professional black women, leaving a void in the women's lives. But something else perplexing is going on when the man is there, for the black female character Ursa seems to remain isolated within the relationship. If Ursa is a typical black professional woman, then these women are devastatingly alone even with a man in their lives.

Ursa does not tell Lowell about her abortion of their fetus, for example, and she feels detached from him in her thoughts and actions. Lowell is not a source of comfort or support. It is unclear whether this quality of separateness lies solely in the female character, is an aspect of the male character, or is an element of the non-interaction of the two. Lowell appears to be insensitive to Ursa, but, on the other hand, Ursa does not share the details of her life with Lowell. It is significant that Ursa, like Meridian in *Meridian*, goes through an abortion alone without feeling that she can speak to the father of the fetus about this abortion. Both women seem alienated psychologically from the men with whom they are sexually intimate. Ursa reflects at one point that "the closest she's come to feeling anything like pain is the laugh that knifed through her for a second last Friday when the bedroom voice over the speaker at the [abortion] clinic whispered, "Love songs. Nothing but love songs" (*Daughters* 53).

Ursa seems to feel that she must make her own choices in a life that is hers alone. Loving Lowell has not made it possible to share her life with him. Love leaves a bitter aftertaste. This was also true for Meridian, who saw her lover with a white woman about the time she found herself pregnant. Ursa feels her body is too child-like and small. She does not feel she meets her community's standards of physical attractiveness. Both Ursa

and Meridian do not appear to feel truly loved or valued by their men. What seems clear is that black women feel alone and live out their lives in a form of interiorized experience that mirrors the anomie of the main character in many male-written modern novels. Black women authors emphasize the deadened quality of their emotional lives with men; their main characters have ceased to reach out to men in any meaningful way.

Ursa presents a flat affect apart from her occasional outbursts of anger. When she can control her anger, Ursa presents a blank face to most of the world, including Lowell Carruthers with whom she has been in love. The blank face she shows Lowell conceals Ursa's internal conflicts. One of these conflicts is Ursa's sense of being in a dead zone in her relationship with Lowell. Walker also presents a deadened character in Celie throughout most of *The Color Purple*. Until the last parts of the novel, Celie is almost wooden in her passive acceptance of everything that is done to her. Early in her marriage to Mr.____, Celie is overrun by the children Mr.____ had with his first wife. Her sister Nettie tells her to stand up to them. "But I don't know how to fight. All I know how to do is to stay alive" (18) Celie tells Nettie. Mr. ____'s sister Kate tries to tell Celie to stand up for herself, too. Kate feels sympathy for Celie. The message from Nettie and Kate is clear: black women must learn how to fight.

It takes Celie a long time to build herself up to confronting her tormentors. Before that occurs, many episodes take place that find Celie passively struggling in the sea of her incapacity to fight back. In one such episode Mr.____ decides that Nettie must leave his house. Celie tells Nettie about this decision, and Nettie surprises her by being happy to go. "I sure hate to leave you here with these rotten children, she say. Not to mention with Mr.____. It's like seeing you buried, she say. //It's worse than that, I think. If I was buried I wouldn't have to work. But I just say, Never mine, never mine, long as I can spell G-O-D I got somebody along" (18).

Kate makes a new dress for Celie, the first dress that has ever been made just for her. But Kate leaves in anger when Mr.____ allows his son Harpo to refuse to do "women's work" by carrying in a bucket of water. Kate feels Celie deserves better treatment, but she cannot get support from Mr.____. He does not require his children to obey Celie, although he makes her solely responsible for their care. He does not discipline his children. His interaction with his children consists of beating them in anger when they disturb him personally while siding with them against Celie whenever she tries to gain the control over them that matches the responsibility she takes for them. Kate sees all the burdens of the household are being placed on Celie. Celie cannot tell the children to help out, because Mr.____ will not support her in any way. She is every family member's servant.

Kate is so angered by the situation that she cries as she packs her bags. Celie writes to god describing her own reaction to Kate's advice to her before she leaves: "You got to fight them, Celie, she say. I can't do it for you. You got to fight them for yourself./ I don't say nothing. I think about Nettie, dead. She fight, she run away. What good it do? I don't fight, I stay where I'm told. But I'm alive" (22). In fact, Nettie is alive, but Celie receives no letters from Nettie. Celie assumes Nettie is dead, because Celie knows Nettie would write. Nettie has written, and Mr.____ has hidden her letters. Celie does not receive the household mail. Mr.____ does not give Celie the letters from Nettie that come addressed to her. Celie is powerless, and she assumes she is alone, without a sister or a friend.

Kate, who was a sister of Mr.____'s, tried to befriend Celie and to help Celie in Mr.____'s house. Kate left when she was made to feel powerless herself. Kate could leave, but Celie thought leaving meant death, as she thought her sister died as a consequence of running away. Celie must stay, because she doesn't recognize her own

capacity to leave. Staying, she cannot fight for herself as Kate directs, because fighting will only bring on more abuse from Mr._____.

Mr._____ beats Celie--even when she is compliant and obedient--which leaves Celie certain that it would be even worse if she fought back. Harpo, Mr._____ 's son, "ast his daddy why he beat me. Mr._____ say, Cause she my wife. Plus, she stubborn. All women good for--he don't finish. He just tuck his chin over the paper like he do. Remind me of Pa" (*Color* 23). Celie has gone from male tyranny in Pa's (her step-father's) house to male tyranny in Mr._____ 's house.

In Pa's house Celie's mother died from childbearing, hard work, and the insanity brought on by seeing Celie's father hanged. Celie's father was a black man who ran a successful business, a country store. White store owner's resented his success and felt he was taking their customers. They hanged him to stop him from successfully competing with them. He left his family with a house and the business. Celie's mother was insane with grief. "Pa" stepped in to marry her to get her property. In those days a husband took over all property from his wife.

Mr._____ 's history with his first wife is similar; she was also worked and bred to death. In those days many men had more than one wife in a kind of serial monogamy brought about through the burden of pregnancy added to hard work for their wives. Women were often unable to avoid several successive pregnancies, and they were often given little or no respite from work to recuperate from childbearing. Consequently, women died young, leaving widowers and children without mothers. The house was the man's property. His wife and children were his property as well.

How could either Celie or Kate fight against that? Celie writes to God:

He beat me like he beat the children. Cept he don't never hardly beat them. He say, Celie, git the belt. The children be outside the room peeking through the cracks. It all I can do not to cry. I make myself wood. I say to myself, Celie, you a tree. That's how come I know trees fear man. (*Color* 23)

Celie makes the best of her situation, taking care of children that are not hers (first her siblings, then Mr.____'s children). She keeps a clean home, participates in her church, and works hard to show her worth.

Celie's attention is taken up by the children, Mr.____, and her household chores until she sees a picture of Shug Avery. When Celie sees that picture of Shug Avery, she keeps it--she acts to claim Shug's image for herself. Celie romanticizes Shug Avery and seeks to know her. Celie succeeds in her desire to develop a relationship with Shug. Through Shug Celie develops, at last, an adult female sexuality. The first step in this process is accomplished when Shug teaches Celie to know and accept her body. Shug conspires by standing guard at the door to give Celie the privacy to use a mirror to look at her genitals. Here is that passage from the book:

You guard the door, I say.

She giggle. Okay, she say. Nobody coming. Coast clear.

I lie on the bed and haul up my dress. Yank down my bloomers. Stick the looking glass between my legs. Ugh. All that hair. Then my pussy lips be black, then inside look like a wet rose. (*Color* 82)

Shug also tells Celie about her "magic button" (clitoris). This instruction about her own body allows Celie to experience sexual arousal through the exploration of her body. Celie's sexual relationships with men have satisfied the men. She served a sexual function for them. For the first time, with Shug, Celie is with someone who sees her as a person and treats her with loving care. Shug leads Celie to see the beauty of her female form as she says: "It a lot prettier than you thought, ain't it?" (82). Shug is the one who provides admiration, which contrasts with Celie's step-father who always describes Celie as ugly. Finding part of herself being considered beautiful is a real change in Celie's life.

Walker's portrayal of Celie's step-father contrasts with Morrison's depiction of Claudia's father. Morrison, who usually is the most stark in her characterization of the writers studied, offers a warm view of a father. This is in keeping with Morrison's usual balancing of polarities, contrasting the incestuous Cholly with the loving Mr. MacTeer.

