Reading Democracy: 
Anthologies of African American Women’s Writing and the 

by 

Aisha Peay 

Department of English 
Duke University 

Date: __________________ 

Approved: 

______________________________ 
Priscilla Wald, Chair 

______________________________ 
Thomas J. Ferraro 

______________________________ 
Ranjana Khanna 

______________________________ 
Kathy Psomiades 

Dissertation submitted in partial fulfillment of 
the requirements for the degree of Doctor 
of Philosophy in the Department of 
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2009
ABSTRACT

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Taking as its pretext the contemporary moment of self-reflexive critique on the part of interdisciplinary programs like Women’s Studies and American Studies, Reading Democracy historicizes a black feminist literary critical practice and movement that developed alongside black feminist activism beginning in the 1970s. This dissertation addresses the future direction of scholarship based in Women’s Studies and African-American Studies by focusing on the institutionalized political effects of Women’s Liberation and the black liberation movements: the canonization of black women’s writing and the development of a black feminist critical practice. Tracing a variety of conceptions of black feminist criticism over the course of two decades, I argue that this critical tradition is virtually indefinable apart from its anthological framing and that its literary objects illustrate the radical democratic constitution of black women’s political subjectivity.

The editors of such anthologies of African American women’s writing and black feminist practice as Toni Cade Bambara’s The Black Woman (1970), Mary Helen Washington’s Black-Eyed Susans (1975), and Barbara Smith’s Home Girls: A Black Feminist Anthology (1984) articulate the relationship of political praxis to creative enterprise and intellectual activity. In the case of Smith’s anthology, for example, “coalition politics” emerges as the ideal democratic practice by which individuals constitute political identities, consolidate around political principles, and negotiate political demands.

Situating anthologies of black women’s writing in relation to the social movement politics of the 1960s and 1970s, Reading Democracy explores how black feminist
projects in the academy and the arts materialized the democratic principles of modern politics in the United States, understanding these principles as ethical desires that inspire self-constitution and creative and scholarly production. Constructing a literary critical and publication history, this dissertation identifies the democratic principles that the anthologies in this study materialize by analyzing them alongside the novels and short stories published during the 1970s and 1980s that they excerpt or otherwise reference, such as Toni Morrison’s *The Bluest Eye* (1970), Audre Lorde’s *Zami: A New Spelling of My Name* (1982), and Paule Marshall’s *Praisesong for the Widow* (1983). The anthology facilitates the analysis of the single creative work’s black feminist consciousness. Using the critical terms of democratic theory to mark the fulfillment of a political theory of black women’s writing, as Smith first proposed, this dissertation arrives at a sense of democracy as a strategic zone of embodiment and a modern political imaginary forged by the recognition of “the others” in our midst who are coming to voice and are ineluctably constituted by the same ethical desires as are we ourselves.
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INTRODUCTION

Toward a Genealogy of Black Feminist Criticism

“What is a literary critic, a black woman critic, a black feminist literary critic, a black feminist social literary critic? The adjectives mount up, defining, qualifying, the activity. How does one distinguish them? The need to articulate a theory, to categorize the activities is a good part of the activity itself to the point where I wonder how we ever get around to doing anything else.”


The cultural knowledge project known as Black Women’s Studies emerged from the intricate connections among political, scholarly, and creative projects, including black feminist social activism, the study of black women writers, and the activity of black feminist criticism, which black feminist activist-educator Barbara Smith inaugurated in her pamphlet publication “Toward a Black Feminist Criticism” in 1977. In that essay, Smith set out to establish a practice for reading black women writers—and especially, black lesbian writers—from a feminist perspective, which, for Smith, presumed the necessity of a political movement that would frame the analysis of black women’s “experience” and foster the development of a black feminist political theory. Such prescriptions for a literary critical practice coincided with what fellow black feminist critic Mary Helen Washington identified as the “renaissance” of black women writers after 1970. This renaissance allowed black feminist critics to identify black women’s writing traditions and canonize under-taught black women writers.

In Reading Democracy, I launch a genealogy of black feminist criticism from this nexus of beginnings, questioning what it means to historicize black feminist thought and determining the link between the registers of social movement politics, academic feminism, literary critical practice, and literature that circumscribe Smith’s call for a black feminist political theory. Understanding black feminism as an outgrowth of the
sixties movements, when black women activists became black feminists engaged not only in social justice projects for equal rights but also in making black women culturally legible as black women, I understand black feminism to garner its political content from its analysis of political subjectivity. In the connection Smith and other black feminist critics drew between black women’s experience and social movement politics, I gather that by what they called black women’s experience they meant some aspect of black women’s subjectivity. By reading the work of their political theorist-contemporaries, I gather the terms for reading that subjectivity.

In the memories of Smith and Beverly Guy-Sheftall about academic feminism and the development of Black Women’s Studies converge two constellations of black women scholars and creative writers. Smith, who was appointed to the Modern Language Association’s Commission on the Status of Women in the Profession in 1974 and became one of the founders of Black Women’s Studies, recalls “a hitherto undocumented chapter in the building of Black women’s studies”: the convening of interdisciplinary salons by black women graduate students studying in Boston in the early 1970s, several of whom had begun incorporating the work of black women writers into their scholarship.¹ In those salons, Smith met Nellie McKay, Claudia Tate, Cheryl Gilkes, Hortense Spillers, Linda Perkins, and Andrea Rushing. On the way to the first meeting at Rushing’s home, Smith encountered McKay, who sensed that they were headed in the same direction, having ridden the same subway. McKay and Smith subsequently remembered their encounter as a metaphor for their intellectual trajectories. As Smith put it, they were

“going to exactly the same place, not just literally, but in [their] work and in [their] lives.”  

Smith had studied in Massachusetts as an undergraduate, graduating from Mount Holyoke in 1965. After earning a Master’s degree from the University of Pittsburgh in 1969, she transferred to a Ph.D. program at the University of Connecticut in 1971 where she took a seminar in women’s literature and noticed the absence of black women writers on the syllabus. During a leave of absence in Boston that she took after the death of the aunt who had raised her, she audited the Pulitzer Prize-winning novelist, short story writer and poet Alice Walker’s seminar on black women writers at the University of Massachusetts, Boston. Smith elected to write on Ann Petry’s novels for her seminar paper and vowed to teach black women writers in her first teaching position, which she was awarded at Emerson College in 1973. Smith’s undergraduate and graduate studies impressed upon her the canonical elision of US black American literature from the American literary canon and black women writers from the definition of “black literature.” Smith remarks that her discovery of black women writers had been tantamount to finding the Holy Grail.  

Guy-Sheftall—a self-proclaimed radical feminist who heads the Women’s Research and Resource Center and the Comparative Women’s Studies program at Spelman College, with a focus on theorizing global black feminisms—visited Smith while she was teaching at Emerson, and Smith shared Walker’s syllabus with her. According to Guy-Sheftall, Walker’s course was the first to be taught on black women

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2 Ibid.

3 Ibid., 197
The late novelist, short story writer, and anthologist Toni Cade Bambara had also designed a course on black women writers to teach as a visiting professor at Spelman in the mid-1970s but taught it at her home in Atlanta when the English department refused to run it.

Like Smith, Guy-Sheftall identifies the genesis of Black Women’s Studies in a burgeoning black feminist critical community, marked by the publication of journals and collections that were foundational for the field. In particular, she names her associates in the 1970s: Mary Helen Washington, renowned for her impact on the development of a canon of black women writers and her anthologies *Black-Eyed Susans* (1975) and *Midnight Birds* (1980); Roseann P. Bell, who, along with Bettye J. Parker and Guy-Sheftall, co-edited *Sturdy Black Bridges: Visions of Black Women in Literature* (1979); Barbara Smith, whom Guy-Sheftall met at the 1974 MLA convention and who, along with Gloria T. Hull and Patricia Bell-Scott, is credited with founding Black Women’s Studies as a formal area with the publication of *All the Women Are White, All the Blacks Are Men But Some of Us Are Brave: Black Women’s Studies* (1982); Johnnella Butler, who co-founded *SAGE: A Scholarly Journal on Women* in April 1984 with Guy-Sheftall, Bell-Scott, Janet Sims Wood, Miriam DeCosta-Willis, and Jacqueline Jones Royster; bell hooks who gained prominence as a black feminist scholar with her 1981 monograph *Ain’t I A Woman: Black Women and Feminism*. Guy-Sheftall also names creative writers like Bambara whose 1970 black feminist anthology *The Black Woman* featured the work of Walker, Nikki Giovanni, Paule Marshall, and Audre Lorde, whom Smith first

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4 Ibid., 225
met at the 1976 MLA Convention in New York and whose work appears in Smith’s

The writers and editors of these publications often articulated their work in
political terms as a form of academic activism. For instance, in her afterword to
Conjuring: Black Women, Fiction, and Literary Tradition (1985), Hortense Spillers
linked social movement politics to the critical agency of the black feminist in the
academy. Describing the Black and Women’s Liberation movements as the
sociopolitical backdrop for a radical revisioning of institutional arrangements, she
explained that the US American academy “is one of the enabling postulates of black
women’s literary community simply because it is not only a source of income for certain
individual writers, but also a point of dissemination and inquiry for their work.”
In the
context of the academy, Spillers argued, “the work of black women’s writing community
not only redefines tradition, but also disarms it by suggesting that the term itself is a
critical fable intended to encode and circumscribe an inner and licit circle of empowered
texts.”
Spillers situated the work of black feminist critics in relation to the literary canon
debates that had been taking place since the 1960s. In characteristically Foucaultian
terms, she described the black feminist critic as a “locus of radical dissent and critique,”
and she defined black women’s literature as a tradition that “speaks to a particular
historical order as a counter-tradition, a counter-myth” and that reveals “a matrix of
literary discontinuities that partially articulate various periods of consciousness in the

5 Spillers, Hortense. “Cross-Currents, Discontinuities: Black Women’s Fictions.” In Conjuring: Black
Women, Fiction, and Literary Tradition. Eds. Marjorie Pryse and Hortense Spillers. (Bloomington: Indiana
University Press, 1985), 249.

6 Ibid., 251
history of African American people.”

Spillers goes on to read these historical ruptures of mythic discontinuities in the work of Harlem Renaissance writers Jessie Fauset, Nella Larsen, and Zora Neale Hurston, essentially reading the characterization of their literary “agents,” or characters, as a symptom of the cultural “grammar” of the fictive worlds from which they emerge. This grammar, I would argue, is actually a political order that constitutes the subjectivity of both the literary protagonist and black women agents.

Spillers focused instead on the fact that the literary agents in Fauset’s, Larsen’s, and Hurston’s work symbolized the critical agency of the black feminist critic. In Hurston’s Their Eyes Were Watching God (1937), she saw the emergence of black female agency in the person of Janie Starks as a “shift in epistemic procedure” by which the agent appears as singularly identified by the act of her storytelling in comparison to the more “faceless” protagonists of Fauset’s and Larsen’s works. Here, Spillers echoed Michel Foucault’s definition of critique as “the art of not being governed quite so much.” reading the character of Janie Starks as the fictive emergence of a critical subject, a black female agent.

To speak of the black women’s literary community as one that dissents to traditional academic procedures is to imagine black women critical and creative writers to be engaged in a kind of cultural politics in the academy. Such a politics mimics the radical politics of black and women’s liberationists in the sixties protest movements, in which black and women’s bodies became sites of political contestation, and activists

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7 Ibid., 251
8 Ibid., 253
prioritized their cultural visibility and social equality over the liberal concern with civil reform, where social equality was reduced to advances in civil rights. Smith’s articulation of black feminist criticism attempted to incorporate the black feminist cultural analysis produced by social justice projects into literary critical practice. As Spillers suggested in 1985, the academy enabled a cultural knowledge project among black feminist activist-critics who reflected on their own agency—their own art of critique—via analyses of black women’s literature. In their attempts to prescribe that art of critique, they enacted a literary theory for reading black women’s writing, one that *Reading Democracy* retroactively recovers. As a mode of analysis that reads the political order—that is, the cultural grammar—subtending the subjectivity of black female protagonists in literature and that of the black feminist critic and black women generally, this literary theory serves as a period- and genre-specific political theory. *Reading Democracy* derives this theory for a reading practice from the archive of black feminist criticism as the relatively unacknowledged legacy of that archive, enacting it in the analysis of selected works of black women’s literature.

Black feminist criticism implicitly invoked a conception of the political, however unknown to its practitioners, that the New Left movements made possible: a conception of radical democracy encapsulated by the popular liberationist slogan, “the personal is political,” as an alternative to the pre-World War II conception of the public sphere as a scene of political action. This radical democratic conception of the political allowed historically disenfranchised subjects to organize collectively around their oppression and examine structures of institutionalized power as a means to social transformation. In the process of re-conceptualizing the way the political is lived, these movements also
generated an ethos of identity politics in which subjects identify with an essentialized notion of their oppression, which, in turn, determines social conduct. Such political theorists as Wendy Brown have critiqued identitarian politics as a kind of “antipolitics,” a politics of social antagonism once deployed by the socialist Left but now based on a politicized notion of difference and the identification of social injustices in persons as opposed to institutions and social arrangements. Brown argues in “Moralism and Antipolitics” that practitioners of identity politics rather naively dichotomize a political context into the virtuous position of the oppressed and the iniquitous position of dominance, which Nietzsche denounced as slave morality in On the Genealogy of Morals (1887). Such a politics neglects the historically contingent nature of politics, flattening the social plane and giving all forms of power equal political significance. About identity politics, Brown explains,

[T]o the extent that identity politics are institutionalized—in academic programs and in political caucuses or other political organizations—they are susceptible to the profoundly depoliticizing logic of liberal institutions; historical conflicts are rendered as essential ones, effect becomes cause, and “culture,” “religion,” “ethnicity,” or “sexuality” become entrenched differences with entrenched interests. [...] [I]dentitarian political projects are very real effects of late modern modalities of power, but as effects they do no fully express its character and so do not adequately articulate their own conditions; they are symptoms of a certain fragmentation of suffering, and of suffering lived as identity rather than as general injustice or domination—but suffering that cannot be resolved at the identitarian level.¹⁰

The political problem that identity politics poses is that it never imagines emancipation from modes of domination but rather allows the oppressed to agitate for short-lived gains in moralistic fashion. Identity politics is, therefore, an apolitical solution to political problems that reveals little about the historical contingencies of institutionalized power.

Smith’s original conception of black feminist criticism imagined it to be practiced solely by black female academics as a part of a social justice project in the academy, and she spoke of the absence of black women writers from Americanist scholarship as a deliberate exclusion to be combated. Such a conception of inclusion and exclusion certainly sustains critical agency by serving as a ready pretext for analysis but is ultimately undermined by its deployment of identity politics, positing a demand for inclusion that, in its repeated invocation, does not want to be fulfilled. This demand for inclusion in the name of democracy fails to account for the different material conditions in which scholarship is produced and the variegated social plane resulting from historically contingent social arrangements.