Only a very good man could counterbalance so much evil. Claudia's father worries over his family's warmth throughout the winter:

My daddy's face is a study. Winter moves into it and presides there. His eyes become a cliff of snow threatening to avalanche; his eyebrows bend like black limbs of leafless trees. His skin takes on winter sun; for a jaw he has the edges of a snowbound field dotted with stubble; his high forehead is the frozen sweep of the Erie, hiding currents of gelid thoughts that eddy in darkness. Wolf killer turned hawk fighter, he worked night and day to keep one from the door and the other from under the windowsills. A Vulcan guarding the flames, he gives us instructions about which doors to keep closed or opened for proper distribution of heat, lays kindling by, discusses qualities of coal, and teaches us how to rake, feed, and bank the fire. And he will not unrazor his lips until spring. (*Bluest 52*)

This is a man in the cold hard world of the 1930's fighting to provide warmth within his home for a family he loves. He isn't a Bradey Bunch father with an easy life. He isn't cheerful in this passage or fun, but he is working on his family's behalf, out of love, and trying to keep the house warm. This makes him unusual, different from the generally harsh portrayal of men in the fiction studied. He is, in fact, different in every way. I think it is Morrison's signature to show possibility next to a stark alternative. I think she is saying this is how fathers can be. This is the sort of man a girl needs as a father. In my reading, I find Morrison often constructs her images of people quite differently from anyone else I've read. She will always provide the exception to every rule. Her portrayal of the good father does that. Marshall also shows a good father, but he is flawed in important ways that still make him inaccessible to his daughter.

Claudia's father is also a protector of his daughters. When their boarder, Mr. Henry, speaks inappropriately to Claudia's sister, Freida, and touches her breasts, Daddy reacts strongly in protecting his child. "When Daddy saw him [Mr. Henry] come up on the porch, he threw our old tricycle at his head and knocked him off the porch" (*Bluest 80*). Everyone, including Mama and the neighbors, comes to Frieda's defense:

He got up and started singing 'Nearer My God to Thee.' Then Mama hit him to keep the Lord's name out of his mouth, but he wouldn't stop, and

Daddy was cussing, and everybody was screaming.//Oh, shoot, I always miss stuff.//And Mr. Buford came running out with his gun, and Mama told him to go somewhere and sit down, and Daddy said no, give him the gun, and Mr. Buford did, and Mama screamed, and Mr. Henry shut up and started running, and Daddy shot at him and Mr. Henry jumped out of his shoes and kept running in his socks (*Bluest* 80).

Fathers are important in the formation of the identity of daughters. Morrison shows two sides to black men as fathers: the daddy who protects (Mr. MacTeer) and the father who abuses his wife, son, and daughter (Cholly Breedlove). Cholly directs his rage particularly at black women: his first sexual conquest starts this pattern when he is caught in the sex act by white hunters. They tell him to go on with it, which he fakes doing, but he is impotent with fear. Cholly feels helplessly angry. He learns in that moment to choose black women as a target for this anger as he thinks to himself how he wishes he really could perform sexually and hurt the girl he is with. Sex and rage are linked for Cholly, and he sees women as available and defenseless targets for the anger he has against the white world.

In writing about parents, Morrison presents a generally held view of black parents as sometimes harsh and austere out of a desire to toughen the children to face a harsh world. Claudia writes about winter in her childhood home:

Our house is old, cold and green. At night a kerosene lamp lights one large room. The others are braced in darkness, peopled by roaches and mice. Adults do not talk to us--they give us directions. They issue orders without providing information. When we trip and fall down they glance at us; if we cut or bruise ourselves, they ask us are we crazy. When we catch colds, they shake their heads in disgust at our lack of consideration. How, they ask us, do you expect anybody to get anything done if you all are sick? We cannot answer them. Our illness is treated with contempt, foul Black Draught, and castor oil that blunts our minds (*Bluest* 13).

The black mother can be hard, but she acts out of love. The mother in *The Bluest Eye* is also recognized as the person who cares whether the children live or die.

The overwhelming feeling from the novels studied is that these authors hope black women will be more supportive in guiding their daughters into womanhood than their mothers were. Marshall, Morrison, and Walker hope the severity will soften into a loving

support. They are aware of being loved, but they feel they lacked supportive guidance. And none of these women endorses a continuation of the matriarch-martyr role. It is particularly in the mother's role that they seek change. They honor their mothers much of the time, but they do not want to become them. Alice Walker wrote in her poem "On Stripping Bark from Myself" that she was "finished with living/for what my mother believes" (*Good Night* 23).

In *The Color Purple* Walker has Celie write to God, telling him: "My mama dead. She die screaming and cussing. She scream at me. I'm big" (3). Celie is pregnant by her step-father. Celie's mother had not been well, and Celie could not confide in her. Celie's mother doesn't pursue her suspicions about the step-father, because he has quit asking the mother for sex (his desires being met with Celie). The mother is relieved to avoid another pregnancy for herself, and she finds it more convenient to believe that Celie is having sex with a boy rather than confronting the incest she intuitively feels is occurring. She ignores her intuition that tells her that the step-father has made Celie pregnant. Celie's mother is mentally ill and physically depleted through childbearing. To avoid blaming herself, the mother verbally attacks Celie. Celie forgives her mother, pitying her weakness and seeing her as a fellow victim of the step-father. Celie has compassion for her mother, understanding how her mother feels.

In *Meridian*, Walker comes closer still to the heart of the mother/daughter relationship: Mrs. Hill has abandoned her own dreams, and Mrs. Hill demands that Meridian sacrifice in the same way for her son Eddie Jr. Meridian takes on this burden of guilt demanded by her mother when Meridian gives up Eddie Jr. for adoption:

But she had not anticipated the nightmares that began to trouble her sleep. Nightmares of the child, Rundi [Eddie Jr.], calling to her, crying, suffering unbearable deprivations because she was not there, yet she knew it was just the opposite: Because she was not there he needn't worry, ever, about being deprived. Of his life, for instance. She felt deeply that what she'd done was the only thing, and was right, but that did not seem to matter.

On some deeper level than she had anticipated or had even been aware of, she felt condemned, consigned to penitence, for life (91).

Part of this sense of guilt germinates when Mrs. Hill tells Meridian that she is not suffering the consequences of her early pregnancy the way she should be: "Everybody else that slips up like you did *bears* it. You're the only one that thinks you can just outright refuse" (88).

Meridian's neighbor from childhood, Nelda, is there when Mrs. Hill tries to tell Meridian that Nelda would never give up her child. Nelda has several children without being married. When she looks at Mrs. Hill telling Meridian that she, Nelda, would not give up her child, Nelda tells Mrs. Hill not to say that. "I'd do anything to have a chance to go to college like Meridian. I wish to God I could have made it to junior high" (88).

Nelda recognizes in that moment how Mrs. Hill has let both herself and Meridian down, giving little guidance to them in their lives.

For a moment, as she looked at Meridian's mother, there was hatred in her sad eyes. Hatred and comprehension of betrayal. She ~~and~~ lived across the street from Mrs. Hill all her life. She and Meridian had played together in the Hill's back yard, they went to school together. Nelda knew that the information she had needed to get through her adolescence was information Mrs. Hill could have given her (88)

Mrs. Hill did not own up to her own discontent as a mother, hiding deeply her frustration in the role. She did not counsel her daughter about her sexuality or birth control, preferring to maintain a surface belief that she had instructed Meridian to be good and that Meridian should have understand the implication to remain celibate. This position , however, willfully ignored the community mores that tacitly approved premarital sex and the absence of supervision for teenagers.

Meridian Hill finally leaves her cell-like room to return to the world, as Celie finally leaves her husband to enter creation. Both women walk away without feeling anger toward men. Celie leaves Mr._____ behind, and Meridian leaves Truman Held.

Both women have come through whole. Meridian "was strong enough to go and owned nothing to pack. She had discarded her cap, the soft wool of her newly grown hair framed her thin resolute face.... Meridian would return to the world cleansed of sickness" (219). Celie and Meridian waste no anger on the men who have hurt them in the past. Such men have, in fact, become humorous to them as these women find their own center. Thadius Davis suggests that "Despite her [Walker's] concentration on the brutal treatment of black women and the unmitigated abuse of children, Walker believes in the beauty and the power of the individual and ultimately of the group" (52-3). Walker's characters achieve wholeness, which I see as an idealized conception of black female identity, something to hope for. For Celie this comes in a bitter sweet moment, after Shug has left her for a young man to have a last fling. Celie writes:

And then, just when I know I can live content without Shug, just when M.____ done ast me to marry him again, this time in the spirit as well as in the flesh, and just when I say naw, I still don't like frogs, but let's be friends, Shug write me she coming home./Now. Is this life or not?/ I be so calm.? If she come, I be happy./ If she don't, I be content./ And then I figure this was the lesson I was supposed to learn. (*Color* 290)

Marshall, Morrison, and Walker are determined to share unvarnished female reality as black women, so that mistakes their mothers made will not become their own. In *Daughters* Estelle MacKenzie, Ursa's mother, remains in a marriage where her husband has a lover. She doesn't leave when she is patronized and when her political advice is ignored in the later years of the marriage. She doesn't leave when she is managed for political advantage by a husband who uses her as his show pony. Even the family doctor manipulates her into accommodating her husband's infidelity. Estelle's husband has the power in their relationship. Seeing the example of Estelle, Ursa does not easily relinquish her own power to her lover, Lowell. She maintains her own apartment, makes her own career decisions, and generally remains independent. Self reliance is important to the black female identity.