Still, the attribution of an identity to black feminist critics and black women artists constitutes part of the radical democratic mechanism of subject-formation. In his introduction to The Making of Political Identities (1994), Ernesto Laclau explains that the end of the Cold War brought the end not only of globalizing ideologies—that is, ideologies that serve to legitimate local, more particularistic ideologies by positing their fulfillment of a universalism, as was the case for the socialist Left—but also a kind of ideological politics in general, in the sense that subjects arise from a more diverse and particularized set of social strategies and conditions of possibility. This change in the relationship between the particular and the universal meant that political identities no longer named universal groups that achieve rights on the basis of presumed universal

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11 See Hollinger, David A., ed. The Humanities and the Dynamics of Inclusion Since World War II. (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2006), where in the introduction Hollinger describes the academy’s response to the changing sociopolitical context after World War II as a “dynamics of inclusion.” Hollinger attributes the emergence of Black and later African-American Studies, Women’s Studies, and Race and Ethnic Studies to an increasing concern with the under-representation of marginalized demographic groups, not only in terms of representative faculty on university campuses but also in reference to the scholarship produced about these cultures within a holistically conceived American culture.
values; rather particular identities achieved rights democratically in co-existence with other identities when they discovered a universalism “that is the very result of particularism.”¹² In other words, groups united around a particular identity would have to construct themselves and posit demands in relation to other such groups. Their self-interest would not necessarily reflect the interests of a universal group. For Laclau, this situation meant the end of social identity, which implies that identity grants a fixed location in a social structure that social agents discover and recognize in relation to one another, and the beginning of political identity, which must be continually constructed.

This process of “radical constructivism” describes the psychoanalytic and radical democratic process of identification, which implies a lack at the root of identity and necessitates the subject’s identification with something to fulfill that lack. The political scene is demarcated by these various instantiations of the subject, “the visibility of the acts of identification.”¹³ Identity, in other words, marks the beneficiary of political rights. When identity is divorced from the processes of identification, it affixes itself to social agents who antagonistically posit demands without regard for the contingencies of social conflict.

Another of Smith’s memories of black feminism gestures towards the conception of the political I deploy in this dissertation. Smith was involved in the Black and Women’s Liberation movements before she proclaimed herself a black feminist. Repulsed by the patriarchalism of black nationalism, to which the Civil Rights Movement gave way by the late 1960s, Smith joined the National Black Feminist Organization, founded by CORE member Margaret Sloan in 1973. Smith established a Boston chapter

¹³ Ibid., 4
of the NBFO in 1974, which later evolved, with the help of fellow Bostonians Beverly
Smith and Demita Frazier into a more radical organization in 1977 to address the plight
of working class women—The Combahee River Collective, its name inspired by the river
in the Port Royal region of South Carolina where the black revolutionary Harriet Tubman
launched a military campaign to free 750 slaves. About her involvement in social
activism, Smith recalls,

Finding NBFO and other Black feminists gave me the context and support I
needed to claim feminism for myself. It was like coming home. […] About a year
and a half after the NBFO conference I came out as a lesbian and was finally able
to acknowledge my long-hidden desire for other women. My meeting other Black
lesbian feminists made me believe that it was possible to be out, to have a
community, and to survive. I am sure that the reason I have been able to maintain
decades of commitment to the struggle for women’s freedom is that I came to
feminism in a specifically Black feminist milieu.14

In speaking of the black feminist movement as a sociopolitical context that generates
desires and demarcates a field of action, Smith invokes a sense of the political that I treat
in this dissertation as a radical democratic scene to be read for the organizing principles
of liberty and equality and that constitute black women as democratic subjects. Smith’s
memory also expresses a desire for a “home” that comes to have political significance in
her anthology Home Girls. The desire for home, I argue, metaphorizes a desire for
identity and cultural legibility, for which the literature of black women writers accounts.

I derive my understanding of how to read political subjectivity in cultural
productions from Judith Butler’s Giving and Account of Oneself (2005), her
philosophical examination of ethical conduct. Butler understands subjects to emerge
from an ethical scenario in which the subject lacks any knowledge about its moment of

14 Smith, Barbara. “‘Feisty Characters’ and ‘Other People’s Causes’: Memories of White Racism and U.S.
Feminism.” In The Feminist Memoir Project: Voices from Women’s Liberation. Eds. Rachel Blau
formation prior to that scenario. In confrontation with another self that likewise
discovers its own limits of self-knowledge in that ethical scenario, that subject is impelled
to present itself to the other, accounting for its formation via a narrative produced from
the cultural norms that subtend the ethical scenario. Butler then links the ethical scene of
address to the political scene when she considers the power of the other to demand an
account of the self in her analysis of Foucault. The cultural account of the self reveals
the operations of power.

Reading Democracy emphasizes the reading of novels by black women writers as
cultural fictions wherein the characterization of black female protagonists allows us to
examine the historically contingent arrangements of power that contextualize black
women’s subjectivity. Attending to the political logic of democracy while taking up the
black feminist concern with inclusion, I consider what it means to enact black feminism
not as a form of cultural politics but as a critical mode of inquiry. Reading Democracy
ultimately defines democracy the way Barbara Cruikshank does in The Will To
Empower: Democratic Citizens and Other Subjects (1999) as a “strategic zone of
embodiment,” conceptualizing the democratic agent as an effect and instrument of

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16 I rely, here, on a similar notion of democracy toward which Russ Castronovo and Dana D. Nelson
gesture in their edited volume Materializing Democracy: Toward a Revitalized Cultural Politics. (Durham
and London: Duke University Press, 2002), where they describe democracy as a “process and not a
definition,” setting out to re-politicize democracy so that in political analysis, it is not reduced to a
governmental system or a set of institutions but rather genealogically garners its Aristotelian sense as a
political configuration that can be observed as democratic. C. Douglas Lummis similarly describes
democracy as a “performance art,” a “state of being” theoretically promised as an ideal end of a historical
Critchley interestingly invokes a radical sense of democracy in his discussion of Marx’s understanding
of political subjectivity, arguing that “politics is a praxis in a situation that articulates an interstitial
distance from the state.” In Marx’s writings, this distance from the state is “democratic,” by which Critchley
means that it does not constitute a state form, but rather a kind of “true” democracy, which he defines as a
“movement of democratization,” a “manifestation of dissensus.” (114-115, 130). My thanks to Eileen Joy
for this reference.
institutionalized power and thereby attending to the personalization of politics during the sixties movements and the politicality of democracy. This strategic zone of embodiment is orchestrated by the democratic subject’s desire for a home—for cultural legibility as the gateway to political participation—that must be constantly redefined in the process of political action. I call this desire for a provisional black feminist home a democratic desire, which is not a desire for identity as a post-political end in itself but rather for subjectivity—i.e., for political agency and the capacity for self-definition.

**The Legacies of Black Feminist Criticism**

The prescriptive process of black feminist criticism—that is, its process of identifying itself in the academic arena—assumes the character of the radical democratic process of identification. In genealogizing that process, *Reading Democracy* engages a question about the relationship between black feminism and the cultural legibility of black women. Black feminism operates on the assumptions first, that representation in the academy mirrors inclusion in cultural politics and second, that black women cannot be culturally legible either as black or women when they need to be understood as black and women—that is, that they constitute an autonomous political subjectivity. The first assumption constructs a homology between black feminism and black women. By recovering the legacy of a democratic theory for reading black women’s literature from black feminist criticism, this dissertation reopens the question of when black women—as literary characters, political subjects, and cultural participants—matter.

Several scholars have implicitly interpreted the legacy of black feminist thought as the mandate to insert formerly excluded black women writers into our archives, and I question whether black women writers always ought to be included under the banner of
black feminism. To illustrate how the black feminist project of inclusion might be conflated with the project of the black woman writer, I would like to turn to several instances where this conflation unwittingly occurs in contemporary African Americanist scholarship.

In *The Practice of Diaspora* (2003), the methodology of which has had significant influence on my project’s methodology, Brent Hayes Edwards includes a chapter on the Nardal sisters, Jane and Paulette, questioning what it would mean to “theorize a feminist articulation of diaspora.” He takes as his pretext Paulette’s complaint to one of Léopold Senghor’s biographers, Jacques Hymans, that she and Jane were the unacknowledged pioneers of black internationalism and Négritude. Edwards examines gender in black Paris, reading the aesthetic representation of black women—particularly, the cosmopolitan circulation and consumption of the figure of the exotic *doudou*, a sexually available native Antillean woman—as a gendered form of black internationalism. He also reads the Nardal sisters’ writings and their forging a network of artists and intellectuals, later dismissed as little more than a salon, as attempts to “find the space in which the black woman in the metropole can speak” across national, class, and gender difference. This articulation evinces an argumentative move from the fact of the Nardal sisters’ black femaleness, to the instance of their having been excluded from a black internationalist archive, and finally to the assumption that their black internationalist work lends itself to a “feminist articulation of diaspora.” This logical chain reduces

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18 Ibid., 181
feminism to cultural politics, suggesting that a feminist theory accrues in the insertion of black women in an archive. T. Denean Sharpley-Whiting similarly takes up the project of inserting the Nardal sisters’ work in the archive of Négritude as a corrective to male-centered histories of Négritude, taking Paulette Nardal’s complaint to Hymans as one of her critical points of departure, though she does not identify her project as feminist.\(^\text{19}\)

That Edwards does identify his project as a feminist one without accounting for the feminist analytical content of their work, if such content exists, suggests that the feminism of his project is his own and not that of the Nardal sisters. In other words, while the insertion of excluded black women subjects in a black internationalist archive might be understood as a black feminist act, to name the analysis that accrues thereby as feminist is to collapse a contemporary moment of reading onto a past moment of writing. Entitling the chapter “Feminism and L’Internationalisme Noir: Paulette Nardal,” Edwards suggests that his task is a conjunction of feminism and black internationalism—a black feminist project of inclusion—wherein his reading of gender is a reading of cultural politics.

The idea that black feminism happens with the invocation of the black woman as a cultural signifier is a legacy of black feminist criticism that I distinguish from that of its political theory in this dissertation, arguing that black feminist criticism is a mode of analysis that emerged in the context of the sixties social movement politics and positing that not all instances of black women’s radicalism can be called black feminist. This idea counters Guy-Sheftall’s assertion in Words of Fire: An Anthology of African-American Feminist Thought (1995), a compilation of the intellectual writings of black women

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activists and scholars from the 1830s to the 1990s, that the term “feminist” “captures the emancipatory vision and acts of resistance among a diverse group of African American women who attempt in their writings to articulate their understanding of the complex nature of black womanhood, the interlocking nature of the oppressions of black women suffer, and the necessity of sustained struggle in their quest for self-definition, the liberation of black people, and gender equality.”

Guy-Sheftall suggests that the tendency towards self-definition in the work of black women writers explains the cultural politics that both subtends and constitutes the content of their work. In Words of Fire, black feminism as an intellectual tradition clearly names an ethos expressed as a kind of identity politics—a concern for black women’s identity, equated here with the “interlocking nature of the oppressions black women suffer.” The identity politics of the content extends also to the act of writing, wherein the black feminist critic writes from the place of her “‘lived’ experience of critical thinking, reflection, and analysis.”

Concurring with bell hooks’s sense that “we can act [or write] in feminist resistance without ever using the word ‘feminism’,” Guy-Sheftall implies that black feminism happens whenever the black feminist critic invokes black women.

This sentiment is echoed in Michelle Wright’s Becoming Black (2004), a comparative study of the counter-discourse of black philosophers throughout the black

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21 Ibid.

diaspora—namely, W. E. B. DuBois, Frantz Fanon, Aimé Césaire, and Léopold Senghor—to white American and European philosophical texts on race. Wright explains that black male philosophers resisted the racism of texts like Count Arthur de Gobineau’s “Essay on the Inequality of Human Races” but did so in heteropatriarchalist terms, thereby demonstrating that blacks could become subjects within Western civilization. Throughout Wright’s monograph, the principal marker of black male philosopher’s heteropatriarchalism is the absence or marginalization of black women from their texts. “Black women, when they do appear in these texts,” Wright observes, “are background objects and therefore are placed even lower than the white female, who is at least granted some agency.”

Later, in her discussion of Amiri Baraka’s Dutchman, she explains that the “gendered discourse of the Western nation” is one in which “the white woman is evil incarnate” and “the Black woman does not matter.” Wright’s fourth chapter, examining the work of such black feminist writers as Audre Lorde and Carolyn Rodgers, recovers the disappeared black female subject through black feminism. While the merits of Wright’s observations are indisputable, I question the slippage between cultural signifiers and women’s subjectivity—an issue I take up in chapter four of this dissertation—notwithstanding Wright’s thesis that black subjectivity is “that which must be negotiated between the abstract and the real” or, in theoretical terms, between the ideal and the material.”

In other words, Wright interprets the absence of the black woman as a cultural signifier from characteristically masculinist philosophical discourses as evidence

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24 Ibid., 130

25 Ibid., 3, emphasis in the original
of the disappearance of black women’s *subjectivity*. The subtitle of her work is “Creating *Identity* in the African Diaspora,” which raises the question about the relationship between identity (i.e., cultural legibility) and political subjectivity and particularly, whether the invocation of the latter is presumed by the former and vice versa.

*Reading Democracy* considers the attribution of black feminism to writing by and about black women, proceeding from my observation that the implicit equation between black feminism and black women risks an inclusive exclusion of black women writers from discursive traditions other than a late twentieth-century black feminist one. In addition to a political theory for reading black women’s writing, another legacy of black feminist criticism is the retroactive attribution of a black feminist label to black women writers like Zora Neale Hurston, who wrote during the Harlem Renaissance, or Gwendolyn Brooks, Alice Childress, and Ann Petry, who wrote during the early years of the Cold War, as in, for instance, Kevin Gaines’s “From Center to Margin: Internationalism and the Origins of Black Feminism.”

To call these writers black feminists is to re-periodize and decontextualize their works. Black feminism, I am arguing, is a historically contingent mode of analysis. It does not make black women matter but rather reads when their political subjectivity matters, which means that in some instances, they may not matter for black feminist reasons.

That black feminism is an outgrowth of the sixties movements, when black women activists became black feminists engaging not only in social justice projects for equal rights but also in black women’s cultural assertion, means that the question of when black women and black feminism matter is a democratic one. Black feminism garners its

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political content from its analysis of subjectivity. In this dissertation, I define black feminism by its enactment, demonstrating not what it is but where it is in its development. Using anthologies like Smith’s *Home Girls* and Bambara’s *The Black Woman* as nodal points in the course of its development, I determine what it means to do black feminism by attending to the consensus reached by the cadres of writers and critics convened by those texts. I then read the novels of writers excerpted in or referenced by those anthologies according to the black feminist analytical practice implicitly or explicitly outlined in the anthology. The materiality of the anthology, its multi-generic constellation of texts, enables a reading of a black feminist literary critical enactment as opposed to its mere prescription.

My reading of that enactment then disciplines my reading of the novel in the sense that the anthology evinces an implicit organizing principle. By gleaning that principle and applying it to a reading of the novel referenced by that anthology, I read the emergence of black women’s subjectivity from its fictive grounds, or as Spillers would say, its cultural grammar. The anthology, I am arguing, proposes a way of reading the political scene of the novel and the emergence of black women’s subjectivity. The agency of the fictive black woman subject is determined by the political order of her material world, and in that sense I am “reading democracy” by identifying the organizing principles that evince the radical democratic principles of liberty and equality and that constitute the black woman subject by ordering the cultural grammar from which she emerges. The agency of the fictive black woman may have implications for historicized readings of black women in the sociopolitical contexts of literary works, and this is the project that Smith and other black feminist critics ventured to outline in their critical
prescriptions. I am arguing, then, that black feminist critical enactments are democratic enactments that explain how black women’s subjectivity emerged in 1970, when the signifier “black woman” was first applied to women of color.