Another house wife and mother Mrs. MacTeer, Claudia's mother, is a believable character with faults and virtues. She is one of the gossips in the community, and she is in a category of "good women" who have no sympathy for Pecola Breedlove or empathy for the tragedy that Pecola lives. Mrs. MacTeer does extend pity, and she takes Pecola into her house for a time. While she thinks women can be ruined, Mrs. MacTeer is also the possessor of the loving hands that do not want Claudia to die. Mrs. MacTeer fails to let her daughter know that she isn't disappointed in her for becoming ill; she is constantly critical--testifying loudly against children who drink too much milk and against other sins. Mrs. MacTeer has a strictness with her children, while loving them fiercely. Mrs. MacTeer has shown concern about preparing her children for a hard reality, while not reassuring them that it is normal and acceptable to be black. She is aware of the dominant culture's view that is not acceptable to be black, and it is almost as though she fears instilling a self-concept that necessarily must be broken down in the face of this engulfing white cultural view. Mrs. MacTeer buys the white baby dolls at Christmas that imply to her daughters that ideal babies are white.

Morrison wants black women to accept themselves and their children as black people, and she warns them of the consequences of self-hatred: through Mrs. MacTeer, who feels pity for Pecola but blames her for her misfortune; through Pecola's mother, who turns to the white family she works for as her real family; and through Geraldine, who calls Pecola a nigger. "In despising their blackness and shaping their femaleness into something false, they not only take on a narrow and self-defeating self-definition; they also participate in the cultural denial of black female subjectivity that destroys Pecola" (Frye 103).

Morrison writes about both hope and despair in complementary pairs. She writes about the good women of the community who are the mothers and homeowners, and she writes about their complement the whores. And she shows that the whores treat Pecola

with loving acceptance while the good women treat Pecola with a pity tinged repulsion. The good women are repulsed by the entire Breedlove family, because the Breedloves allow themselves to end up out on the street when Cholly burns their building down. A primal fear in the community of homeowners is fear of being being out on the street. The good women reject Pecola along with her family as a unit that isn't functioning. The good women don't see Pecola's individuality and promise. The whores, by contrast, talk with Pecola and welcome her company. Morrison presents hope and despair, but the whores and the children are the hope, while the good women are the despair. The miscreant whores of the community have a purity of innocence regarding Pecola that the good men and women of the community could benefit by adopting.

Shug Avery and the whores have seen the underside of the community ethos. They have never entered the category of good women who feel they must set a moral code, but Shug and the whores are aware of the code and the fact that the code's transgressors are often its biggest proponents: men. Men want the good women for stability, clean shirts, and a homelife. Being outside the code allows Shug and the whores to see all sides to the people in the community, particularly men who hide part of themselves from their wives and children. Shug and the whores are not innocent as the children are, but in their position of cynically knowing adults, they can tolerate children in a way the good women cannot. Knowing how people really are, Shug and the whores can face that reality while being bemused by the ingenuousness of children and other innocents. This pose of cold aloofness is a necessary strategy for them in their own emotional survival as women who are looked down on by much of the community. They see the cruelty of incest and other acts against innocence. The whores suffer from the community's cruelty as the innocents do. The whores know men use them as men use the innocents--only the whores are paid.

Shug knows that Celie has been exploited by the church, her stepfather, and her husband. She also knows Celie has more strength and character as a person than all those people. Similarly, the whores know the husbands of the good women better than the good women know their husbands. The whores respect the good women, which is not reciprocated, and they know they help the good women keep their husbands by providing an escape from the home for these men. Whores offer irresponsibility; good women require maintenance. It is hard work keeping a family, making a home safe and secure. The women become their role as wives and mothers, but they cease to be lovers. For pleasure and intimate conversation, husbands go to whores.

The polarity of being either a good wife or a whore is one of being treated as an icon versus being treated as a person. The role of matriarch/good wife is a straight jacket that Marshall, Walker, and Morrison are writing their way out of. There can't be any real intimacy in a relationship between a human being (male) and a female in a rigidly defined role. These authors are asking for basic humanity in their role as women: they are writing about whole funky hip swinging women who laugh, get angry, and sometimes cry. They are also developing professional sides to themselves as women working in important roles in business. They want to be everything they feel the need to be: mothers, wives, lovers, professionals, workers, whatever suits their individual lives best. And they want significant interpersonal relationships with dear friends, community members, their parents, their children, and their lovers. It is intimacy in a love relationship, that seems most elusive. They want intimacy that includes conversation; men can't talk to the image of black motherhood as now conceived with its aura of sacrifice.

PART FOUR: LANGUAGE IDENTITY

Look like to me only a fool would want you to talk in a way
that feel peculiar to your mind.
--Celie writing to her sister Nettie

There are markers for some styles and forms of black speech that differentiate it from white speaking styles and forms. One of these is signifying, a part of the story-telling tradition of black culture. Another marker is the Black English grammatical pattern. I am interested in how these elements of speech relate to my search for identity formation. My exploration of this topic began with James Baldwin.

James Baldwin, in his essay "If Black English Isn't a Language, Then Tell Me, What Is?" analyzes the relationship between black people and language. One of his conclusions is "that language is...a political instrument, means and proof of power" (87). Baldwin expounds further on the nature of language: "It is the most vivid and crucial key to identity, and connects one with, or divorces one from, the larger, public, or communal identity" (87). According to Baldwin, language is a functional necessity for people living in a world where they must control at least some aspects of life for their psychological survival. Baldwin writes: "People evolve a language in order not to be submerged by a situation they cannot articulate" (87). For black American children, in particular, language becomes important because rejecting the child's language is rejecting the child himself. Baldwin makes this point in reference to education:

It is not the black child's language that is despised. It is his experience. A child cannot be taught by anyone whose demand, essentially, is that the child repudiate his experience, and all that gives him sustenance, and enter a limbo in which he will no longer be black, and in which he knows that he can never become white. Black people have lost too many children that way. (89)

Baldwin's essay asserts that the subject is the discourse: the child is his language. As an educator, I find Baldwin's assertion persuasive, and I agree with his assertion that rejecting some person's language equals rejection of the person himself. An awareness that the child is his language is important, and it cannot be overlooked. There are other aspects to this dilemma for teachers: the child's future use of language, as he or she applies for higher educational opportunities or seeks the best employment opportunities, requires a knowledge of American Standard English. A delicate balance must be maintained between acceptance of Black English, and therefore acceptance of the child, and meeting the child's future language needs.

Black English deserves respect, and this can be accomplished in some measure by recognizing it as a home language, what Martha Demientieff, a "native teacher of Athabaskan Indian students refers to as 'heritage language'" (Delpit 293). Respect for heritage language does not preclude learning American Standard English, which is the language of social access--the link to educational and employment advantage. Baldwin makes a powerful emotional appeal, but he does this primarily in American Standard English.

What I found in Hurston's, Walker's, Marshall's, and Morrison's writing was a blend of styles and language types. Dialogue is frequently written in Black English, Caribbean Black dialect, and other vernacular styles -- although it can also be written in American Standard English. The context surrounding the dialogue is most often written using American Standard English powerfully and effectively. *The Color Purple* stands in contrast to this generalization, and it is persuasively evocative in the rural, Southern, black vernacular, which demonstrates the fundamental correctness of Baldwin's argument that Black English is a language. *The Color Purple* is an internal dialogue of the self which is conceptualized as the true language of an unschooled black girl. As such, this discourse is the only language we can expect from Celie, and her vivid imaging in that

language proves the richness and scope of her linguistic heritage. Celie's writing is no less eloquent than the language of Meridian, another Walker character, who is college educated and who speaks in a broader range of styles than Celie. Celie's language has not been altered by school culture that is so often dominated by the white middle-class, whereas Meridian has been acculturated through education. These authors skillfully use the discourse style that is most appropriate in expressing their characterizations.

What seems important to me as a teacher is that these writers use a full range of language. They are proud of Black English in its Southern or Northern dialects; they are proud of the voices of their neighborhoods. They are equally proud of their own competence in American Standard English, which they demonstrate through using this language in their writing. My feeling is that American Standard English has been co-opted for use by educated blacks, and it is now as much their language as it is the language of any other group that has progressed through education. It is their second language or even their first depending on individual backgrounds, but it is not a totally alien tongue for most black people.

Celie did not reject the language of the school. One of the tragedies of her life was being ostracized from school because she was pregnant. Walker makes it clear that Celie loved books and that going to school was a joy she missed. Celie wanted schooling; she wanted to read books; she wanted to study. But the school rejected Celie; Baldwin's point about Black English is made in Celie. She spoke a rural black vernacular English. If Celie had spoken differently, belonged to a higher economic class, the school might have invested more effort into keeping her. Walker would surely not suggest denying her access to education--Walker shows that taking Celie out of school is abuse of an already abused child. The community bars Celie from school rather than protecting her from exploitation, resulting in her further alienation from all potential help and support by teachers and others outside her home.