Each chapter of the four chapters in this dissertation proceeds as a discursive telescoping of questions raised by the previous chapter. In this introduction, I have posited that black feminist criticism has a genealogy, arguing that it is not reducible to a conception of academic identity politics but rather must be defined by its enactments, its process of defining itself, that the four chapters of this study together genealogize. Chapter one attempts to define black feminist literary criticism in terms of those enactments, revealing the relationship between black feminist literary criticism and an understanding of black women’s political subjectivity.

More specifically, chapter one, “Politicizing the Content, Anthologizing the Form: Black Feminism and Radical Democracy,” examines the discursive homology that accrues in Smith’s early writings between the subjectivities of the black feminist scholar, the black woman creative writer, and the black female protagonist of literary texts. Reading the literary text as a representational vehicle that illustrates the political common ground between the black feminist scholar and the black woman writer—that is, the inter-articulation between the fictive context and the academic and sociopolitical context of the critic—I suggest that the literary text reflects a political and representational “logic of content.” This logic is a form or organizing principle that orders the social context as well as the discursive matter of the literary text. This ordered social and discursive matter in turn comprises the content of subjectivity. I conceive of subjectivity in the radical democratic and psychoanalytic-inspired sense of the citizen-subject’s multiple and
interconnected social identifications that are politically negotiable and culturally accountable. I argue that the logic of content of the literary text mimics the radical democratic constitution of liberal democracy, wherein a concealed locus of power anchors the democratic principles of liberty and equality, which in turn organize various social planes of difference. I read this logic in Smith’s anthology Home Girls and derive a theory for reading representations of black women’s political subjectivity from Smith’s writings during the late 1970s and 1980s. In particular, I determine how the identity politics of her early writings lends itself to the radical democratic mechanism of coalition politics in the anthology, harmonizing the process of identification and the making of political solidarities, or “homes,” with the perpetual process of identitarian recreation in “the streets.”

Chapter two, “The Soul of Subjectivity: Toni Cade Bambara’s Literary Coalitions,” shifts from the mid-1980s to 1970, the moment not only when “black woman” was first used in reference to women of color but also the year of Bambara’s The Black Woman’s publication, which enacted a black feminist cultural analysis without explicitly naming it as such. I extend the conceptual geographies of “home” and “streets” with an analysis of Bambara’s black feminist cultural analysis in the “streets” as opposed to the depoliticized practice of identity politics in the critic’s academic “home.” I theorize African American experience as a kind of cultural meaning ascribed by literary texts that describes the position of black subjects in the “strategic zone of embodiment” known as radical democracy, as Cruikshank describes it. Moreover, I read Bambara’s The Black Woman as the political subtext of her subsequent novel The Salt Eaters (1980), both texts illustrating black feminist cultural analysis as a practice that fundamentally democratizes
black cultural and revolutionary nationalism to accord with the liberal constitutional framework of the United States. I also observe that Bambara’s anthology registers the critical reception of Daniel Patrick Moynihan’s infamous Moynihan Report of 1965 among African American journalists and scholars who understood Moynihan to be mischaracterizing African American working class families and invoking a racist stereotype about black women as castrating matriarchs. By reading this reception across several essays in the anthology and its echo in Bambara’s novel, I demonstrate how Bambara launches not only a critique of gender politics in the black nationalist movement but also a means of social transformation by delineating a structural tie between cultural analysis and the ongoing process of political identification.

Chapter three, “‘A Wide-Angled Lens’: Black Feminist Historiography and the Textual Image,” returns to the critical reception of the Moynihan Report addressed in chapter two, arguing that the African Americanist scholarship produced after its release registers a misreading of Moynihan’s document and that the Moynihan Report actually comprises two texts: the text of its critical reception and the polemic of The Negro Family: A Case for National Action. I argue that the document identifies the problem of blackness as a problem of ethno-national exclusion, imagining the possibility of a national home for disenfranchised black subjects through their political inclusion. The document suggests that the family is not simply a cultural form but a unit of political common ground that connects subjects to the state through a liberalizing mechanism. Historicizing black cultural particularity in relation to the political controversy sparked by The Negro Family, I read Toni Morrison’s The Bluest Eye (1970) and Mary Helen Washington’s anthologies Black-Eyed Susans and Midnight Birds as texts that address a
black community that would have become unrecognizable as culturally black had democracy been fully accomplished.

Chapter four, “The Diasporic Bridge: Black Feminism and the Politics of Representation,” provides an answer to the condition of blackness defined in chapter three as ethno-national exclusion and limited political inclusion, conceiving of national belonging as suspended in diaspora. Chapter four finds a home for subjects of the African diaspora in a democratized and deterritorialized diasporic context, imagining radical democratic space as a queer one that genders and ethnicizes black subjects into African American subjects. Proceeding from Michele Stephens’s sense in Black Empire (2005) that the transnational context of black empire narratives are orchestrated by the black diasporic subject’s longing for both transnational mobility and belonging to a nation-state as well as her implicit characterization of desire as feminine and the agency of imperial consolidation in the nation-state as masculine, I extend her analysis in a study of Paule Marshall’s oeuvre, which metaphorizes heterosexual intimacy in politically salient ways. I read Guy-Sheftall’s Sturdy Black Bridges in conversation with Marshall’s works—the anthology excerpting a short story version of her 1969 novel The Chosen Place, The Timeless People—to enact a black feminist reading of diaspora. Although the anthology does not explicitly call itself a black feminist one, I suggest that beyond its concern for the image of black women, Sturdy Black Bridges advocates a black feminist mode of analysis in terms of the “politics of intimacy,” a phrase taken from Spillers’s essay of the same title. Spillers explains in a reading of James Baldwin’s novels how characterization reveals the cultural grammar that underwrites gendered political subjectivity. Characterization reveals this cultural grammar as a representation of the
affective balance of power—i.e., the politics of intimacy—of masculinized and feminized subjects in heterosexual relation. Placing the inclusionary objectives of the black feminist critic in conversation with the aesthetic priorities of the black woman writer, the anthology inter-articulates the activities of aesthetic representation and critical engagement through the politics of intimacy.

In her 1989 essay “But What Do We Think We’re Doing Anyway: The State of Black Feminist Criticism(s) or My Version of a Little Bit of History,” Barbara Christian outlined the development of black feminist criticism and a contemporary moment of debate about how black feminist criticism ought to be defined. Beginning with the appearance of Washington’s “Black Women Image Makers” in the August 1974 issue of Black World and ending with Hazel Carby’s intellectual history of black women in Reconstructing Womanhood (1987), Christian described the tradition of black feminist criticism as concerned not only with developing a political theory of black women’s writing but also an open-ended process of prescribing a critical practice. Reflecting on her 1984 collection of essays Black Feminist Criticism, Christian explained that the form of the book “was based on the idea of process as a critical aspect of an evolving feminist approach—that is, a resistance to art as artifact, to ideas as fixed, and a commitment to open-endedness, possibility, fluidity—to change,”27 which she felt reflected the work of the writers she studied.

Christian’s intuitive sense about the link between a political theory of black women writers and the process of literary critical development reflects the self-reflexivity of any disciplinary knowledge project forged in social movements. Christian’s observations resonate with what Donald E. Pease and Robyn Wiegman would later articulate in their introduction to *The Future of American Studies* (2002), unburying the discipline’s “futures” in the intellectual histories that attempt to construct a coherent past. Wiegman similarly observes in her introduction to *Women’s Studies on Its Own* (2002) that by producing linear histories about their knowledge practices, reading the present onto the past, disciplines like Women’s Studies very conveniently sustain an elusive object of study. Her volume resists the desire for a coherent disciplinary past, tracing the difference between current institutional projects and their social movement foundations and thereby tracing the process of feminist intellectual formation in genealogical fashion.

*Reading Democracy* is animated by such a methodology, but it does not tell the genealogy. Rather it presumes that genealogy, understanding historical time not as a linear trajectory but rather as the sedimented layers of genealogy. It also traces an archive, much in the way Edwards does in *The Practice of Diaspora*—and, of course, Michel Foucault in *The Archaeology of Knowledge* (1972)—in which he proceeds from an etymologized deployment of “diaspora” as a term of analysis and then excavates its uses in an archive, which he articulates as a “discursive system that governs the possibilities, forms, appearance, and regularity of particular statements, objects, and

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28 This articulation of time is inspired by Edward’s sense that etymologies “provide a sedimentation of the social construction of linguistic meaning over time,” explaining why usages “become necessary at a certain historical conjuncture” in “The Uses of Diaspora.” *Social Text* 66, 19 (2001): 53.
practices.” In my project, black feminism presumes a critical genealogy as opposed to
an etymological one. My study proceeds meta-critically: The anthologies present the
means of excavation, signaling a critical field that is not entirely contained by the text,
including interviews with authors and critical essays not published in the anthologies.
Although the anthologies I study in this dissertation have distinct publication histories
and convene singular collective voices, I do not argue that they constitute categorically
distinct sediments of discourse. Neither is my study an encyclopedic effort to account for
temporalized variations in a discursive system. Rather I use the anthologies as indicators
of the critical genealogies and black feminist praxes to be exhumed. Throughout Reading
Democracy, several genealogized concepts appear: namely, “authenticity” in chapter two,
as well as “race,” “political liberalism,” and “motherhood/matriarchy” in chapter three.
These genealogies aid my analysis of critical terms, particularly when these terms are
mired in normative ideologies. What my study reveals is that archives have a desire—
what Foucault would call an “ideal genesis”—and for black feminist criticism, self-
reflexive as it is about its own prescriptive processes, that desire is radically democratic.

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29 Edwards, 7
CHAPTER ONE

Politicizing the Content, Anthologizing the Form: Black Feminism and Radical Democracy

“Once home was a long way off, a place I had never been to but knew out of my mother’s mouth. I only discovered its latitudes when Carriacou was no longer my home. There it is said that the desire to lie with other women is a drive from the mother’s blood.”

--Audre Lorde, Zami: A New Spelling of My Name (1982)

Such contemporary anthologies as the late Winston Napier’s *African-American Literary Theory: A Reader* (2000) and Angelyn Mitchell’s *Within the Circle: An Anthology of African American Literary Criticism from the Harlem Renaissance to the Present* (1994) identify black feminist criticism as a distinct canonical development—a sociopolitical response in letters to the entrenchment of liberal ideologies after World War II. Napier’s anthology in particular suggests a literary critical history of sorts, mapping a trajectory of black feminist thought within an African American literary tradition, beginning with black feminist activist-critic Barbara Smith’s seminal essay “Toward a Black Feminist Criticism” (1977) in the second part of the volume. The volume’s third part temporally shifts from the 1970s to the 1980s, charting the development of black feminist theory from black feminist criticism and featuring articles by Deborah E. McDowell, Hazel V. Carby, Shirley Ann Williams, and Valerie Smith that, in part, responded to Barbara Smith’s essay and proposed new agendas for black feminist scholarly production.

Originally written for the second volume of the lesbian feminist literary magazine *Conditions*, Smith’s 1977 manifesto issued a rallying cry for a practice that, by her standards, had yet to emerge. The essay called attention to an unrecognized, unpublished, and altogether un-actualized consciousness and provided an analytical
framework for approaching work by black women writers. Smith noted that black female critics writing about black women’s creative enterprise had not done so from a coherent feminist perspective and disparaged an entire “literary world,” including a white academic establishment, black male critics, white feminist critics, and black female critics and writers, that had not acknowledged either the voice of a distinct black feminist consciousness or its capacity to be “politically transforming.”

Presupposing the inter-articulation between literary productions and their sociopolitical contexts and promulgating a “political theory whose assumptions could be used in the study of Black women’s art,” Smith deemed the artistry of black women writers as fertile ground for politically transformative knowledge production. By virtue of the black feminist literary critic’s involvement in the social movement politics of the 1960s and 1970s, her literary analysis constituted the means by which the work of black women writers could be kept “real and remembered” as politically viable art. Smith described the approach of black feminist criticism as an outgrowth of the critic’s “assumption that Black women writers constitute an identifiable literary tradition,” a “commitment to exploring how both sexual and racial politics and Black and female identity are inextricable elements in Black women’s writings,” and the performance of “the breadth of her familiarity with these writers” that would demonstrate that “thematically, stylistically, aesthetically, and conceptually Black women writers manifest common approaches to the act of creating literature as a direct result of the specific


2 Ibid., 134

3 Ibid., 133
political, social, and economic experience they have been obliged to share.” Politicizing
the work of literary analysis, the black feminist critic would presume the existence of a
fully constituted though largely unrecognized tradition of black women’s writing and
usher it into the US cultural mainstream.

In 1980, McDowell revisited Smith’s project, critiquing its rather imprecise
critical practice as an attempt to materialize the aesthetics of a tradition. Questioning the
possibility of identifying the common material existence of black women solely in the
technical craft of literary works, McDowell proposed a less reductive approach to literary
analysis, one that would expose “the conditions under which literature is produced,
published, and reviewed.” Both Smith and McDowell undertook the project of
examining the materiality of black women’s political subjectivity. Whereas Smith
understood the literary techniques and tropic commonalities that accrue across the
tradition of black women’s writing to index the material context of black women’s
subjectivity, for McDowell that materiality was borne in the discursive contexts of
literary productions and the institutional context of the black female scholar herself. In
McDowell’s model, the black feminist critic would not presuppose a unified tradition but
rather analyze the context of an individual text for the discursive variables of race, class,

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4 Ibid., 137

5 Specifically, McDowell took issue with the notion that black women writers employ a “common
approach” or “language” in their art, explaining about Smith’s identification of common cultural elements
in black women’s writing, “While these folk elements [of rootworking, herbal medicine, conjure, and
midwifery] certainly do appear in the work of the writers, they also appear in the works of certain Black
male writers, a fact that Smith omits. If Black women writers use these elements differently from male
writers, such a distinction must be made before one can effectively articulate the basis of a black feminist
aesthetic.” “New Directions for Black Feminist Criticism” In African American Literary Theory: A Reader,
169.

6 Ibid., 172
and gender.\(^7\) Retaining the centrality of the black female critic to define black feminist criticism, she used the term “simply to refer to black female critics who analyze the works of black female writers from a feminist or political perspective. But the term can also apply to any criticism written by a Black woman regardless of her subject or perspective—a book written by a male from a feminist or political perspective, a book written by a Black woman or about black women authors in general or any writings by women.”\(^8\) Like Smith, McDowell understood the space of scholarly production to engage the political subjectivity of the black female scholar via her intellect. Indeed, McDowell’s concern with the material context of literary texts extended even to the institutional context of the black woman scholar whose analyses worked to correct literary history’s “sins of omission.”\(^9\)

For both McDowell and Smith, more so than for Williams, Carby, and Valerie Smith, the discursive enactment of black feminism on the part of the black female scholar was a form of identity politics that imagined the insertion of black women’s subjectivity in literary history as the fulfillment of participatory democracy. This conscious enactment of identity politics on the part of the black female scholar accounts for the difference between *black feminist criticism* and *black feminist theory*. The latter largely renounced the politics of the scholar and emphasized the identification of a political

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\(^7\) Shirley Ann Williams later called for an expansion of black feminist criticism to the analysis of literary productions by black male writers in “Some Implications of Womanist Theory” (1986) in *African American Literary Theory*, 218. And in 1989, Valerie Smith performed her variation of black feminist theory by examining “representations of black women’s lives through techniques of analysis which suspend the variables of race, class, and gender in mutually interrogative relation.” “Black Feminist Theory and the Representation of the ‘Other.’” In *African American Literary Theory*, 376.