Many teachers teach the language of power hoping to impart power to its recipient, because they recognize this language as the key to the culture of power. Lisa Delpit writes:

I suggest that students must be taught the codes needed to participate fully in the mainstream of American life, not by being forced to attend to hollow, inane, decontextualized subskills, but rather within the context of meaningful communicative endeavors; that they must be allowed the resource of the teacher's expert knowledge, while being helped to acknowledge their own "expertness" as well; and that even while students are assisted in learning the culture of power, they must also be helped to learn about the arbitrariness of those codes and about the power relationships they represent. (296)

Baldwin's essay exposes the power relationship between American Standard English and education in a white language. His views are important and ground breaking in their insight into language as self-definition and into the domination of Black English speakers by white people through the medium of white language. None of this can be overlooked by teachers. Lisa Delpit's view, however, goes beyond this awareness of language related to a culture of power to an understanding that this language is also an avenue of access to power.

Viney's son Robeson, in *Daughters*, is an example of a black child becoming educated to take a meaningful place in society. His mother, who is educated, knows American Standard English and she uses it, making it part of her language repertoire. She also uses the language of her neighborhood. She sends Robeson to school where he will learn the language he needs to advance, but she chooses to live in the neighborhood where her own cultural base lies. These writers have balance, loving the home girl side of themselves as well as the women they have become who can fluidly move into the outer surrounding culture. They use the discourse mode that will facilitate their communication.

Black English is naturally included in the speaking styles of many of the characters in these novels. Marshall uses Black English sparingly, as her characters are

educated and cross many cultural borderlines. Marshall's character Ursa has Black English as a part of her past; she spoke it as an American high school student. Ursa is more concerned with the alienation her island lilt sometimes causes her in her new American home than she is with Black American English. Walker and Morrison make greater use of Black English as an element in the identity of their main characters than Marshall does. Marshall's language issues center on the black Caribbean dialect Ursa learned on Triunion.

Exaggerated language is another important element of style that defines the personal voice of the black woman's identity. This telling of a good tale in dramatic form establishes the voice for this identity. The verbal act of having someone on (joking while seeming serious), with a winking eye that lets everyone in on the joke, is a part of signifying. The oral story-telling tradition is a component of black identity. In *Their Eyes*, Janie truly finds herself for the first time when she takes part in the story-telling on the store front porch. Janie becomes progressively more of and with the Folk as her development as a story teller progresses. But this does not occur until she has gone through two marriages that hold back her development as a storyteller. She is finally able to communicate effectively with a man, Tea Cake, who supports her store porch story telling. Ursa never attains this communicative capacity with a man, perhaps because her relationship with Lowell requires that they not discuss the things they disagree about. Where Janie can define herself as a story teller, Ursa learns to keep silent, interiorize and analyze within her own mind.

The irony is that self-definition through language is clearer in stories about women in the early history of black women than it is in the stories of women in the present time, which suggests that self-definition through language use is regressing rather than progressing over time. More modern stories seem to show women losing their voice within their personal relationships and their communities, becoming more interior,

communicating less effectively. There is a sense of the futility of trying to be heard by black men and by the white cultural system. In *Daughters* this shows up when Viney's son Robeson is falsely accused of trying to break into cars. Viney takes on the policeman who arrested her son, taking him to court. She feels an almost overwhelming fear about what might have happened to her son. She fights through the court to defend her son against police harassment, but she feels alone while doing this. Where is the support system these women need? Marshall's writing tells us it doesn't exist. This is what isolates her characters, making them women who are alone unless they are wise enough to turn to one another for support.

Janie Crawford is an idealized version of a woman finding a voice, but Marshall's view of women still in search of their voices may more accurately define the situation at this time. Marshall's Ursa is a sophisticated, educated woman who represents many black women today. When Ursa speaks, her sound is erudite, but also accesses the vernacular style. For example, in an internal monologue about the thesis for her senior paper, she says, "There had been a time when we actually had it together. That slavery, for all its horrors, was a time when black men and women had it together, were together" (*Daughters* 94). This is vernacular speech, "had it together" but not dialect. The message is that things were better in some ways in the past, when language was truer and men and women were united against a common oppression: the white outer world. Through her word choice, Ursa illustrates that she has retained that original child self she formed in a New York high school (Weaver High) so many years ago. Her language shows Ursa is true to her inner self. The girl Ursa was still lives within the woman who uses edited English for business and education.

Marshall, Morrison, and Walker illustrate through the range of language used by their characters that the black female identity includes acceptance of dialect as history and of Black English as an insider form of speech. It also stretches to accommodate Standard

American English in appropriate situations. This black female identity spans a wide range of linguistic variation across cultures and registers. The modern black woman is linguistically flexible and skilled.

Walker and Hurston wrote in dialect and within a story-telling tradition about the women who helped to open the way for the modern women. The language used by Janie Crawford and Celie is part of their self-defining process. If they spoke differently or changed their narrative style, their identity would be altered. No other language style could come from Celie's or Janie's mouth and have them remain who they are. They are rural women. Their speech is consistent, partly because they speak primarily to people like themselves. There is a richness to the style, but there is little shift in register or variation in the level of sophistication.

By contrast, Marshall's character, Ursa MacKenzie, changes her speech situationally. That sophistication of altering style and register situationally shows that Ursa is a character who lives in a more complex world where she deals with a wider variety of people and situations. Ursa is able to fit into her American black community after "the four years living with the homefolks and going to Weaver High had done their job. She had learned how to walk the walk and talk the talk well enough to get by" (228).

She has one community in her island home, where she speaks in island tones. But the boundary between Triunion and New York blurs in some ways. The New York expressway Sandy Lawson proposes will destroy a poor neighborhood, just as the resort development the PM is secretly planning will destroy a poor neighborhood in Triunion. Sadly, the common element between Triunion and New York is betrayal by black male politicians. Ursa has dealings with these politicians: one is her father and the other is someone whose political campaign she studied and supported. Ursa's linguistic prowess gives her the social ability to deal with all sorts of people, including those she no longer admires, such as those two men. She is able to speak to university professors in America,

politicians in her island home and in America, professional colleagues, her college educated best friend Viney, the uneducated peasant-class of servants, her father's superstitious fowl-yard-tongued keep miss, her YUPPIE lover Lowell Carruthers, and the ward worker Mae Ryland, among many others. Ursa has greater range linguistically than Janie or Celie, and she represents the level of sophistication to which a modern black woman may aspire in her personal growth within the modern world.

Still, Ursa's Caribbean sound causes her some problems in America, where she sometimes feels like an outsider. She reflects to herself that "Others you would call Folks with a capital F would catch the island lilt in her voice she couldn't even hear anymore and without stopping to listen to the strains of New England, New York, and the mean streets of Hartford's North End would immediately color her immigrant" (86). Ursa feels blocked from fully belonging because of her island roots. Her language gives her away as an outsider. The Caribbean is in her voice:

So instead of them or her stepping forward to shake hands or to embrace with their faces and bodies touching, instead of one saying, "Hey girl, hey sistuh, how ya doin'?"/ And the other: "Hey souilly-gal, how yuh keepin'?"...Instead of the intimate, loving palaver, they hold off, shy away, step back, setting distrust between them. (86)

Ursa MacKenzie's language does not mirror her adult surroundings. Ursa spent her early childhood on the island of Triunion, where her voice took on an island lilt that sets her apart from other black Americans indelibly. From this island background emerges language such as: "Wha' the rass! Lef' muh in peace, nuh! Just lef' muh in peace!" Ursa explodes with this type of expression when she is angry. But this island sound is not her only language. Another is the American Black English she learned in high school where Ursa was sent by her mother who wanted Ursa to know the world her mother came from. Ursa speaks in other modalities as well, depending on her surroundings. What is interesting about Ursa is her versatility and range of language use. Ursa's language shifts among several worlds. She is a border-crosser.

Celie has a similar experience when her non-standard language usage is noticed by others. This happens when she goes to Memphis, Tennessee with Shug. Her language gives her away as a rube to Darlene, a young black city woman Celie employs in her cottage industry making uniquely stylish trousers for men and women. Darlene responds to Celie's difference by offering to teach her to speak in a more urban style. Darlene advises Celie about such grammar issues as the correct use of "us." Celie reports this to her sister Nettie in a letter: "She say us not so hot. A dead country give-away. You say us where most folks say we, she say, and peoples think you dumb. Colored peoples think you a hick and white folks be amuse" (222). It is important for Celie to feel assured that Shug Avery accepts her language as it is, because this feels to Celie like acceptance of herself as she is.

Celie has self-acceptance while Ursa has versatility of expression. Ursa has a greater sense of anomie in her existence as a sophisticated but lonely urban woman than Celie does in her more consistent Folk existence. Neither of these women fits in completely with these urban black communities. Both women have rural home communities as children apart from their later adult urban communities. Celie brings more of her rural Southern community context forward into her new urban environment in the persons of Shug Avery and visiting friends from back home. Ursa returns home occasionally and reluctantly, but she does not bring people from home into her American context. She forms instead an important female support relationship with Viney and her son, Robeson. She also tries, unsuccessfully, to form a relational context with a man. Ursa encounters a broader range of people, but she is more isolated as adult than Celie is from a deeper connection to community. As an adult Ursa is more alone than Celie is as an adult. Celie finds a place for herself when she grows up. Ursa continues to struggle for her place in the world.