\(^8\) McDowell, 171

\(^9\) Ibid., 167
theory of subjectivity in black women’s writing—a theory that was complicated by the material complexity of black women’s subjectivity.

Black feminist criticism, then, yielded two projects: an identity politics of knowledge production and a political theory of subjectivity. This chapter demarcates the discursive intersection between these projects by locating where the political theory of subjectivity consummates its liberal democratic impetus. In inaugurating black feminist criticism in 1977, Smith began mounting not only a black feminist literary theory but also a political theory across the trajectory of her writings. In the language of the social liberalism advanced by the black and women’s liberation movements of the sixties, which spoke of culture and the “personal” as sites of political contestation, Smith advocated “equal” access to the publishing market for black women writers and “equal” critical attention to their work. In novels illustrating black female subjectivity, Smith not only identified a vehicle for enacting identity politics in the academy and publishing market but also a strategy for imagining a participatory democracy on the way towards a liberal democratic schema. Invoking vastly different conceptions of equality and liberty from those of participatory democracy, liberal democracy entails a configuration of the political terrain that ultimately cannot accommodate participatory democracy as an end itself. In her work, Smith shifts from a conception of identity politics as a reformist and depoliticized aim to a conception of identity politics as a radical democratic strategy.

Radical Democracy’s Logic of Content

The radical democratic architecture of the liberal constitutional framework of the United States complicates the project of this chapter. What such political philosophers as Dante Germino and Claude Lefort called a “revival” of contemporary political theory as a
tradition of critical inquiry in the last half of the twentieth century—a tradition that in part explains contemporary political strategies in relation to the historical phenomenon of democratic revolution—provides a critical language that clarifies the terms of an emergent black feminist political theory. Lefort along with such political theorists as Chantal Mouffe and Ernesto Laclau have not only examined the nature of modern democratic politics but have also marked its theoretical “radicalization,” describing how liberal democracy avoids the totalitarian pitfalls of social liberalism on the left and neo-conservative pluralism on the right. For these theorists, the radical nature of democracy is not constituted by any absolutist principle but rather is to be found in our consciousness of the contingent grounds of its emergence and the constitutive preservation of its indeterminacy as the impossibility of any final closure to our democratic practices.

This radical indeterminacy characterizes the tension between a liberal logic of pluralism and difference and the democratic concern with identity and equivalence.

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13 Mouffe, 13

14 Ibid., 14. See also Laclau, Ernesto and Chantal Mouffe. *Hegemony and Socialist Strategy: Towards a Radical Democratic Politics*. Trans. Winston Moore and Paul Cummack. (London: Verso, 1985), where in chapter four Laclau and Mouffe explain that absolute equality and pure difference are neither politically possible nor viable and that radical democracy harmonizes the demand for pluralism and equality through a logic of equivalence that links the differentiated space of social relations.
Radical democracy,\textsuperscript{15} Mouffe argues, is the most viable option for the Left in the struggle against absolutism and neo-liberalism and involves the extension of “the principles of equality and liberty to an increasing number of social relations.”\textsuperscript{16} This objective is not guaranteed by a communitarian imposition but rather ensured by the agonistic struggle of citizens who, by definition, assume an identity within a political community.\textsuperscript{17} The political identity of the citizen, Mouffe goes on to explain, cannot be understood apart from his/her other social relations.\textsuperscript{18} In a radical democratic schema, the citizen is not understood as a complete and stable political identity that is susceptible to essentializing rhetoric, as in a liberal reformist schema; and the political agent is not the bourgeois individual who possesses natural rights prior to entering the social matrix but rather constitutes the locus of articulation “of an ensemble of subject positions, constructed within specific discourses and always precariously and temporarily sutured at the intersection of those subject positions.”\textsuperscript{19} In the dissolution of the public and private spheres, democratic rights are achieved through the logic of equivalence between subject positions that are equally impacted by those rights. The ideal of radical democracy considers not only the contradictory claims that engender social conflict but also the

\begin{itemize}
  \item \textsuperscript{15} Describing the historical project of radical democracy, C. Douglas Lummis explains, “[D]emocracy is not the name of any particular arrangement of political or economic institutions. Rather, it is a situation that political or economic institutions may or may not help to bring about. It describes an ideal, not a method for achieving it.” \textit{Radical Democracy}, (Ithaca and London: Cornell University Press, 1996), 22.
  \item \textsuperscript{16} Ibid., 3 Lefort similarly explains in his discussion of human rights that “the survival and extension of the public space is a political question. I mean by that that it is the question that lies at the heart of democracy.” (43).
  \item \textsuperscript{17} Mouffe, 4
  \item \textsuperscript{18} Ibid., 5
  \item \textsuperscript{19} Ibid., 10
\end{itemize}
“destructuration of the social identities that the conflict would bring about.”

As Laclau concludes in his explication of particularistic political identities in reference to the concept of “radical constructivism,” social identities necessarily entail “construction, and not simply recognition,” whereby construction can be understood in terms of “the psychoanalytic category of identification, with its explicit assertion of a lack at the root of any identity: one needs to identify with something because there is an originary and insurmountable lack of identity.”

The citizen’s participation in politics entails the precarious construction of a political identity as well as the consolidation of identificatory processes in these identities. Though guided by a vast array of democratic principles, radical democracy exposes the irreducible processes of social and political identifications, political alliances, and conflict.

In reading Smith’s and McDowell’s prescriptions for black feminist criticism as ways of wedding the identity of the scholar to a political theory, Smith’s approach can be distinguished from McDowell’s in the way it attempted to materialize the political. In proposing that scholars analyze the sociopolitical context of emergence of individual literary texts, McDowell called for a radical constructivist analysis of sorts, one that accounted for the precarious inter-articulation of ideologies of race, class, and gender. Smith’s approach, in contrast, imagined a stable political domain encoded in a unified tradition of black women’s writing and a fixed black female identity. This essentialist sense of identity anticipated a vision of participatory democracy that de-politicized identity and difference. By accounting for the pluralism of black women’s identifications, McDowell’s definition anticipated an account for radical democracy.

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20 Laclau, 3

21 Ibid.
which yields not equality per se but a structure of social equivalence and political solidarity.

In its attention to individual literary texts, particularly novels, McDowell’s definition revealed a political theory within the text itself. In illustrating the constitution of black women’s subjectivity, the literary text evinces a *logic of content*—a mechanism by which the ordering principle of constitution is concealed but materialized as content.22

In the literary text, this ordering principle transforms the discursive “matter” of race, gender, and class difference into literary content, which in turn effectuates the ordering principle. This way of thinking the materiality of political subjectivity mimics the constitution of democracy. In Lefort’s description of democratic revolution, a logic of content replaces a locus of sovereign power, and the political scene is revealed, not in what we call political activity, but in the double movement whereby the mode of institution of society appears and is obscured. It appears in the sense that the process whereby society is ordered and unified across its divisions becomes visible. It is obscured in the sense that the locus of politics (the locus in which parties compete and in which a general agency of power takes shape and is reproduced) becomes defined as particular, while the principle which generates the overall configuration is concealed.23

In Lefort’s account, political activity is symptomatic of the sociopolitical processes (i.e., identifications) by which political identities are constituted, and the totality of the social body has no unifying identity apart from the inter-articulation of varying social planes of difference. The experience of democracy avoids becoming totalitarian by supplanting the place of the sovereign with an identifiable “locus of politics” that conceals the democratic

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23 Lefort, 11
principles that order the social. A radical democratic black feminist criticism, then, exposes the sociopolitical context and identificatory logic of content out of which the works of black women writers—and the writers themselves—emerge.

By 1990, Smith was able to apply her critical framework to an analysis not of the formalistic properties of black women’s writing but rather its subject matter: the representation of black lesbian experience. She attributed the efficacy of her approach to the outgrowth of works by black lesbian writers since 1977. The results, however, were no less reductionist than her reading of Toni Morrison’s *Sula* (1973) in “Toward a Black Feminist Criticism,” in which she read the intimate friendship between the titular character and Nel as effectually, though not actually, lesbian. Retaining the logic of the 1977 essay, she assumed in “The Truth That Never Hurts: Black Lesbians in Fiction in the 1980s” that a black lesbian feminist reading would expose a black lesbian feminist content—an approach that presupposes that black lesbian feminist content is already constituted in literary language. Indeed, for Smith, the language of works by black women writers evinced “the miraculously rich coalescing of form and content,”24 where the language presumably is formalistically political and expresses political content. This fusion of form and content is distinct from the logic of content, for in the latter, form is not fused with content but rather can be expressed *in terms of* content and vice versa. Form is not a container but rather an ordering principle, and the logic of content cannot so much be created as observed or performed.

Smith imagined the political identification of the black female writer and critic as an essential consciousness, explaining that a “Black woman writer’s relationship to

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24 Smith In *African American Literary Theory*, 137.
feminism affects the themes she might choose to write about” and that a “Black woman critic’s relationship to feminism determines the kind of criticism she is willing and able to do.”

25 She analyzed Alice Walker’s The Color Purple, Gloria Naylor’s The Women of Brewster Place, and Audre Lorde’s Zami: A New Spelling of My Name for their “authenticity” and “verisimilitude” of literary representation as the expression of the author’s relationship to “the politics of Black Lesbian experience.”

26 By verisimilitude, she meant the “true-to-life” depiction of black lesbian “experience” while authenticity described the reflection of a writer’s desire for a black lesbian self-certainty, a “characterization which reflects a relationship to self that is genuine, integrated, and whole.”

27 To some extent, these terms were inter-articulated: The writer’s authentic desire for self-certainty would be materialized in verisimilitudinous literary content.

Smith also suggested that the black woman writer’s identity is directly correlated to her political consciousness and the subject matter of her work and that the black woman writer of the 1970s and early 1980s would have experienced the dearth of representations of black lesbians as a creative necessity she was destined to fulfill.

In Smith’s schema, the concept of experience bore a positivist assertion, as when she proclaimed, “I believe that the most accurate and developed theory, including literary theory, comes from practice, from the experience of activism […] I do not believe it is possible to arrive at fully developed and useful Black feminist criticism by merely


26 Ibid., 225

27 Ibid., 222
reading about feminism.”

Activism, here, is figured as an experience of “real” politics rather than as the symptom of the activist’s political identifications or even a means of effectuating feminist principles.

The opposition of “activism” to the act of reading registers the flattening of the political identity of white women academics, the bulk of whom she flatly accused, in ostensibly racist terms, of bearing merely a tenuous relationship to women’s issues via Women’s Studies. For Smith, political identities reified historically fixed political relations of struggle, and radical black feminist practice entailed the taking up of an agenda that would benefit the woman with the most complicated geometry of oppression. In her 1984 article “Between a Rock and a Hard Place: Black and Jewish Women,” Smith argued that no one is guiltless of oppressive ideological sentiment.

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28 Ibid., 218

29 Ibid., 217

30 In her 1976 article “Notes For Yet Another Paper on Black Feminism, Or Will the Real Enemy Please Stand Up?” Smith conceives of identity in slightly more radical terms. Explaining that feminism implores us to examine the beliefs that subtext our social conduct, she defines an oppressor as “the person(s) who takes away your freedom,” whether or not they share the same political identity as the oppressed. In fact, “the identity of the oppressors we face in our day-to-day lives is fluid and constantly changes.” In Bethel, Lorraine and Barbara Smith, eds. Conditions: Five, The Black Woman’s Issue. 2 (1979): 124, 127.

31 In her notes from April 1977 on the “function of criticism on the impact of art,” Smith interestingly jotted, “The accretion of manifold oppressions is geometric, not arithmetic.” Barbara Smith Papers, Lesbian Herstory Archives, Box 2, Folder 10. She defined feminism in totalizing terms as “the political theory and practice that struggles to free all women: women of color, working-class women, poor women, disabled women, lesbians, old women—as well as white, economically privileged heterosexual women. Anything less that this vision of total freedom is not feminism, but merely female self-aggrandizement.” “Racism and Women’s Studies” in All the women Are White, All the Blacks are Men, But Some of Us Are Brave: Black Women’s Studies, ed. Gloria Hull, Patricia Bell Scott, and Barbara Smith. (New York: Feminist Press, 1981), 49. She alternatively defined feminism as a practice that “articulates political opposition to the subordination of women as women, whether that subordination is ascribed by law, imposed by social convention, or inflicted by individual men and women. Feminism also offers alternatives to existing unequal relations of gender power, and these alternatives have formed the agendas for feminist movements.” “Feminisms.” In The Reader’s Companion to U.S. Women’s History, Wilma Mankiller, Gwendolyn Mink, Marysa Navarro, Barbara Smith, and Gloria Steinem, eds. (Boston and New York: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1998), 192.
“Classism, racism, homophobia, anti-Semitism, and sexism,” she explained, “float in the air, are embedded in the very soil.” She explained that political identities index the oppressive ideologies by which we are constituted and that we may unwittingly, though not innocently, enact against one another. One can be only “actively anti-racist” rather than decidedly non-racist. White women scholars, then, appear to register the transhistorical struggle of black feminist critics, and particularly, black lesbians, for institutional recognition. Major trade presses, rather than being guided by book market trends, appear homophilic for not accepting the work of black lesbian writers for publishing and facilitating the expansion of their audience. In reducing the identity of non-black, male, and non-lesbian academics to the oppressive ideologies with which identity politics contends, Smith anticipated a participatory democracy that condemned antagonism among different identities with little possibility of building political solidarity across social differences. This schema not only fixes identity but also stabilizes relations of struggle.


33 Ibid., 71

34 The same true for black male and female scholars who “ignore Lesbian existence entirely” (219).

35 In an unpublished paper entitled “Black Women and Publishing” (1978), Smith bitterly remarks that publishing “is a business run by white-males. This white-male establishment prints what it wants to print, which means that very little written by women and Black people, let alone Black women, ever surfaces. […] Because Black women have experienced such massive oppression, our creations describing these experiences do little to shore up the ‘American Dream.’ Our exclusion from the publishing industry, literary and academic establishments and the other media is no accident and can only be understood if the function of the media as a political tool is also comprehended.” Barbara Smith Papers, Lesbian Herstory Archives, Box 1, Folder 17.
This is not to say that her observations about the publishing market were entirely unfounded: In “Toward a Black Feminist Criticism” Smith pointed out where in their work such feminist scholars as Elaine Showalter, Patricia Meyer Spacks, and Ellen Moers conflated the political categories of “black” and “woman” or underrepresented the works of Third World women writers,\(^3\) though she quite problematically did not attribute this to the fact that the movement to get lesbians of color in print was a “‘new’ literary development, made possible by alternative, primarily Lesbian/feminist presses.”\(^4\) In her unpublished essay “Black Women and Publishing” (1978), Smith interestingly rephrased the problem of non-recognition: “Merely adding one or two Third World women writers to a thick anthology or a course […] is not sufficient. Students still get the impression that women’s literature is white and that black women are exceptions. The goal should be to integrate the writing of Third World women to achieve parity.”\(^5\) The lack of representative parity between black lesbian and non-black, non-lesbian writers in literary critical studies thus indexed the newness of black feminism as a moment in democratic practice. And the complaint against the “racism,” “heterosexism,” and “homophobia” of the literary establishment, when not overtly espoused, served as part of the apparatus that grounded the political demand for recognition.

In spite of its liberal reformist logic, Smith’s essay of 1990 was on the verge of articulating a radical logic of content in reference to the role of the feminist movement in

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4. Smith, In Wild Women in the Whirlwind, 220. An article covering the controversy sparked by Smith’s presentation at Howard University’s fourth annual National Conference of Afro-American Writers in which she spoke on the panel “Black Women Writers and Feminism” notes, “The relative newness of a Black feminist movement means that many people are ignorant that it even exists or are unfamiliar with the special concerns that make many Black feminists want to bond together.” Eklund, Janice. “Black Lesbian Feminist Speaks Out.” The Blade. (June 1978).
the reception of works by women writers. Just as she juxtaposed the literary focus of a broad feminist movement in its recovery of works by women authors and the black feminist literary critical tradition in the essay of 1977, Smith cited black feminist activism as the necessary “precondition” for the growth of black feminist criticism. Her sense of the relation between political activism and literary criticism posited the former as the totalizing grounds on which the latter was constituted. But these juxtapositions ultimately exposed the democratic principles that subtend all of these phenomena. The “feminist movement” can, then, be understood as an historical moment in which simultaneous and particular struggles for inclusion, recognition, and representative equity were waged on behalf of women’s rights.

“The Truth That Never Hurts” also registered a shift in Smith’s vision between the late 1970s and the mid- to late 1980s about the democratic aims of her writings. By contextualizing the black feminist scholar’s identity politics in the framework of the reformist goals of black feminist activism, Smith anticipated not the equality of participatory democracy but a radical democratic schema of equivalence. The direct correlation, in Smith’s view, between the way a writer politically identifies and the subject matter of his/her work, between the political identity of the scholar and her critical agenda, between the identity of the editor and the kinds of creative works he publishes applies also to the relation between identity and ideology. Describing how the

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39 Smith explains, “In speaking about the current situation of Black women writers, it is important to remember that the existence of a feminist movement was an essential precondition to the growth of feminist literature, criticism, and women’s studies, which focused at the beginning almost entirely upon investigations of literature. The fact that a parallel Black feminist movement has been much slower in evolving cannot but have impact upon the situation of Black women writers and artists and explains in part why during this very same period we have been so ignored.” In African American Literary Theory, 133-134.

40 Smith, In Wild Women in the Whirlwind, 213.
work of black lesbian writers lends itself to black feminist analysis, Smith explained, “For historical, political, and ideological reasons, a writer’s consciousness about Lesbianism bears a direct relationship to her consciousness about feminism.” The implication, here, is that the ideological identifications of black lesbian women are activated by the reformist goals of feminism, though Smith presumed that all black lesbian women identified similarly. While this view strategically essentialized reformist ideologies much in the same way that Smith posited the atmospheric properties of oppressive ideologies, shaming the presumed oppressor into fulfilling the political demands of the oppressed, it also suggested that competing ideologies reveal a political scene divided and differentiated according to competing democratic visions.

Speaking of lesbianism as an ideology that is separable from the identity of black lesbian women, Smith implied that identities are composed of indeterminate ideological identifications. Conceiving of an ideology of lesbianism as conducive to a feminist consciousness, Smith reconciled a vision of participatory democracy to the radical identificatory technology of liberal democracy in which social transformation is achieved by remapping political solidarities. In this sense, Smith’s editing and publishing work, in contrast to her literary criticism, materialized democratic principles in more pointedly radical democratic terms (i.e., as forms revealed by the processes of identification). In the essay of 1990, Smith attributed the availability of literary material by black lesbian writers to the outpouring of anthologies featuring their work—among them, her own edited volume *Home Girls: A Black Feminist Anthology* (1984), published by her co-founded Kitchen Table: Women of Color Press.

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41Ibid., 216, my emphasis
The Anthology as Radical Democracy

The inception of *Home Girls* was a special issue of *Conditions* featuring work by black feminist writers. Smith notes in the introduction to *Home Girls* that *Conditions: Five, The Black Woman’s Issue*, co-edited with fellow black feminist Lorraine Bethel, was the most widely distributed collection of black feminist writing in the US in 1979, setting a record in feminist and small press publishing by selling three thousand copies in the first three weeks following distribution and another ten thousand of the first and second printings. Smith understood by the success of the issue that “clearly people not only wanted such a collection, but they *needed* it to fill a tremendous gap,” particularly in the classroom where the issue was used nationwide. Indeed, the anthology would fulfill the needs of those who shared Smith’s own pedagogical need in 1978 for an anthology with an explicitly black feminist focus, one that would frame the kinds of oppression she targeted in her activist work.

This perceived necessity raises the question of what the black feminist anthology has to teach us. Smith solicited articles from selected writers, intending to “represent Black feminism at the present time” and “retain its literary focus.” This “black feminist” and “literary” focus does not constitute the anthology as activism per se—a fact that differentiates the genre of black feminist literary criticism from that of the black feminist anthology. In its treatment of definably black lesbian representations, literary

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43 Ibid.


criticism produces black feminist ideology. In “Black Women and Publishing,” Smith suggested that all kinds of cultural media serve as ideological “tools.” She noted about Kitchen Table Press that it “does indeed play a role in making political change […] I have had time to experience the difference it makes for women of color to control a significant means of communication, a way to shape ideology into a foundation for practical social and political change.” Reformist ideology, in this sense, is the performance of political principles with the aim of effecting social change. In contrast, Smith’s objective in Home Girls was to reveal a principle, one that in comparison to the critical frameworks employed in other enterprises of its kind, would be characteristically black feminist.

In this iteration of black feminist practice, Smith does not name the feminist movement as a totality unto itself as the precondition for her volume but rather the process of building the movement to which her anthology would contribute: “Home Girls has been a long time coming. I am thinking not so much of the two years from its conception in mid-1981 to its publication in 1983, but of the far longer span it has taken to prepare a space for its existence, the years devoted to building consciousness and a movement so that a book like this one becomes inevitable.” Smith did not set the anthology’s contribution to the movement against the oppressive ideologies that goaded her in her grassroots activism but rather named it as “the simultaneity of oppression.”

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48 Ibid., Home Girls, 1.

49 Ibid., xxxiv
Home Girls performs this nominalization, not by naming its enemies or ranking oppressions but rather foregrounding the dispossessed. In reference to identity, the principle of simultaneity implies the multiplicity and fluidity of ideological sentiments. In fact, Smith depersonalizes oppression, stating earlier in the introduction where she debunks the popular myth that equates feminism with man-hating, “It is important to make a distinction between attacking institutionalized, systemic oppression (the goal of any serious progressive movement) and attacking men as individuals.” 50 This view strikingly inverses that of her literary critical works, where she named political identities as oppressors of black lesbians, and serves just as strategic a purpose.

Smith champions the principle of the simultaneity of oppressions for helping to “create a political atmosphere particularly conducive to coalition building.” 51 Coalition politics describes the solidarity of feminists across political identities. It entails self-examination rather than confession. Smith assumes the posture of the former when she grants, in reference to the “necessity” of coalitions, “[T]here has been the commitment of some white feminists to make racism a priority issue within the women’s movement, to take responsibility for their racism as individuals, and to do anti-racism organizing in coalition with other groups.” 52 Coalition politics implies that all identities are constituted from complex geometries of social relations and that no one oppression or inter-articulation of oppressions corresponds to any one political identity. 53

50 Ibid., xxx
51 Ibid., xxxv
52 Ibid.
53 In “A Cyborg Manifesto: Science, Technology, and Socialist-Feminism in the Late Twentieth Century” (1985), Donna Haraway celebrates coalition politics as a practice that acknowledges the de-natured
of oppression, as opposed to a synthesis or confluence that can be identified in additive historical analyses, sustains the plurality and dynamism of recognizable subject positions and permits fluidity of movement among them.

This simultaneity also names the ordering principle, or form of Home Girls and lends discursive tactility to its radical democratic content. In a mixed review of the anthology, Hortense Spillers praised its “vital democracy of written forms that alternately capture the interest and lose it.” Form, here, denotes genre, both conventional (short stories, excerpts of novels, poems, literary criticism, pieces of historical scholarship) and unconventional (e.g., “conversations,” as opposed to staged interviews, between the editor and one or several of her contributors, and semi-autobiographical meditations). Spillers alternatively describes “democracy” as “miscellany” in the opening of her review. The anthology is not a form in the sense denoted by the logic of content. Rather it is a genre that merely facilitates the revelation of its form. It implies selection and arrangement of texts on the part of the editor. Smith notes in her introduction that she solicited articles from selected writers instead of sending out a general call for submissions, as she did for the special issue of Conditions. The former strategy streamlined the editing process and allowed her to focus the anthology deliberately to suit her editing interests. The effect is not mere eclecticism or ambitious range of informatics of identity taxonomies that subjects assume in various ways in an ever-changing sociopolitical context. In Simians, Cyborgs, and Women: The Reinvention of Nature. (New York: Routledge, 1991).


55 Ibid., 17

56 Smith, Home Girls. li.

57 Ibid.
coverage, but pedagogy. It teaches us how radical democracy is to be sustained and that the democratic ideals of equality and liberty can be imagined though not guaranteed.

**Toward a Radical Constructivist Practice**

Smith’s arrangement of texts suggests a movement between the conceptual geographies of “home” and the “streets,” to deploy the metaphors of its ending piece, a transcribed presentation by activist and historian Bernice Johnson Reagon entitled “Coalition Politics: Turning the Century” (1981). “Home” represents the site where sociopolitical identities are constituted and “the streets,” the site of coalition politics.

The first section of the anthology, entitled “The Blood—Yes the Blood,” reconstructs the contexts from which the various identifications that convene in the subjectivity of lesbian women of color emerge. The second section, “Artists Without Art Form,” is composed of critical essays that acknowledge the marginalization of black lesbian identity and black lesbian writers in literary criticism. The third section, “Black Lesbians—Who Will Fight For Our Lives But Us?,” contains prose and poetry that illustrate the construction of black lesbian identity and political consciousness. The fourth section, “A Hell of a Place to Ferment a Revolution,” illustrates the act of revolutionary struggle, focusing on black feminist organizing and coalition politics.

This movement from home to streets illustrates the radical democratic processes of dynamic identity construction and strategic consolidation around political identifications, most pointedly in the fourth section where identity politics is juxtaposed with coalition politics. The Combahee River Collective statement that appears in the final section of the anthology describes principled activism with a more stringent conception of identity formation than does coalition building. In the spring of 1977, three
black lesbian women—Smith along with her sister, Beverly, and Demita Frazier, recorded discussions that would later comprise the content of the statement. Taking its name from the site of Harriet Tubman’s military campaign to free slaves in South Carolina, the Collective proclaimed itself the fulfillment of a patent need for an “autonomous” black feminist movement.

The women committed themselves to a progressive focus on, in their view, interlocking oppressions of race, gender, class, and sexuality, an instance of which they described when they explained, “We know that there is such a thing as racial-sexual oppression which is neither solely racial nor solely sexual, e.g., the history of rape of Black women by white men as a weapon of political repression.”

Interestingly, the Collective did not extensively name a political agenda, no more than to mention briefly its intention to take up causes on behalf of women whose compounded identities give rise to a preponderance of oppression (e.g., Third World working women or black female rape victims). Given its autonomy, its anti-liberal resistance to an integrationist ethos, the Collective understood itself to be engaging in identity politics: “We believe that the most profound and potentially most radical politics come directly out of our own identity, as opposed to working to end somebody else’s oppression.” It also identified first wave feminism and the anti-slavery movement as well as the black liberation struggle of the 1960s as the “origins” of contemporary black feminism, vowing its solidarity with black men around the issue of race. The oppression of black women, according to the

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58 Ibid., 267. This statement echoes Angela Y. Davis’s historicization of black women’s oppression in her 1971 article, “Reflections on the Black Women’s Role in the Slave Community,” where she asserts that rape constituted an institutionalized method of terrorizing female slaves.

59 Ibid.
Collective, was the struggle in partnership with black men on the issue of race and against them on the issue of sexism.

The Collective employed the same essentialist and reductionist logic as Smith’s writings on black feminist criticism. Calling for analysis of the “interlocking systems of oppression,” the “synthesis” of which constituted the conditions of black women’s lives, they suggested that a systemically imposed synthesis of oppression compounds the identity categories that black women assume. Its radical politics named a personalized “identity politics,” by which Smith, Smith, and, Frazier meant that “the most profound and potentially most radical politics come directly out of our own identity, as opposed to working to end somebody else’s oppression.” Here, identity is conceptualized as the direct extension of compounded oppression. In such a schema, to assume an identity is to wear the arithmetic of oppressions, ranked in a moral hierarchy: To identify as black is to identify as one who is oppressed by racism; to identify as a woman, is to identify as one oppressed by sexism; to identify as a black woman is to identify as one oppressed by a synthesis of the former two; and to identify as a black working class lesbian qualifies one as most “worthy of liberation.” In advocating solidarity with progressive black men in the anti-racist cause and struggle against them on the score of sexism, the authors performed the very idea of compounded oppression by consolidating differentiated identities around the additive analysis of ideologies.

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61 Ibid., 267
62 Ibid.
In a radical democratic schema, oppression is systemically constituted by virtue of being relationally constituted; and identity politics on its own can function either as a reformist strategy or a political demand for social liberalism that cannot be fulfilled by a liberal democratic schema. In contrast to the Combahee River Collective statement, Reagon’s speech explicates a principle that more pointedly incarnates radical constructivist democracy. Coalition politics—the practice that, in turn, incarnates the principle of simultaneous oppressions—entails the shifting site of “home” or political identification(s) around which practices are consolidated. In the process of mapping political solidarities, coalition politics reconfigures the ideological makeup of identity as opposed to producing new political ideologies around which fixed identities are consolidated.

In an extended metaphor, Reagon names two alternative iterations of home: the “barred room” and “womb.” When home becomes a “barred room,” the principle behind group solidarity is, ineluctably, nationalist. Describing the impetus behind separatism as the sense that one has been precariously othered, Reagon invokes a biopolitical logic, explaining, “There is no chance that you can survive by staying inside the barred room […] The door of the room will just be painted red and then when those who call the shots

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63 In Laclau’s globalist sense of radical democracy, the particular principles of minority groups can become universal; and radical democracy is achieved when “there is a plurality of political forces substituting for each other in power—as the attempt to hegemonize the very principle of ‘order’ and ‘organization.’” In The Making of Political Identities, 5. Still, in a strictly literary critical field during this era of social movement politics, particularisms competed with one another and produced shifting solidarities more than they hegemonized or universalized their ordering principles.


get ready to clean house, they have easy access to you.” The problem with a static sense of identity, a sense that loses site of its construction, is that it merely succumbs to the way it has been othered and rendered static by an oppressive ideology. The solution, according to Reagon is active self-legitimization:

> But that space while it lasts should be a nurturing space where you sift out what people are saying about you and decide who you really are. And you take the time to construct within yourself and within your community who you would be if you were running society. In fact, in that little barred room where you check everybody at the door, you act out community. You pretend that your room is a world.