Ursa feels the way she is closed out of community in her adult life. Her childhood home is far away in Triunion. She hasn't found a complete place in her new American world. At first Ursa looks back to her childhood for her community context, and in many ways she is working through and resolving issues out of her past more than affecting her present. She does, however, have the seeds of a female community context developing in her relationships with Viney and Mae Ryland. These women bring her more into the present.

The idea of a place in community is central to black female identity for these characters. Celie comes out of her childhood isolation and joins in a community centered around Shug Avery, Celie's step-child Harpo, his wife Sophia and the juke joint run by first Harpo and Sophia and then Harpo and Squeak. Ursa is in a process of leaving the past and coming into a present relational context of supportive women: her mother, Viney and Mae Ryland. For Ursa, rejection of her father's political values marks a turning point aligning her with other women. This marks a break with childhood. Ursa lets go of Triunion, but she finds no replacement for her childhood home.

If Celie can be seen as the foundation that says accept yourself, then Ursa's message is to adapt your language situationally. Ursa changes her language as she adapts to a greater variety of people and places. A wide range of language is clear in *Daughters*, where a great variety of diction and dialects is found in the characters' mouths. For example: "'Stasis,' she had said, 'meaning stagnant' " (89) comes from Viney. This is high vocabulary. "She had blown up and told Viney to mind her own rasshole business" (89) comes from Ursa. This is when she lapses into the "fowl yard tongue" (111) she learned from Astral Forde, her father's keep miss.

In *Daughters* there is a slipping up and down through registers. The truth is most often spoken in the character's true voice or older voice: more dialect is used, more slang, more street language. For example Ursa says, quoting a blues song, "I'd rather drink

muddy water and sleep in a hollow log than work another day for NCRC" (90). Ursa speaks the bitter truth when she is angry, then she lapses into the fowl-yard language she learned as a child from the keep miss. To become whole, Ursa will need to learn to speak the truth in a new manner. Her communications with significant people are insufficient, too much of Ursa is kept within herself, too little is expressed. Not feeling at home in a new linguistic setting may be a barrier to her communication. This parallels the way many black people feel stymied while trying to communicate in a white cultural style in American Standard English when Black English is their personal style.

Lowell Carruthers illustrates this true voice by a register shift as he quotes his ex-wife telling a truth, followed by his own more polished, less vital words: "'Nigger,' she'd say when she really got angry, 'I didn't leave my daddy's good house to come and live in no Harlem./I'd tell her we were four blocks away, albeit four short blocks'" (96).

Celie, unlike Ursa, speaks always in her true language a point Winchell makes. "As Walker explains, to have Celie speak in the language of her oppressor's would be to deny the validity of her existence...Walker writes of Celie, 'She has not accepted an alien tongue to tell us about it. Her being is affirmed by the language in which she is revealed, and like everything else about her it is characteristic, hard-won, and authentic' " (*Living* 87-88). Or as Celie herself tells Albert, "We all have to start somewhere if us want to do better, and our own self is what us have to hand" (*Color* 278) .

Celie's language is quaint and within an historical framework that places it in the past, Marshall's Ursa is of our day and her language is more characteristic of the increased education and experience of present day black women. Ursa shows a broad scope linguistically--from island phrases to American Black English, from fowl yard language to professional speech. But Ursa's communicational ability across the male/female cultural barrier is as limited as Celie's and she finds fewer true words to express the frustration she feels. Ursa represents an ideal, however, of the modern black

woman's ability to accept vernacular speech, Black English, and down-home dialects as readily as she accepts Standard American English. This sophistication gives her a sense of when to say what to whom and in what manner. But it also limits her to what is permissible to say in some circumstances. Celie and Janie were freer to speak their minds in some areas of their discourse communities. As a child, Celie was practically mute with other people, but she wrote freely and expressively to God. Shug Avery opened Celie's mouth with her understanding. Celie is finally able to tell off Mr.____. Janie had a grandmother who did not receive her communications, but she found a lover, Tea Cake, who did. Tea Cake opened up the world of expression for Janie, who learned to speak out freely in her own strong voice. Ursa is never able to confront her father with words. The one time she tries to say what can't be said to Lowell, Ursa ends of stumbling out of Lowell's apartment, blind with emotion, chased out by Lowell's anger.

Walker is free to write using the Southern folk idiom for Celie because Hurston wrote in that style ahead of her and opened the way. Hurston allowed black women to claim the history of their speech. This included the use of an oral story telling tradition, not only the use of dialect. Hurston established that using uneducated speech forms was not demeaning to black people when these forms were authentic and in doing so, she drew the fire of criticism.

Wright argued that *Their Eyes Were Watching God* "did for literature what minstrel shows did for theater, that is, make white folks laugh" (Washington viii). This attitude may have been a defense of the race based on the idea of hiding from white readers anything that might reinforce negative stereotypes--even if it meant denying the truth. Hurston studied black speech. She displayed the drama of the store-porch lying sessions and carried forward an important oral tradition. There is a colloquial quality at times to the Walker's writing that is "at home language" similar to the colloquial style that Maya Angelou describes here:

We were alert to the gap separating the written word from the colloquial. We learned to slide out of one language and into another without being conscious of the effort. At school, in a given situation, we might respond with "That's not unusual." But in the street, meeting the same situation, we easily said, "It be's like that sometimes. (219)

Ultimately the down home style and the new ways of speaking are all important to the black woman today; both elements are needed to achieve wholeness. Janie's and Celie's folk simplicity is not enough on its own. Ursa's surface sophistication still leaves her with barriers to communication she cannot cross, so that too much of what she needs to say she cannot articulate. Ursa is speaking the language of the people she encounters, but she is not able to make real connections effectively in the new tongues. Yet she falls into her old fowl-yard tongue only when she is angry. More and more Ursa holds interior monologues when she needs to get something across. This is clearest in her relationships with men: her father and Lowell Carruthers.

Modern black women writers offer the language they know to be a part of their cultural make-up. When they write using black language forms, they write with a freedom from care about the view of the white culture in which they are submerged. This differs dramatically from the black intellectual view of the Harlem Renaissance, where there was great concern for white perceptions. Hurston was criticized back then for writing in what some considered dialect that alluded to minstrel traditions that had become an embarrassment. James Baldwin writes about the dialect of black Americans: "A people at the center of the western world, and in the midst of so hostile a population, has not endured and transcended by means of what is patronizingly called a 'dialect.' We, the blacks, are in trouble, certainly, but we are not inarticulate..." (89). It took courage for Hurston to open the door to dialect for black authors. There was a writing taboo for black intellectuals to avoid dialect. But Hurston demonstrated the beauty and dignity of dialect. Dialect enabled her characters to be truly articulate.

Alice Walker, in *The Color Purple*, employs a rural black language. Toni Morrison employs an urban black language style in *The Bluest Eye*. Alice Walker combines American Standard English with a black colloquial English in *Meridian*. In *Daughters* Paule Marshall writes in American Standard English studded with a multiplicity of language variations: Black English, island patois, American and Caribbean slang, swearing, and YUPPIE speech, to name most. This use of the gamut of language that black Americans speak becomes an affirmation of the linguistic diversity of the black community and assures all language a place in the self identity of black women.

The choice of the language spoken by main characters carries the import of defining self through language. Celie is a character defined through an unsophisticated idiom that renders her insights more eloquent because she arrives at the truth through experience and states it so ingenuously that she reminds the reader of Huck Finn. Celie's truths are not book-learned truths. Her language is not a book-learned language, and it can, therefore, be seen as closer to the bone of a true identity unclouded by immersion in the white-dominated world of school. Celie can read, and she learned some things from school books her sister, Nettie, brought her. Still, Celie is in essence unschooled, having been dropped from school because she was pregnant at age fourteen.

Celie's voice in *The Color Purple* is a strong voice in non-standard English with a rural flavor--the voice of the folk. This voice places Celie in the community, rather than in the larger outer world. Here is an example of her tone and style: "I run out the door. *Shug*, I say, and put out my arms. But before I know anything a skinny big toof man wearing red suspenders is all up in my face. Fore I can wonder whose dog he is, he hugging me" (112). Celie, herself, voices an opinion (Walker speaks through her character) about her rural language style:

Darlene trying to teach me how to talk. She says us not so hot. A dead country give-away. You say us where most folks say WE, she say, and people think you a hick and white folks be amuse.

What I care? I ast. I'm happy.
But she say I feel more happier talking like she talk" (*Color* 222).

Here is a case of the community looking down on some of its own members on the basis of language. Celie is a member of the community in whom they can take pride, if they do not emulate the white community and turn away from her based on her non-white, non-standard speech.

In the novel, Darlene goes on to tell Celie that Shug will not be ashamed of Celie if she sounds more educated. Shug reflects to herself that Shug is not ashamed right now, and changing herself isn't necessary for acceptance. In fact, Celie finds that trying to change her language is the cause of a mental confusion for her. To help Celie learn, Darlene has brought her books with "white folks all over them, talking about apples and dogs" (222). Books are part of the white world. Celie decides that, although she thinks some times about apples and dogs, she is fine right now in her expression. This acceptance of one's own language becomes acceptance of one's own self. *The Color Purple* is written in Celie's spoken style of language. It is entirely colloquial which serves the purpose of affirming her language. Walker did not feel compelled to write American Standard English in order to be read, published, or valued.

The Bluest Eye has American Standard English as its narrative style, except for direct quotes from people who do not use that style. Morrison wrote in a more traditional fashion regarding language than Walker did in *The Color Purple*. However, through dialogue, Morrison presents as true a slice of life as Walker does. The narrative style rings true as the style most likely to be used by the narrator, who is the adult Claudia telling the story of one year in her childhood when marigolds wouldn't grow. The narrator sets the stage for the novel in these words:

It was a long time before my sister and I admitted to ourselves that no green was going to spring from our seeds. Once we knew, our guilt was relieved only by fights and mutual accusations about who was to blame. For years I thought my sister was right: it was my fault. I had planted them too far down in the earth. It never occurred to either of us that the

earth itself might have been unyielding. We had dropped our seeds in our own little plot of black dirt. Our innocence and faith were no more productive than his lust or despair.

What is clear now is that of all that hope, fear, lust, love, and grief, nothing remains but Pecola and the unending earth. Cholly Breedlove is dead; our innocence too. The seeds shriveled and died; her baby too.

There is really nothing more to say--except why. But since why is difficult to handle, one must take refuge in how. (*Bluest* 9)

This is the adult voice and writing form of Claudia, who has grown into a woman who can make the subtle distinctions between why and how, who can understand that the earth itself was sterile. It is an analytical, articulate voice that expresses a complex reality. This reality includes looking back clear-eyed on the neighborhood and the people there with empathy for Pecola and other little girls growing up there. It is a sympathetic voice that looks back with sympathy on its own self as a child. Claudia as a child was more intuitive than analytical. She was ingenuous and yet her eyes recorded the scenes from childhood that are later so effectively used in understanding the adult world.

Even as a child, Claudia was learning to speak American Standard English. Her speech is a blend of home, school, and neighborhood. Here are some examples of that speech: "I ain't gonna break nothing" (*Bluest* 26). "What do you want to do?" I asked (24). I had another idea. "We could go up the alley and see what's in the trash cans." (25) This speech is Claudia, free to reflect within herself on what she sees while remaining a part of her surroundings. Claudia belongs in her community. Claudia is different from Celie in that Claudia went to school. Celie was forced out of school by pregnancy and this isolated her from the community for a period of time--until she gained a core of self. Claudia never suffers an outer break with her community, but her internal voice finds its flaws. Claudia's speech does not alienate her from her neighborhood as she changes through her schooling, because she changes in socially supported ways. The community does not question adopting white school language any more than it questions buying white baby dolls. The urban, black, Northern community is submerged and engulfed by a white culture. Celie's rural, black, Southern community is to the side and

apart from the white world. The language of that world retains more of itself, its own sounds.

Claudia's non-standard childhood speech is realistically temporized by education. Still, it is a voice with a neighborhood rhythm. This dialogue is from a scene where Claudia and Frieda are washing Mason jars in the kitchen and listening as their mother (Mrs. MacTeer) gossips with other women about Mrs. MacTeer's decision to take a roomer (Henry Washington). Mr. Henry had been living on Thirteenth Street with Miss Della Jones. Della has had a few mild heart attacks and has become unclear in her thinking. Mr. Henry wants to leave Miss Della's house, where he rooms now. Here is part of the kitchen conversation from pages 15-16 in *The Bluest Eye*:

"Well, I hope don't nobody let me roam around like that when I get senile. It's a shame."

"What they going to do about Della? Don't she have no people?"

"A sister's coming up from North Carolina to look after her. I expect she wants to get ahold of Della's house."

"Oh, come on. That's a evil thought, if ever I heard one."

"What do you want to bet? Henry Washington said that sister ain't seen Della in fifteen years."

"I kind of thought Henry would marry her one of these days."

"That old woman?"

"Well, Henry ain't no chicken."

"No, but he ain't no buzzard, either."

"He ever been married to anybody?"

"No."

"How come? Somebody cut it off?"

"He's just picky."

"He ain't picky. You see anything around here you'd marry?"

"Well...no"

"He's just sensible. A steady worker with quiet ways. I hope it works out all right."

"It will. How much you charging?"

"Five dollars every two weeks."

"That'll be a big help to you."

"I'll say."

There are an unknown number of women in this conversation. They are not identified with individual statements, and we don't know who is saying what. They are the language soup of the neighborhood. These are the voices Claudia hears on a daily basis,

and, as such, they are a part of her linguistic heritage. No one monopolizes this conversation. There are no monologues. Everyone participates. The talk moves around briskly from person to person. Claudia describes it this way:

Their conversation is like a gently wicked dance: sound meets sound, curtsies, shimmies, and retires. Another sound enters but is upstaged by another: the two circle each other and stop. Sometimes their words move in lofty spirals, other times they take strident leaps, and all of it is punctuated with warm-pulsed laughter -- like the throb of a heart made of jelly. The edge, the curl, the thrust of their emotions is always clear to Frieda and me. We do not, cannot, know the meanings of all their words, for we are nine and ten years old. So we watch their faces, their hands, their feet, and listen for truth in timbre (16).

Through sound resonance Claudia finds reason and meaning. Celie also finds reason in language, preferring her own language for her thoughts. Language carries emotions for both Claudia and Celie. For Claudia, the sound of voices carries the truth about what adults are feeling. Claudia says that "with grown-ups we listen to and watch out for their voices" (15). Through language, through the timbre of voices, we all recognize our language environments--separating home sounds from school sounds, for example. We live in a sea of communal noise, that is in us like the sea water of our cells--a part of ourselves.

The speech of Meridian Hill, in Alice Walker's *Meridian* shows first a young girl who uses American Standard English much of the time and then a radical woman--who still speaks in calm polite tones most of the time. Meridian's language is reasoned language, but it is also polite to the edge of non-assertion of self. The child of a mother and a father who are both school teachers, Meridian speaks schooled English. She grew up in a small Georgia town where politeness is the norm and cordiality rules. Meridian is educated and controlled. When Meridian finally finds herself, her words take on strength and she says, in her calm way, "You are not free, however, to think I am a fool" (216)

The characters in Marshall's Morrison's, and Walker's writing are placed in time and space by their speech. In *Daughters* Marshall's characters speak for a new day and

time. Listening to a black person speaking today you probably won't hear, except in very isolated communities, words like: 'De crow gahn up, man./ 'dat ain't nothin'. You ain't seen de boss man go up is yuh? Well all right now. Man, de money's too good on the muck. It's liable tuh fair off by tuhmorrer. Ah wouldn't leave off if Ah wuz you' (*Their Eyes* 148). Hurston wrote those words in the 1930's; and this language is a part of black heritage that shouldn't be lost out of fear of perpetuating stereotypes. It is a language out of older times for most black people, but it is not forgotten. This language is similar to the dialect style Alice Walker sometimes employs in her writing about the South in earlier times, and it is appropriate to its day. Marshall writes in a more contemporary style in *Daughters*, and Morrison writes about Northern blacks in her novel *The Bluest Eye*. While Walker discovered her style of writing through the writing of Hurston. This has allowed Walker to write in Hurston's literary tradition and reclaim it as an element of black identity. This language should be a legacy, not a source of shame. Black women have claimed this heritage in their writing; they have proven capable of writing for the black community first and foremost without the fear of the white world looking in and judging.

SUMMARY: A PORTRAIT OF THE BLACK WOMAN

"I'm going to have it together tomorrow, Ursa."
--Viney to her friend in *Daughters*

Marshall, Morrison, and Walker are leaders of the black community who have analyzed the community's position within American society, and who have hypothesized a sense of unity that would enrich the potential of every woman like themselves. They see the community surrounded by an outside world dominated by white culture. They are suggesting that the black community discover its own idealized woman, and they are suggesting that this woman should be a black woman who is loved within the black community.

Such a woman would first love herself and accept herself. From that beginning, she could become a loving mother. But how does this black woman love herself? She loves her language, whether it is the edited English learned in the classroom or the Black English learned in the school yard or at home. Such a woman accepts the history of black speech, loving all the forms from Janie's speech in *Their Eyes Were Watching God* to Ursa's fowl-yard tongue in *Daughters* to Meridian's college English. This black woman knows what she feels and loves "all them feelings", like god does in *The Color Purple*. She loves to learn, like Celie who kept reading books even after her pregnancy kept her out of school. This black woman takes independent action, as Ursa did in leaving the NCRC. Like Meridian, she asks herself hard questions, such as the place of violence in the fight for civil liberty. Such a woman cares about other people, the way Shug cared for Celie. This black woman cares about black babies, as Claudia and Frieda cared for Pecola's baby. She stands up for her community, the way Ursa stood up for the poor constituents her father was exploiting on Triunion. Such a woman values her friends as

Claudia valued Pecola; Shug valued Celie; Ursa valued Viney; Meridian valued Truman Held. Critically, the black woman Marshall, Morrison, and Walker represent through their protagonists knows that she is of worth no matter who comes and goes from her life, the way Celie came to know that her life was of value whether Shug came back to her or not. Celie is in despair when she thinks she has lost Shug. Celie feels much like Ntozake Shange's lady in red in her choreopoem *for colored girls who have considered suicide /when the rainbow is enuf* who says, "it waz too much /i fell into numbness /...i wuz cold/i wuz burnin up /a child /& endlessly weavin garments for the moon /wit my tears" (Shange 63). All of these characters: Celie, Meridian, Ursa, Claudia, have similar moments of despair when they feel there "was missin somethin /somethin so important /somethin promised/a layin on of hands /fingers near my forehead /strong /cool /movin /makin me whole /sense /pure /all the gods comin into me /layin me open to myself" (Shange 61). And all of them, like Celie, found a strong core of being within themselves.