The barred room to which we resign ourselves by ideological mandate affords us the space to differentiate between how oppressive ideologies have othered us and the principles and ideals to which we subscribe. Reagon remarks on the condition of agency in the situation of the oppressed, a kind of freedom to which the oppressed does not finally arrive as some hard-won objective but struggles for, constituting herself against non-recognition.

The conception of home as the site where one imagines one’s insertion in a political community points to the subject’s confrontation with an ethical question regarding democratic equivalence. In *Giving An Account of Oneself*, Judith Butler describes the ethical as a relational structure, positing a thesis about moral philosophy that invokes a logic of content quite similar to that of radical constructivist theory:

> “[M]oral questions not only emerge in the context of social relations, but [...] the form these questions take changes according to context, and even that context, in some sense,

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67 Ibid.
inheres in the form of the question.”68 That is, norms of conduct incarnate the principle that determines those norms; and moral questions are normalized in response to the social relations that frame them. Insofar as the question of social conduct must be posited, Butler assures us that there is no morality without an “I,” and no “I” “can fully stand apart from the social conditions of its emergence, no ‘I’ that is not implicated in a set of conditioning moral norms.”69 We cannot exercise social or political agency without first being constituted as citizens; and we cannot conceive of the “political” apart from agency. The injunction to “give an account of oneself” instantiates the creative process of self-making, which means, as Butler argues,

that [the injunction] does not act unilaterally or deterministically upon the subject […] The norm does not produce the subject as its necessary effect, nor is the subject fully free to disregard the norm that inaugurates its reflexivity; one invariably struggles with conditions of one’s own life that one could not have chosen. If there is an operation of agency or, indeed, freedom in this struggle, it takes place in the context of an enabling and limiting field of constraint. […] This struggle with the unchosen conditions of one’s life, a struggle—an agency—is also made possible, paradoxically, by the persistence of this primary conditions of freedom.”70

Under the imposition to give an account of oneself, the subject is not granted freedom but achieves freedom as the condition of struggle. Here again, we see the logic of content at work, for there is no essential qualitative content to freedom in the ethico-political structure. Rather it is relationally constituted. The activity of struggle, which brings about the condition of agency, differentiates freedom from the initial state of unfreedom.

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68 Butler, 3.

69 Ibid., 7

70 Ibid., 19
The “barred room” of Reagon’s metaphor figures the state prior to struggle and self-constitution as an enclosure, a nurturing space that inaugurates the process of creation. Self-fashioning, here, prior to coalition politics, prior to entering into political relations with one’s identified others, is only imagined and experimental. Reagon explains, “Of course the problem with the experiment is that there ain’t nobody in there but folk like you, which by implication means you wouldn’t know what to do if you were running it with all of the other people who are out there in the world. Now that’s nationalism,” and it is “totally inadequate for surviving in the world with many peoples.”

The barred room, then, represents the kind of identity that never gains symmetrical and reciprocated political recognition; rather it is recognized insofar as it is othered. In Butler’s sense, the “I” is not merely asserted. Rather, ethical norms occasion its emergence; and I would add, the structure of relation reveals the norms that brought it about just as much as the norms contextualize the relational structure and give it meaning. The ethical relation is not necessarily presocial for Butler, but to describe its structure is to describe its ordering principle that variegated social relations incarnate. In Reagon’s metaphor, the “I” is not personal but a political abstraction. In the barred room, one’s “I” is constituted by the “we,” the collectivity that identifies under the same political signifier. This “we” is not ordered by a principle but rather produced by an ideological abstraction, which, in turn, generates a nationalist fiction.

The concept of a unified “we” belies its heterogeneity: the disparate and multivalent processes of selves giving account, the simultaneity of oppressions that other us. Reagon explains that the barred room cannot be made comfortable for its others by

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71 Reagon In Home Girls, 345.
changing the terms by which it identifies. That is, it cannot be sustained by denouncing
the types of oppression that other its others lest it mistakenly grant them entry: “The first
thing that happens is that the room don’t feel like the room anymore. And it ain’t home
no more. It is not a womb no more. And you can’t feel comfortable no more. And what
happens at that point has to do with trying to do too much in it. You can’t do no coalition
building in a womb.” The barred room to which one is relegated by ideological
injunction becomes a “womb,” or nurturing gestational site for self-constitution inasmuch
as it masks the principle of simultaneity and its social effect: the heterogeneity of subject
positions through which one gives account of oneself.

Coalition politics produces a kind of collectivity that is distinct from the one that
inhabits the barred room—the kind that citizens forge amongst themselves and that is
ordered by principles rather than imposed from without by ideology. The “streets,” or the
site of coalition, is not a nurturing space, like the barred room. “It is not to feed you,”
Reagon explains, “You have to feed it. And it’s a monster. It never gets enough. It
always wants more. So you better be sure you got your home someplace for you to go to
so that you will not become a martyr to the coalition. Coalition can kill people; however,
it is not by nature fatal.” Since the barred room, and one might add, identity politics, is
vulnerable to demolition by the ideological regime that constructed it, as Reagon’s
metaphor explains, coalition building is a preemptive measure, where the pronouns “we”
and “our” must include “everybody you have to include in order for you to survive […]
Cause I ain’t gonna let you live unless you let me live. Now there’s danger in that, but

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72 Ibid., 346

73 Ibid., 348
there’s also the possibility that we can both live—if you can stand it.”

In coalition building, political identifications consolidate around principles rather than barred rooms. We allow each other to live insofar as we recognize the common principles that govern our conduct despite the plurality of contexts to which we apply them.

Although “the streets” names the site of coalition building, coalition politics involves the constant movement between “home” and “streets,” not simply so that activists can be morally recharged in the barred room for a potentially life-threatening activity outside, but rather to be transformed and give an account of themselves anew. About the nature of this movement between home and streets, Reagon explains, “There were people who came South to work in the movement who were not Black. Most of them were white when they came. Before it was over, that category broke up—you know, some of them were Jewish, not simply white, and some others even changed their names […] It’s called finding yourself. At some point, you cannot be fighting oppression and be oppressed yourself and not feel it.”

The same was true, Reagon recalls, for black activists working during the black liberation struggle, some of whom found “that anything that happened to you in New York or the West Coast probably also happened to you in another way, within the movement.”

Reagon’s point is that coalition does not so much address the social issues we struggle to resolve as it reveals the principles that subtend conflict. In the identification of principles, we “find ourselves”: That is, we

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74 Ibid., 352
75 Ibid., 350
76 Ibid.
recognize the principles by which we constitute ourselves. In this sense, coalition allows us to narrate democratic principles in multiple ways.

Coalition, then, explains how the ‘I’ is relationally constituted, how it emerges when we narrate our identifications to an other and thereby reveal a common principle that governs its conduct towards the other. In Butler’s post-Hegelian sense of the scene of recognition, the recognition of the other is self-recognition in the other, not as some coherent self that one constitutes as stable and permanent against the other, but precisely as a self that is constituted as incoherently as that of the other:

An ability to affirm what is contingent and incoherent in oneself may allow one to affirm others who may or may not ‘mirror’ one’s own constitution. […] My own opacity to myself occasions my capacity to confer a certain kind of recognition on others. It would be, perhaps, an ethics based on our shared, invariable, and partial blindness about ourselves. The recognition that one is, at every turn, not quite the same as how one presents oneself in the available discourse might imply, in turn, a certain patience with others that would suspend the demand that they be selfsame at every moment.  

As in coalition, one’s recognition in the other of the lack of any essence that constitutes the other points to the lack of a constituting essence in oneself, precisely because that self has to be constituted. And this revelation about oneself produces the possibility of an ethical relation to the other. Butler explains that in Jean Laplanche’s psychoanalytic reformulation of the infant’s subject formation and sexual development, the injunction to give an account of oneself is not necessarily staged by a Lacanian big Other (i.e., the symbolic) but rather “the various others who constitute the caregiving adults in a child’s world’ who are not necessarily organized according to the oedipal categories of “father” and “mother.” In this sense, the injunction is diffuse and heterogeneous. The Other is

77 Butler, 42-43
78 Ibid., 70
the many others who impel us to narrate ourselves, and the process of self-constitution is continual. To use Reagon’s metaphor, the movement between “home” and “the streets” is ongoing, and upon every return home, we find that it is no longer what we formerly conceived of it.

The Appropriation of Democratic Desire

The ethical relation between self and other by which the self grants recognition to the other describes the emergence of the political and, specifically, radical democracy. Multiple “I’s” take form as a result of the ethical injunctions of social relations and the life-sustaining necessity of coalition. While the barred room imposes its collectivizing principle, coalition reveals it. The vulnerability that is felt both inside and outside the barred room produces the impetus to build coalitions, though the sensed danger is mainly intellectual. The injunction of the other to give an account of oneself is, in a sense, biopolitical: It is the means by which we inform one another that we will conduct ourselves in a way that ensures our survival, knowing that our survival depends on the conduct of the other.

In this sense, the ethical principle that governs coalition renders Butler’s reading of Laplancheian psychoanalysis, particularly in reference to desire, as biopolitical. Describing the identificatory mechanism by which subjectivity is transformed into conduct in the psychoanalytic framework, Butler explains that in the ethical relation, the subject’s narration of his life is subject to the address of the “you”: “If I give an account, and give it to you, then my narrative depends upon a structure of address. But if I can address you, I must first have been addressed, brought into the structure of address as a
possibility of language before I was able to find my own way to make use of it.”79 Here, Butler exteriorizes the unconscious as a structure of address so that conduct (i.e., how one should treat the other) is not contemplated from within but rather disciplined from without. The “you” is merely a fiction that centralizes that structure.

To summarize the logic of content working in Butler’s analysis, social norms contextualize social relations, and inversely, the structure of social relations reveal the norms by which it is governed. These ethical principles also occasion the emergence of an “I” which must fashion itself in relation to the principle. This process of self-fashioning reveals a structure of address since self-narration implies an audience for whom the subject tailors the narration. In this sense, the structure of relation implies a variegated “I.” As Butler explains about the context of narration, “The narrative authority of the ‘I’ must give way to the perspective and temporality of a set of norms that contest the singularity of my story.”80 The “you,” then, incarnates not only the structure of address but also the norms and principles that order it and give it moment, and the “you” is as multifarious as the “I” that addresses it.

Butler further explains that in Laplanche, the address of the other constitutes “the unconscious,” which, by extension, does not belong to the subject.81 The other is implied by the very process of subject formation, and the address of the other impels the subject

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79 Butler, 53  
80 Ibid., 37  
81 Ibid., 53
to desire the desire of the other.\textsuperscript{82} Since the question, “Who are you [who demands that I constitute myself in relation to you]?” can never be answered successfully, the structure of address is more accurately posed, “What do you want of me?” In her analysis of Laplanche’s sense of desire in terms of a relational structure, Butler explains, “Desire emerges first from the outside and in overwhelming form, and it retains this exterior and foreign quality once it becomes the subject’s own desire.”\textsuperscript{83} In this model, what psychoanalysis refers to as “drives” is not some biological essence, but rather “the interiorization of the enigmatic desires of others” that “carry the residue of those originally external desires.”\textsuperscript{84} Desire, then, is an ethical production that effectuates the structural relation between the “I” and the “you.” To desire is to find oneself under the ethical injunction to constitute oneself in relation to an exteriorized address. It begins as fear of the other—the context that occasions the emergence of an “I”—and is transformed into the other’s desire.

I would like to term this ethical production \textit{democratic desire}. In “Eastern Europe’s Republics of Gilead,” Slovoj Zizek employs this phrase in more Lacanian terms to refer to the West’s fascination with democratic novelty in Eastern Europe. Arguing that Eastern Europe serves as the West’s Ego-Ideal, a supposed naïve gaze from which

\textsuperscript{82} I take this articulation of desire from Jacques Lacan’s “The Subversion of the Subject and the Dialectic of Desire in the Freudian Unconscious,” where he explains that it is “as the Other’s desire that man’s desire takes shape.” \textit{Ecrits: A Selection}, Trans. Bruce Fink. (New York and London: Norton, 2002), 299.

\textsuperscript{83} Ibid., 72

\textsuperscript{84} Ibid., 71. Laplanche’s definition of the drive is informed by both Lacanian and Freudian psychoanalysis. In his explication of Freud’s “theorization of the infant,” he insists that the drive be understood in terms of the “lived experience” of the concept. He thus explains, “The drive is therefore neither a mythical entity, not a biological force, nor a concept lying on the frontier between the mental and the physical. It is the impact on the individual and on the ego of the constant stimulation exerted from the inside by the repressed thing-presentations, which can be described as the source-objects of the drive.” “The Drive and its Source-Object.” Leslie Hill, trans. in \textit{Essays on Otherness}, (London and New York: Routlege, 1999), 129.
point the West fancies itself idealized, Zizek explains that the real state of affairs is that corporate national populism with all its social ills—particularly xenophobia and anti-Semitism—overshadows liberal-democratic tendencies. Under the presupposition that the dissolution of totalitarianism would issue forth various kinds of “democratic desire” (e.g., political pluralism, market economy), the West’s own repressed democratic desire is returned to itself when the outbreak of ethnic conflict, as so many particularized nationalisms, “breaks the narcissistic spell of the West’s complacent recognition of its own values in the East.”

Although in Zizek’s example democratic desire is narcissistic, it is nevertheless produced by the self’s relation to the other. Applied to the model of coalition politics, in which collectivities consciously seek out the common democratic principles that guide their conduct and imagine the phenomenon of radical democracy as a real possibility, democratic desire refers to the exteriorized demand of the other that the subject appropriates as its own ethical desire.

*Home Girls* imagines such a desire but never quite produces it. We might understand Smith’s meditation entitled “Home” that concludes the first section of the anthology, as a fantasy of self-constitution that paves the way for the effectuation of democratic desire—a desire that the anthology only describes in the concept of coalition politics. As Spillers observes in her review, “The writers featured in *Home Girls*, among the radical voices of our time, too often seal off, inadvertently, the uses to which feminism, or freedom to the woman, may be put within the community of lesbian activity. To conflate ‘feminism’ and female intrasexual or heterosexual expression is to

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85 Zizek In *Dimensions of Radical Democracy*, 201.
render a false economy of identities that allows no freedom of the play of meanings.”

The anthology’s primary focus on the constitution of black lesbian identity does indeed enact the barred room of identity politics. But within that barred room, the contributions narrate and poeticize the heterogeneous processes of self-constitution, in a sense “fermenting a revolution,” as the fourth subsection’s title suggests.

Smith’s own contribution, however, conceals the barred room’s heterogeneity, describing the concept of “home” both as womb where self-making can be safely imagined, as in the case of the barred room, and as scene of address. Describing how she yearns in the present for the house of her youth and her Aunt LaRue who raised her after she was orphaned by her mother’s death and her father’s desertion, she recounts a dream in which her aunt gifts her lavishly as a sign that she approved of her lesbian relationship. Smith recalls that her own idiosyncrasies triggered Aunt LaRue’s memories about her mother: “Sometimes I’d do something that reminded her of my mother and she would laugh, remember a story, and say I was just like Hilda.”