As I discovered in my historical research, black women have had to have a strong personal center to withstand an overwhelmingly negative exterior perception of who they are. Black women in America today have come a great distance from the past where they were first slaves and later servants: a new slavery. They speak, think, act and see themselves in a new form. They accept their diverse language modalities that range from rural to urban and from vernacular to formal styles. They know their history and their place in American society in times past. These women are more educated then their mothers, and they have met unique challenges in moving forward in their lives. Some, like Meridian, may have given up a child in an adoption in order to finish school. Others, like Ursa, have had abortions, because they saw little future for themselves or their children without genuine male support. Through their decisions black women have broken consciously from the old patterns that limited their mothers' lives.

In my curiosity about the way black women see themselves, I chose books that included the childhood of the protagonist. I consider childhood a crucial period for self development. Also, it is from the child's ingenuous perspective that a portrait of the family and community appears without retouching by the editing process of adult rationalization. This family portrait shows mother/daughter relationships may range from supportive, as they are with Ursa and Estelle MacKenzie, to neglectful, as they are with Pecola and Polly Breedlove. And it is from the child's eye view that the father/daughter relationships may range from protective, like Mr. MacTeer's relationship to Claudia and Frieda, to harmful like Cholly Breedlove's relationship to Pecola. The child self of the protagonists in the fiction of Marshall, Morrison, and Walker evaluates the role of mothers, fathers, and community in creating a black female self. Through the definition of a black female self in their fiction, Marshall, Morrison, and Walker define this self in the real world of the black community. In Morrison's, Marshall's, and Walker's writing, self definition is culturally based within the black community context and within a family context.

The self Marshall, Morrison, and Walker portray in their writing is the modern black woman who was raised as the heir apparent to a tradition of matriarch martyrs. Their protagonists show that black women are resisting that role. The matriarchal tradition demands that the black woman repress her own potential, and, as a result, she has suppressed her children's growth intellectually and emotionally. This is shown clearly in the relationship of Meridian and her mother, Mrs. Hill. The matriarch martyr has denied herself the right to grow spiritually and intellectually and to become the whole person she has the potential to become. Sublimating her self-development to the family, the black woman has, as a consequence, discouraged her children in their own growth, while honoring an ethic of self-sacrifice as Meridian's mother did. A martyred woman, Mrs. Hill saw no realistic potential for her personal development in an overwhelmingly

rejecting world. Mrs. Hill did not advise her daughter in ways that would help her find her way in the world. Instead, Mrs. Hill counseled Meridian to reject a place in the world and embrace the martyr role. Meridian found the world held possibilities for her that it had not held for Mrs. Hill. Meridian chose her own educational development, rejecting early motherhood with its stunting of personal growth for the young mother. Meridian went out to meet the world.

That formerly rejecting world has opened up for the modern black woman. Marshall's characters, particularly, are modern women. They exemplify strength; Turner writes about Marshall: "She focuses on--or at least emphasizes--black women growing in strength as they develop consciousness of themselves" (Turner xv). The modern black woman sees new avenues to self outside of the traditional role of sacrifice of self to the family, but she has had difficulty in getting the other members in the black community to recognize and encourage her potential. As a result, black women stepped out ahead of the social lag within the black community. They saw a new place for themselves in a world unfolding with possibilities, but not everyone surrounding them has assimilated these changes in perspective. The resulting persona for modern black women has strength but also loneliness.

The new self-definition for black women presents a picture of a strong woman, yet one who feels the absence of a supportive mate. She finds her solace in the company of other women. Her relationships with men have become primarily sexual encounters. Loving a man does not remove the interiority of her experience. She remains firmly apart from the men with whom she is sexually intimate, men she says she loves. Communication across the sexual frontier involves men who monologue to women who keep their analysis and insights to themselves. The borderland between what the woman thinks within herself and the little she reveals to the men in her life is studded with emotional land mines that make the passage across it difficult. This woman does not find

her communication well received by men. In turn, she often judges men as people who have sold out to the white world, abandoning the interests of black community and valuing white women above black women.

Frye writes:

There are few appropriate adult roles for women to grow into. As traditional constraints on the female self focus in the opposition between femaleness and autonomy, so the Bildungsroman's sense of linear development toward maturity itself forces a choice between becoming progenitive woman and becoming autonomous individual. (78-9)

This assumes that men do not lose autonomy through the expression of their progenitive nature. It can be argued that a man's autonomous development is also restricted by his obligations to children. The real problem for a woman may be when a man assumes no responsibility in the rearing of children, freeing himself at her expense. When the man abandons responsibility, then society expects a woman to shoulder that responsibility entirely. This was certainly the case for Meridian, whose mother called her a monster because Meridian allowed her son, Eddie, Jr., to be adopted. Meridian's husband received no rebukes for abandoning his family.

Meridian did go on to college. She later had an abortion of a second pregnancy, subsequent to the birth of her son, Eddie, Jr.. But she always felt she had not lived up to the expectations of her college, which saw her as a perpetual virgin, or of her mother, who did not understand why Meridian did not embrace the same limited future she had accepted for herself. Meridian needed to find self-acceptance even though the important people in her life rejected her life's choices.

Frye writes about: "The development of the self toward a balance between the ideal inner self and the adaptation required by the external world--what Jerome Buckley calls 'accommodation to the modern world' and what George Lukacs calls 'reconciliation between interiority and reality'"(79). In accommodating the modern world, Meridian created a conflict between her inner mother's voice (her conscience) and that modern

world's required adaptation. She needed an education in order to become whole as a person. That necessitated giving her baby up for adoption and having an abortion, because Saxon College girls couldn't be mothers.

The father of Meridian's baby walked away free, never looking back, guiltless. The father of Meridian's aborted fetus never knew it existed, in fact, he was dating a white girl when she discovered she was pregnant. Eddie, Meridian's young husband, and Truman Held, her college lover, both left Meridian alone with the consequences of their sexual activities. Why didn't she talk to them, try to make them carry some of the burden? There was no way to shift part of the weight of responsibility to these men. They didn't want to hear or to know about the emotional and physical consequences for Meridian that resulted from their sexual union with her. They wanted Meridian to handle the consequences alone for a sexuality that was free from male commitment. Meridian's womb would give birth to one child--Eddie's; her uterus would have another fetus--Truman Held's--scraped from it. Neither Eddie nor Truman wanted to know what consequences Meridian faced as a result of making love to them. Meridian typifies the black woman who often gives birth without a husband, raising children alone, or who has an abortion, going to the clinic on her own.

These writers offer no dream of a future where the relationship between black men and women improves. The protagonists in Marshall's, Morrison's, and Walker's fiction adapt to the sad reality they see and take strength from one another. Thus a problem is defined and yet no solution is offered that will resolve the conflict. The message from Walker appears to be: we are in this world alone, and our only comrades are other women like ourselves. Women can receive support from other women, while most men can see the error in the way they treat women only as these men grow older. There is an empty place in the lives of black women "that hole next to me...the outline,

the space where some decent, halfway together black man should have been" (*Daughters* 330-331).

There is inadequate or inconsistent loving support from the family for black girls growing up and for black women moving out into new areas in the world. Not only are men absent, but many black parents see the world as a threatening place for their children. Morrison presents this in her character Polly Breedlove, who is harsh to her daughter Pecola when Pecola burns herself by tipping a hot pie from its cooling place onto her leg.. Polly is cruel, but she does this to make Pecola accustomed to ridicule.

According to Marshall and Morrison, black parents may try to toughen their children to face this world by being stern with and sometimes criticizing of their children. Morrison's view shows love underlying the surface harshness of black parents who are strict with their children. Morrison shows the parent who is harsh out of concern, and she also shows the parent who takes his rage against the white world out on his daughter.

Morrison invents Cholly Breedlove who is too free to be safe; she also invents Mr. MacTeer who is loving and safe. The reflective self who narrates in Morrison's fiction, in the case of *The Bluest Eye* this is Claudia, sees and assesses everything, weighing and measuring the value of what she observes. Claudia forms a calm center in the narrative that allows the reader to see and reflect with her. Claudia does not *become* a self, she always is formed as a personality, but she is in the process of moving beyond the limitations she observes in the people in her community, enlarging selfhood in her empathy with Pecola. Claudia will be more able to love from strength and more able to care about the Pecola's and their unfortunate babies.