Conjecturing about the origins of her sexual desire, Smith explains, “I guess a lot of how [my aunt and mother] loved each other, my aunt gave to me” in the form of lesbian desire. This “gift” of desire resonates with the gifts from her aunt in the dream sequence. Smith effectuates what might be understood as an erotic drive by recalling an evidently repressed scene of address in which her aunt, in a sense, demands of her to be like her mother. Smith then constitutes herself in the present in relation to that past demand. Collapsing the present

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86 Spillers, 182
87 Smith, In Home Girls, 66.
88 Ibid., 67
scene of relation to her lover, Leila, into the past scene of relation to her aunt, Smith imagines returning home to Aunt LaRue with Leila, where her aunt would “be so glad to see [her] and to meet Leila” and decide, “She’s like one of us.” Smith’s fantasy structures the identifications that sustain the barred room as an ever widening scene of address, in which the other is collapsed into the same by being co-opted for the subject’s address to its particular “you.” The “you” constructs the ruse that the subject recognizes its own likeness in the other.

Smith’s meditation closes with an account of an erotic encounter with Leila in their new apartment, where she enjoys the familiar and “steady comfort of a woman moving through the house.” Smith relies on Leila’s presence as solace for the loss of her mother and aunt, a source of sadness that the poverty of the former residents recalls for her. As if enacting the repressed scene of address, she gives herself over to an erotic drive that returns to her as fear:

Tonight we made love here for the first time […] When I started to give Leila a single kiss, her mouth caught mine and held me there. Desire surprised me, but then I realized how much everything in me wanted touch. Sometimes our bodies follow each other without will, with no thought of now I’ll put my hand here, my mouth there […] But I have been afraid. Afraid of need, of loving someone who will leave.

Reading Smith’s account in terms of a Laplanchian psychoanalytic structure of relation, one might say that Smith interiorizes and represses her aunt’s desire that she assume her mother’s likeness and fantasies a self that might fulfill that demand. She then erotically enacts that fulfillment as drive in the present scene of address with her lover. The

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89 Ibid., 68

90 Ibid.

91 Ibid., 69
“desire” that surprises her is that repressed desire of her aunt that resurfaces along with the inaugurating fear that contextualized the demand: her aunt’s fear of loss that Smith appropriates as her own and renames as the desire for home.

The erotic drive, here, appears as primary and biological: a felt physical need for touch and an almost instinctual movement of two bodies. Indeed, Smith’s placement of “Home” in the first section of the anthology suggests that the erotic is a drive “from the blood.” My epigraph comes from Audre Lorde’s biomythography Zami: A New Spelling of My Name, the last segment of which begins the third section (“Black Lesbians—Who Will Fight for Our Lives But Us?”) of the anthology under its 1979 short story title, “Tar Beach.” Lorde reconstructs the sociopolitical context and relations that gave rise to her black lesbian poet character. Combining the genres of the künstlerroman and the autobiography, Lorde consciously universalizes the narration of her singular life as biomythography—the narration of the replication of sameness, the recognition of other “black women poet warriors” much like herself.

After a series of failed love affairs with women and longing for connectedness with a “sistah outsider” in whom she might find her own identity reflected, she meets Afrekete (nicknamed Kitty) at a party in Queens. Describing their intense desire for each other, Lorde ponders, “Would it be possible—was it ever possible—for two women to share the fire we felt that night without entrapping or smothering each other? I longed for that as I longed for her body, doubting both, eager for both.” Similar to the desire for home of Smith’s meditation, Audre brings Afrekete into the scene of adolescence. Earlier in the narrative, Lorde recalls her mother’s “nightmarish evocations” and

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admonitions about menstruation, pregnancy, and self-care in which she detects
“something else […] that I could not define. It was the lurking of that amused/annoyed
brow-furrowed half-smile of hers that made me feel—all her nagging words to the
contrary—that something very good and satisfactory and pleasing to her had just
happened, and that we were both pretending otherwise for some very wise and secret
reasons.” 93 In the midst of her mother’s heavy-handed parenting that instills a great deal
of fear in her daughter, Audre detects something of the desire of her mother, the raw
material of which is to be found in her developing body. While pounding garlic for their
supper, Audre enjoys “the delicate breadfruit smell rising up from the front of [her] print
blouse that was [her] own womansmell, warm, shameful, but secretly utterly delicious.” 94
The initial fear of her mother gives way to pleasure—a mixture of her mother’s
annoyance and Audre’s shame and amusement at her body’s reproductive capacity,
which represents, as it were, a principle of pure plentitude.

When she “goes home” with Afrekete, she visits a locale that conjures childhood
memories—particularly, her childhood friend, Genevieve, whose suicide haunts Lorde
because of her own silence about the abuse and neglect that Gennie suffered, as well as
the smells and tastes of her mother’s kitchen, which she associates with Carriacou, her
mother’s island home in the Caribbean. In recalling how Kitty brought her “magical
fruit” from the West Indian markets and Puerto Rican bodegas on Lenox Avenue,
Lorde’s narration plays out the sexual encounter, figuratively going home with Afrekete
by linking the fruit bought on the streets of New York City, the spices and smells of

93 Ibid., 77
94 Ibid.
Carriacou with desire for Afrekete: “There were green plantains, which we half-peeled and then planted, fruit-deep, in each other’s bodies until the petals of skin lay like tendrils of broad green fire upon the curly darkness between our upspread thighs. *There were ripe red finger bananas, stubby and sweet, with which I parted your lips gently, to insert the peeled fruit into your grape-purple flower.*”95 The italicized portions lend an eroticized poetics to the mythos of Carriacou—where “it is said that the desire to lie with other women is a drive from the mother’s blood.”96 Here, Lorde figures the erotic drive as something biological and primal, but within the structure of relation to her mother, the erotic names the return of a repressed memory and the acting out of a fantasy in response to the desire of the other.

The mythos surrounding Carriacou is perpetuated not only by its temporal distance from Audre but also by the fact that it had so long been cartographically unavailable, a place Audre had not been able to locate in any atlas until the age of twenty-six. Audre longs for Carriacou insofar as she longs for her mother’s desire. Before going home in Afrekete, “home was a far way off, a place [she] had never been to but knew well out of [her] mother’s mouth.”97 Her desire for Afrekete—the woman whom Audre proclaims in the epilogue to be her muse, of sorts, *“the mischievous linguist, trickster, best-beloved, whom we must all become”*—is figured, here, as the exteriorized desire of her mother that she interiorizes as her own. Collapsing Afrekete into that primary scene of address, Audre becomes something like her mother by appropriating her desire.

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95 Ibid., 249
96 Ibid., 256
97 Ibid., 13
Home, then, represents not only Carriacou, but the memory of “the women who helped give [her] substance”\(^98\) and an imagined fulfillment of her mother’s desire.

In the structure of her relation to her mother, Audre’s libidinal drive in the present encounter with Afrakete enacts the imagined response to the scene of address. Audre recalls, “Years afterward, when I was grown, whenever I thought about the way I smelled that day, I would have a fantasy of my mother, her hands wiped dry from the washing, and her apron untied and laid neatly away, looking down upon me lying on the couch, and then slowly, thoroughly, our touching and caressing each other’s most secret places.”\(^99\) Lorde’s narration of the sexual encounter with Afrakete quilts together the cluster of associations surrounding that scene of address—the kitchen, the spices crushed by mortar and pestle, and her own “breadfruit” smell. The trace of Afrakete, the “print” of her that “remains upon [Audre’s] life with the resonance of an emotional tattoo”\(^100\) long after she leaves New York, carries also the trace of Audre’s foremothers that she then becomes in narration: “Their names, selves, faces feed me like corn before labor. I live each of them as a piece of me, and I choose these words with the same grave concern with which I choose to push speech into poetry, the mattering core, the forward visions of all our lives.”\(^101\) Like the barred room of Reagon’s speech, home for Audre is the pabulum of her poetic devices and the womb that nurtures political action.

\(^98\) Ibid., 255
\(^99\) Ibid., 78
\(^100\) Ibid., 253
\(^101\) Ibid. 256
This poetic “core”—the associative cluster surrounding the home—resonates with what Lorde theorized about the erotic in a paper she delivered in 1978 entitled “The Uses of the Erotic: The Erotic as Power.” Lorde attributed her poetic inspiration to the force of erotic drive, describing its nature not as “plasticized sensation” but rather the “nurterer or nursemaid of all our deepest knowledge,”\textsuperscript{102} the emotional and psychic impetus that prompts us to bridge differences. In a sense, the erotic is that amorphous pleasurable remainder that we can only apprehend, here, as a structural effect. The politicization of lesbianism as sexual expression in \textit{Home Girls} attests to the association between “home” and the “streets.” Home is not the site of the political, but it nurtures the principles by which we forge political solidarities in the streets, where the political as radical democracy can then be revealed.

\textit{Home Girls} also demonstrates the elusive desire to become and a desire for recognition, discursively enacted, that never arrives at sameness but rather masks infinitesimal difference. In the introduction to the anthology, Smith articulates one of its “challenges” as not “what we face from out there, the familiar insults and ‘isms.’ I want to write about the challenges we face in each other, to broach the subject of accountability in Black women.”\textsuperscript{103} The “Other” of the black lesbian woman/writer/activist is not her multifarious oppressors but sameness itself. The challenge of self-constitution and all its possible fantasies in the face of coalition politics is the responsibility to recognize the way fantasy masks difference at home, to realize that

\textsuperscript{102} In \textit{Sister Outsider: Essays and Speeches}. (Freedom, California: The Crossing Press, 1984.), 56.

\textsuperscript{103} Smith, xl
in the structure of a truly radical democracy, if only as a political possibility, identity is a process and desire belongs to the other.
CHAPTER TWO

The Soul of Subjectivity: Toni Cade Bambara’s Literary Coalitions

“I think it was in 1973 when I really began to realize that [writing] was a perfectly legitimate way
to participate in struggle. I don’t have to be out their running in the streets or at the barricades.
This counts, too.”  --Toni Cade Bambara, “An Interview: Searching for the Mother Tongue”
(1980)

At the University of Maryland and Spelman College—institutional homes to
Mary Helen Washington and Beverly Guy-Sheftall, respectively—Black Women’s
Studies operates as the disciplinary interface between Women’s Studies and African
American Studies. As the published histories about the emergence of the field attest,¹ the
inception of Black Women’s Studies was not the establishment of a formal academic
program but rather the emergence of a community of black feminists invested in the
social situation of black women both in a broad sociohistorical context and in the
academy. Such black feminist activist-educators and creative writers as Toni Cade
Bambara, Audre Lorde, and Alice Walker as well black feminist scholars like Guy-
Sheftall and Washington and Barbara Smith, and others whose conversations and
writings were formative for the development of Black Women’s Studies proclaimed the
singularity of black women relative to the Black Liberation and Women’s movements
and sought to interrogate the priorities of cultural, historical, and sociological knowledge
production.

¹ See Smith, Barbara, “Building Black Women’s Studies,” McKay, Nellie Y., “Charting a Personal
Journey: A Road To Women’s Studies,” and Guy-Sheftall, Beverly, “Other’s Mothers of Women’s
Studies.” In The Politics of Women’s Studies: Testimony from Thirty Founding Mothers, Ed. Florence
Howe. (New York: The Feminist Press and the City University of New York, 2000) as well as Guy-
Sheftall’s Women’s Studies: A Retrospective, a report to the Ford Foundation (June 1995), and her essays
“A Black Feminist Perspective on Transforming the Academy: The Case of Spelman College” In
Theorizing Black Feminisms: The Visionary Pragmatism of Black Women. Eds. Stanlie M. James and
Abena P. A. Busia. (London and New York: Routledge, 1993) and “Sisters in Struggle: A Belated
Response” In The Feminist Memoir Project: Voices From Women’s Liberation. (New York: Three Rivers
The founders of Black Women’s Studies as a formal area—Gloria T. Hull, Patricia Bell Scott, and Barbara Smith—declared black women to be in an “embattled” space as a result of the epistemic violence of cultural knowledge production, the revelation of which they believed would pave the way to social transformation. As Hull and Scott explained in the introduction to their 1982 anthology *All the Women Are White, All the Blacks Are Men, But Some of Us Are Brave: Black Women’s Studies*, the politics of Black Women’s Studies attested to the political situation of black women. The interdisciplinary framework of Black Women’s Studies pursues a thoroughgoing documentation of black women’s lived experiences, which Hull, Scott, and Smith understood to materialize the racial and gender politics circumscribing black women’s subjectivity.

This pedagogical investment in experience presented the theoretical difficulties that Joan Wallach Scott would point to in her now famous 1992 essay “Experience.” In her critique of orthodox historical methodology, which deployed a notion of experience as the positivist and affective relation of the scholar as participant-observer to the object qua human subject of study, Scott suggested that this realist sense of experience rendered the scholar one and the same as the object. In the study of difference, the scholar who “experiences” his/her object affirms and naturalizes the difference s/he seeks to deconstruct by locating the origin of that difference in the object rather than its context of emergence. Scott re-conceptualized difference as relationally constituted and re-defined

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2 See Hull, Gloria T., Patricia Bell Scott, and Barbara Smith, eds. *All the Women Are White, All the Blacks Are Men, But Some of Us Are Brave: Black Women’s Studies*. (Old Westbury, New York: The Feminist Press, 1982).

experience as the narrative account of the complex processes of the subject’s socio-historical emergence.

In adopting the methodological instrument of lived experience in the formative years of Black Women’s Studies, black feminist scholars lent the kind of ideological weight that characterized the move of empowering knowledge produced during the sixties era of social protest to the academy—particularly, the self-determinism and realist bias evinced by the Black Aesthetic movement and prescriptions for feminist and women-centered literary criticism.\(^4\) To be sure, in her 1975 anthology *Black-Eyed Susans*, a thematic study of the then burgeoning canon of black women writers that I treat in the next chapter, Mary Helen Washington accounted for the relationship between literature and black women’s lived experience by explaining that black women’s writing “confirms and validates (or rejects) the findings of sociology,”\(^5\) which rendered the methodological operations of these disciplines comparable and assimilable to one another. By distinguishing between black women’s experience as the object of sociological knowledge and the cultural representation of black women’s experience, indeed suggesting that the former is prior to the latter, Washington effectually essentialized experience as a formation that is not the product of a socio-historical and cultural context.


I focus on the way Black Women’s Studies has understood black women’s experience in order to distinguish between two different kinds of black feminist cultural analyses—one that is produced by black feminist critics and another produced by creative writers. In chapter one, I suggested that Bernice Johnson Reagon’s conceptual geographies of “home,” or the identities around which political collectivities consolidate, and “the streets,” or the space where those identities are perpetually reconfigured, describes the radical constructivist process of subject formation. In this chapter, I extend the geography of “home” and “streets” to describe the two kinds of black feminist cultural analyses produced by Black Women’s Studies—one by which the black feminist critic in her academic home understands black women’s experience as a disciplinary object, and another by which the black women writer, not necessarily in service of the academy, treats black women’s experience as a cultural production, in “the streets,” so to speak.

As an academic project, Black Women’s Studies produced a black feminist cultural analysis that affirmed the singularity of black women’s political subjectivity as opposed to examining its constitution. In other words, the work of Black Women’s Studies begins with the revelation of politics, which Hull and Smith defined as “any situation/relationship of differential power between groups or individuals,” as opposed to “the political,” or the strategic context of political subjectivity’s emergence. The founders of Black Women’s Studies did not explicitly make this distinction between “politics” and “the political,” but this distinction accounts for how the disciplining of black women’s writing contributed to the dual projects of identity politics in the academy.