Marshall's Ursa MacKenzie poses questions in the adult realm, where answers are harder to develop. She is searching for human connectedness with a man who listens to what she has to say. She is questioning the integrity of men in political situations and demanding a reassessment of their loyalty to the community. It is most clearly in

Marshall's writing that we see a woman still in transition toward self, still becoming. Marshall's characters are often transcendent in the sense that they become emblems of continuity in black culture.

In *Daughters*, Marshall is departing from the apotheosis of the protagonist where the woman becomes the link to the diaspora, a device that she employed in *Praisesong for the Widow*. In *Daughters*, Marshall places her protagonist in the world that real women traverse. The island scenes are not idylls separated from the present day. Ursa carries all of the complexity of a modern black woman's dilemma in her relations to men into the island scenes as well. This character is centered in a real life where Lowell, the man she loves, doesn't converse with her, where certain things are never said between lovers and certain things are never said to fathers.

The black female self that is drawn in *Daughters* is a woman trying to communicate across a gender barrier. *Daughters* is asking the right questions, but the answers are not there. Maybe Marshall hasn't posited answers yet. The portrait drawn here is one of a woman still searching. This woman is conflicted in her love for and loyalty to a father who disregards her mother's ethics and her own. She is conflicted by her political support of black men like Sandy Lawson who turn their backs on the poor people who elect them when rich white people court their attention. She is conflicted by her love for Lowell who cannot speak with her intimately about the things that trouble her heart.

Sexuality is treated with greater promise than love is. Acceptance of one's own body and the right to exploratory curiosity about sex is approved of in *The Color Purple*. In Walker's work, sexuality and religion are so closely aligned that orgasm becomes nearly rapturous. The parallel between sexuality and religious exaltation was introduced into this genre by Hurston, who gave us Janie Crawford's sexual climactic among the pear blossoms. Nature, religion, and sex are intertwined into a bacchanalian paradise for

women that becomes a female owned pantheism. In *The Color Purple*, Walker writes in the tradition begun by Hurston, where Janie Crawford went out into the world seeking a bee for her blossom. Although Celie does not have a promising introduction to her own sexuality, she does find a self acceptance that includes the acceptance of her own sexual nature. Celie achieves her adult sexuality through the healing power of another woman's loving concern. This lesbian relationship is a part of the feminist milieu in which Walker writes. Winchell comments: "Like Hurston, Walker was not afraid of being condemned for honestly presenting a sexual freedom that her audience might consider incorrect" (Winchell 11). In fact, sex becomes a quasi-religious experience.

Sexuality and the divine are every woman's inheritance--or so it seems in Walker's writing: "Part of the celebration of the self in Walker's work is in her characters' acknowledgment that there is something of the divine in everything in the universe" (Winchell x). This inner divinity is expanded to include a divinity in nature and even, in Walker's writing at least, divinity in objects. This animism may be a conscious effort to produce a thread of cultural continuity between the African tribal animism and present day black spirituality. All of these writers are believers in the diaspora, the threads of cultural connection throughout black cultures worldwide, present and past. Marshall portrays this in her work, perhaps most strongly in *Praise Song for the Widow* and other works, but also in *Daughters*.

Marshall deals less with religion and sexuality and more with the cultural/historical context of the new black woman. Marshall joins black Caribbean and black American cultures into the self-concept of her character Ursa. This merging of cultures, whether African/American, Caribbean/American, or rural Southern/urban Northern becomes an issue for all of the authors studied. Marshall appears as the major voice among the authors studied in presenting the African/Caribbean diaspora that links all black people together with a common thread: cultural origin. This is one of her main

concerns: the diaspora, the historical/cultural continuity of black women. Marshall writes of the threads that run among the black peoples of the world: their common source. Walker also writes of this bond to older black civilization--placing Nettie and Celie's children in Africa.

Morrison writes of this cultural continuity in *Sula* and other novels. Morrison writes:

We are the subjects of our own narrative, witnesses to and participants in our own experience, and, in no way coincidentally, in the experiences of those with whom we have come in contact. And to read imaginative literature by and about us is to choose to examine centers of the self and to have the opportunity to compare these centers with the 'raceless' one with which we are, all of us, most familiar. (Wall i)

We do learn about those common human elements of character. What else do we learn about the characteristics of the new black female persona from reading the writing of black women? We learn about: a cultural and historical contextuality; a feminist voice; a female autonomy; a personal strength; an awful loneliness; a refusal to settle into old roles; a loyalty to the black community; a hope for a community of black women. We also discover: a void in their lives where men *should* be and a desire for a new community of support. The new woman has her feet on a new road never traveled by her mother or grandmother. She wants a community of friends along her path to ease her way.

Works Cited

- Angelo, Maya. I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings. New York: Random, 1969.
- Aptheker, Herbert. American Slave Revolts. New York: Columbia, 1943.
- Aptheker, Herbert. A Documentary History of the Negro People in the United States. New York: Citadel, 1951.
- Baechler, Lea and A. Walton Litz, eds. Modern American Women Writers. New York: Scribners, 1991.
- Baldwin, James. "If Black English Isn't a Language, Then Tell Me What Is?" In Depth: Essayists for Our Times, 2nd edition. Eds. Carl Klaus, Chris Anderson, Rebecca Faery. Fort Worth: Harcourt, 1993.
- Bambara, Toni Cade. The Salt Eaters. New York: Random, 1980.
- Bethel, Lorraine. "'This Infinity of Conscious Pain': Zora Neale Hurston and the Black Literary Tradition." But Some of Us Are Brave. Eds. Gloria T. Hull, Patricia Bell Scott, and Barbara Smith. New York: Feminist, 1982.
- Davis, Thadious M. "Alice Walker's Celebration of Self." Women Writers of the Contemporary South. By Peggy Whitman Prenshaw. Jackson: UP of Mississippi, 1984.
- Delpit, Lisa. "The Silenced Dialogue: Power and Pedagogy in Educating Other People's Children" Harvard Educational Review, 58:3, August 1988.
- Frye, Joanne S. Living Stories, Telling Lives: Women and the Novel in Contemporary Experience. Ann Arbor: U of Michigan P, 1986.
- Harley, Sharon. "Northern Black Female Workers." The Afro-American Woman. Eds. Sharon Harley and Rosalyn Terborg-Penn. Port Wahington, N.Y.: Kennikat P, 1978.
- Hemenway, Robert E. Zora Neale Hurston: A Literary Biography. Urbana: U of Illinois P, 1977.
- Hurston, Zora Neale. Their Eyes Were Watching God. New York: Harper, 1937.
- Marshall, Paule. Praisesong for the Widow. New York: Plume, 1983.
- . Daughters. New York: Atheneum, 1991.
- Morrison, Toni. The Bluest Eye. New York: Holt, 1970.
- . Sula. New York: Random, 1974.

- . Playing in the Dark. Cambridge: Harvard U P, 1992.
- Otten, Terry. The Crime of Innocence in the Fiction of Toni Morrison. Columbia, Missouri: U of Mississippi P, 1989.
- Shange, Ntozake. for colored girls who have considered suicide/when the rainbow is enuf. New York: Macmillan, 1977.
- Shapiro, Herbert. "The Impact of the Aptheker Thesis: a Retrospective View of American Negro Slave Revolts." *Science and Society*. 48:52-73.
- Sundstrom, William A. "Last Hired, First Fired? Unemployment and Urban Black Workers During the Great Depression." The Journal of Economic History. 52:515-29.
- Turner, Darwin T. Introduction. Soul Clap Hands and Sing. By Paule Marshall. Washington, D.C.: Howard UP, 1988
- Walker, Alice. The Color Purple. New York: Washington Square-Pocket, 1976.
- . Meridian. New York: Washington Square-Pocket, 1976.
- . Foreword. Zora Neale Hurston: A Literary Biography. By Robert Hemenway. Urbana: U of Illinois P, 1977.
- . Goodnight, Willie Lee. New York: Dial, 1979.
- . Dedication. I Love Myself When I Am Laughing...And Then Again When I Am Mean and Impressive. Zora Neale Hurston. New York: Feminist P, 1979.
- . Living by the Word. San Diego: Harcourt, 1988.
- Wall, Cheryl A. Introduction. Changing Our Own Words. Ed. Cheryl A. Wall. New Brunswick: Rutgers UP, 1970.
- Washington, Mary Helen. Introduction. I Love Myself When I Am Laughing...And Then Again When I Am Mean and Impressive. Zora Neale Hurston. New York: Feminist P, 1979.
- Willis, Susan. "I Shop Therefore I Am: Is There a Place for Afro-American Culture in Commodity Culture?" Changing Our Own Words. Ed. Cheryl A. Wall. New Brunswick, N.J.: Rutgers UP, 1970.
- Winchell, Donna Haisty. Alice Walker. New York: Twayne, 1992.