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6 But Some of Us Are Brave, xvii
and the advancement of a black feminist political theory. In particular, this chapter considers a moment that produced the cultural and discursive production of black women’s subjectivity and a political theory of communal formation and social transformation in the work of Toni Cade Bambara as anthologist and novelist.

In her most recent re-capitulation of the development of Black Women’s Studies, Guy-Sheftall identifies a foundational moment for the field in Bambara’s 1970 anthology *The Black Woman*. Dubbing Bambara a “black feminist foremother,” Guy-Sheftall distinguished the impact of the anthology from that of Kate Millett’s *Sexual Politics* (1970) and Gerda Lerner’s documentary history *Black Women in White America* (1972). Like Cheryl A. Wall, who remarked that *The Black Woman* “signaled the emergence” of black women writers, Guy-Sheftall argues that Bambara’s anthology marked the beginning of Black Women’s Studies and “was significant because of the value it attached to hearing the distinct voices of black women, arguing that our experiences were different from both black men and white women.” The “distinctiveness” of black women’s voices was marked by the momentous recognition that the market for black women’s writing would be identified not by publishers but rather by the producers of these aesthetic productions. Assembling the journalistic and aesthetic works produced by students and instructors involved in the SEEK program at the City College of New York and activists of civil rights movement organizations like SNCC and CORE, Bambara demonstrated that there was indeed a market for black women’s writing. *The Black*

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9 *Savoring the Salt*, 115
Woman marked a transitional period, from a moment when “the black woman” was an unrecognized elision in the political analogy “blacks and women” to a moment when social activists, creative writers, scholars, and organic intellectuals recognized their divided political allegiances and forged an autonomous political identity, “turning toward each other” in identifying a complex geometry of social oppression and embarking upon a critique of the social context in which they assumed political agency.¹⁰

Born in 1939 in Harlem, Bambara was early shaped by a vibrant African American community of activists and cultural producers. In a 1990 interview with Zala Chandler, she remarked upon the presence of the Ida B. Wells club women; Communist Party members; trade unionists; Muslims and Rastafarians; and the bookstores, theaters, and clubs devoted to black art in the late thirties, forties, and fifties.¹¹ As the major source of her social consciousness, Bambara named the black women organic intellectuals of her neighborhood—the Ida B. Wells Club women who demonstrated the art of investigative journalism and the black churchwomen who behaved as historians and encouraged community activism. She also named the race heroines who talked racial and sexual politics in beauty parlors, kitchens, and bedrooms, and the black women entertainers—the bebop artists and tap dancers—who traveled the “Chitlin Circuit” and through whom Bambara was introduced to communities of blacks nationally and globally.

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A self-professed “cultural worker” and Pan-Africanist who was an activist in Harlem, Philadelphia, and Atlanta, Bambara edited *The Black Woman* while teaching at the SEEK program of the City College of New York in 1968, where some of her students and an acquaintance, Dan Watts, then editor of the *Liberator*, encouraged her to publish a work devoted to black women. When she was told by the publishers she approached—former classmates of hers—that there was no market for black women’s writing, she decided to “kick the door open,” as she remarked in an interview with Louis Massiah, because she knew “800 million Black women all by [her]self.”

Bambara originally approached black nationalist women activists for their position papers, but they declined her invitation to make their work public. Still, several position papers collected in the anthology explicitly and implicitly critique the sexual politics of black nationalism and the black radical tradition. Along with position papers and journal articles, *The Black Woman* collected several poems by Audre Lorde and Nikki Giovanni and the short stories of Paule Marshall, Alice Walker, and Shirley Williams. Indeed, this multi-generic representation of the voice of “the black woman” ushered in her political consciousness and subjectivity via a black feminist cultural analysis.

In the majority of her prose publications—two collections of short stories and three novels, a posthumously published volume of fictional and non-fictional prose, and two anthologies—Bambara was preoccupied with the idea of the black and Third World

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national and global community and drew upon her work as a social activist for creative inspiration. The first of her novels, *The Salt Eaters* (1980), has received the most critical attention as a thoroughgoing illustration of the black community and critique of the racial and sexual politics by which it is constituted. The novel is also informed by Bambara’s Pan-Africanist vision. Its title refers to the curative properties of salt in traditionalist medicine. Set in the fictional town of Claybourne, Georgia, its black community is divided by its multivalent politics and seeks the cultural and political grounds of its solidarity. The protagonist is an emotionally fragile black woman named Velma Henry who suffers from the trials of community activism. The narrative begins in the town’s Southwest Community Infirmary where a circle of black women spiritualists treat Velma for a suicide attempt using psychoanalysis and religious rites informed by West African customs. Although the narrative is told primarily from Velma’s perspective, it unfolds, as literary critic Eleanor W. Traylor and Bambara herself remarked, as a multivocal “jazz suite,” told from the vantage of various social agents in the community.

The novel recommends a solution to the black community’s political fragmentation, both in the novel and in its sociopolitical context, by identifying the community’s cultural and political grounds of commonality. That the protagonist is a black woman activist encapsulates the novel’s black feminist posture in that the novel suggests that Velma’s oppression symptomatizes what ails the community at large and that her singular sociopolitical situation would allow her to identify and derail epistemic violence. The novel’s temporal moment is unspecified but recalls an era of social protest,

which is evinced by Bambara’s preoccupation with the last quarter of the twentieth century, as she explained in interviews.

In its naming of black women’s political subjectivity, *The Black Woman* constitutes the political subtext of *The Salt Eaters*, which aids my analysis by concretizing the terms of the novel’s sociopolitical critique.\(^{15}\) Bambara’s first anthology and novel together provide a black feminist cultural analysis that accounts for black women’s subjectivity and “experience.” What Bambara calls “the struggle for liberation” in her preface to *The Black Woman* names the project of political self-constitution in terms of the process of “creation” (i.e., fashioning “from within”) as opposed to “reaction” (i.e., fashioning “rashly from without” in response to the prevailing cultural signifiers attributed to black women).\(^{16}\) In a 1987 interview, Claudia Tate asked Bambara whether she attempted to order or simply record human experience, to which Bambara responded,

> All writers, musicians, artists, choreographers/dancers, etc., work with the stuff of their experiences. It’s the translation of it, the conversion of it, the shaping of it that makes for the drama. I’ve never been convinced that experience is linear, circular, or even random. It just is. I try to put it in some kind of order to extract meaning from it, to bring meaning to it.\(^{17}\)

Bambara’s sense of the creative process rejected a positivist or realist notion of quotidian life that is prior to aesthetic representation. Rather for Bambara, the “stuff” of experience

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\(^{15}\) Remarking on the neo-conservative climate in the United States following *The Black Woman*’s publication and urging that black feminists reread the anthology to expose the limitations of black nationalist ideology in the present political moment, black feminist scholar Farah Jasmine Griffin juxtaposes *The Salt Eaters* and *The Black Woman* as “feminist” texts in interlocutory relation in her “Conflict and Chorus: Reconsidering Toni Cade’s The Black Woman: An Anthology.” In *Is It Nation Time?: Contemporary Essays on Black Power and Black Nationalism*. Ed. Eddie S. Glaude, Jr. (Chicago and London: The University of Chicago Press, 2002).

presupposed the activity of the cultural worker who extracts cultural meaning from, and applies creative form to, a material context. Employing a sort of conceptual logic of content, Bambara described experience as the material result of the cultural aesthetician’s production of cultural meaning. Insisting upon the atemporality of experience, Bambara shifted the attribute of temporal duration from “experience” to cultural production, inter-articulating the processes of cultural production and the act of political identification. Like the feminist recourse to the “personal” as the politicized grounds of subject formation and the basis of a claim to the full rights of citizenship, the project of self-fashioning outlined in The Black Woman locates the “black woman’s” political grounds of allegiance in the cultural meaning of her political identity.

This sense of experience as the result of aesthetic production complicates the idea of experience as an essential category of difference and the basis of identity and suggests how black feminist analysis redefined the black cultural nationalist construct of racial “authenticity.” Such scholars as Wahneema Lubiano and Stuart Hall have remarked upon the legitimating function of racial authenticity in the proletarianization of black cultural nationalism and pop cultural aesthetics. Lubiano, in particular, has pointed out the cultural depredations (i.e., the marginalization of black women and queer persons of color; and the ideologically conservative validation of patriarchalism, the “family,” personal responsibility, and masculinity) that have resulted from the neo-liberal political strategies of a black middle-class vanguard that uncritically assumed the role of state forces in the production of “national” subjects. Lubiano explains that literary critics

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19 See Lubiano, Wahneema. “Black Nationalism and Black Common Sense: Policing Ourselves and Others.” In The House That Race Built: Original Essays by Toni Morrison, Angela Y. Davis, Cornel West,
like Amiri Baraka “made literary production the ‘proof’ or ‘reality’ of black cultural coherence and the desire for a wished-for reality. Authenticity functions within the terms of this economy as the way to counter what might otherwise be a possible destiny of cultural ‘disappearance.’” ²⁰ As the narrative site of black cultural nationalism, cultural expressivity constituted the barometer of authenticity, or the synchronicity between the cultural and the political. The black feminist critical tradition generally intervened in the discourse surrounding racial authenticity by critically evaluating the cultural ramifications of black political solidarity, thereby contesting black cultural nationalism’s tendency to romanticize the cultural effects of black radicalism.

Black cultural nationalism’s investment in the authentic ultimately amounted not to an idea of blackness as a real essence but rather to blackness as a political category of struggle that corresponds to a moment of political consensus about its cultural meaning. Insofar as black cultural nationalists understood cultural expressivity to materialize that consensus, the authentic revealed the problem of directionality. Moving from the grounds of the political to the cultural, black cultural nationalism normativized the latter in relation to the former and installed the cultural as the grounds of political legitimation. In its treatment of cultural productions that characterize black women, black feminist analysis was no less concerned with authentic cultural productions, engaging them to determine the constitutive cultural grounds from which to forge political solidarity and negotiate liberatory political strategies. Political solidarity, in other words, materialized

²⁰ Lubiano, “Standing In for the State,” 159.
an interrogation of the cultural on the part of a community of black women writers, 
activists, and scholars.

In the case of both black cultural nationalism and the black feminist tradition, 
then, authenticity described the mutually indexical relation between the cultural and the 
political. Both traditions re-appropriated the articulating principle of blackness\textsuperscript{21} as a 
countercultural move to produce empowering knowledge. Such scholars as Regina 
Bendix\textsuperscript{22} have examined the idea of authenticity in relation to the production of cultural 
knowledge. Bendix’s historiographic study of the relation of authenticity to cultural 
productions, particularly US American and German folklore, yields philosophical, 
anthropological, cultural, and political frameworks for understanding the authentic as the 
imagined recovery of cultural or national “purity.” Drawing upon Lionel Trilling’s 
epochal distinction between an early modern conception of “sincerity” and a modern 
conception of “authenticity,”\textsuperscript{23} Bendix points to a modernist anxiety of loss vis-à-vis the 
commodification of culture in an era of transnational capital and the exposure of the 
ideologies that underlie disciplinary knowledge production as the impetus behind the 
authentic. She describes this anxiety as a “peculiar longing” that is “oriented toward the 
recovery of an essence whose loss has been realized only through modernity, and whose 
recovery is feasible only through methods and sentiments created in modernity.”\textsuperscript{24} This

\textsuperscript{21} I take this idea of blackness as an articulating principle from Stuart Hall’s “Race, Articulation, and 
Societies Structured in Dominance.” In \textit{Black British Cultural Studies: A Reader}, Eds. Houston A. Baker, 

\textsuperscript{22} Bendix, Regina. \textit{In Search of Authenticity: The Formation of Folklore Studies}, (Madison, Wisconsin: 
The University of Wisconsin Press, 1997).


\textsuperscript{24} Bendix, 8. See also Orvell, Miles. \textit{The Real Thing: Imitation and Authenticity in American Culture}, 
1880-1940. (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 1989). Orvell identifies a transition in 
US American cultural consciousness from the discursive category of the “inauthentic” in an age of
“essence” materializes as an authoritative consensus about the real. Inasmuch as such cultural productions as folklore are “inauthentic” replications of some prior instance of expressivity, they recover the aura of its “authentic” foundation. In this sense, the authentic harbors its dual etymological sediments from the Greek “authentes”: “one who acts with authority” and “made by one’s own hand,” for the identification of the authentic implies the authority of humanistic scholarship to identify a foundational moment of production. By historicizing this preoccupation with the authentic, Bendix reveals the ever-shifting site of “origin” as well as the epistemic forces that have contributed to its location. In other words, the study of the idea of authenticity reveals its historical situation, its moments of instantiation over time.

The conception of the authentic I am employing in this chapter is one that applies specifically to cultural productions as opposed to self-presentation or performativity.25 I understand the authentic as an instrument of aesthetic judgment that attests to the cultural logic of political subjectivity. In more pronounced terms than The Black Woman, The Salt Eaters theorizes the relation between the political and the cultural, disrupting the legitimating function of the latter. In the recently published Savoring the Salt: The Legacy of Toni Cade Bambara (2007), honoring the creative writer-activist-educator after her death in 1995, features a republished 1999 interview with Toni Morrison, with whom

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Bambara shared a long literary friendship. Lauding the intricately developed prose and narrative structure of *The Salt Eaters*, Morrison commented, “I have never read a book—any book—that had a representation of an African-American family that is so, on the one hand, accurate and on the other joyful as well as hard. It’s just a beautiful rendition, with not one stereotype in it. I’ve always been astonished by it. Just astonished.”

Morrison’s attentiveness to the “accuracy” of representation registers a black feminist concern for “authentic,” un-formulaic representations of black women, as expressed most explicitly by such black feminist critics as Barbara Smith in her critical evaluations of novels by black women writers and more implicitly in Washington’s *Black Eyed Susans* (1975) and Pat Crutchfield Exum’s *Keeping the Faith: Writings by Contemporary Black American Women* (1974). Remarking upon Bambara’s and her shared detestation of the “simplistic reduction of black people” to stereotypical portrayal, Morrison calls attention to Bambara’s joint cultural and political project, which constitutes political identity not as a counter-ideological reaction to social oppression that crystallizes in a single character illustration but rather as a strategic, political response to a critique of her social context. In other words, what Morrison heralds as *The Salt Eater*’s representational complexity can be attributed to the novel’s illustration of the social grounds that instantiate black political subjectivity.

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27 My sense of the authentic names what I think is a conjunction of political identification and social critique in Roderick A. Ferguson’s sense of a “queer of color analysis,” which “extends women of color feminism by investigating how intersecting racial, gender, and sexual practices antagonize and/or conspire with the normative investments of nation-states and capital” in *Aberrations in Black: Toward a Queer of Color Critique*. (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2004), 4.
To call Bambara a black feminist foremother, then, is to recognize the unique revelatory potential of cultural productions and the cultural analysis that subtends Bambara’s political intervention. Bambara herself remarked on the continuity between her work as creative writer and social activist. In “Salvation Is the Issue,” Bambara recalled her discovery in 1973, upon her return from activism in Cuba, that writing constituted a legitimate way “to participate in the empowerment of the community that names [her].”29 Deeming The Salt Eaters, along with her work in the genres of film and the short story, to be representative of her political work, she explained,

The setup in The Salt Eaters is as close as I have come at this stage in my development to coaxing the ‘design’ of the world I intuit and attempt to signify/communicate come through. Intimations that what I’m striving for—to work at the point of interface between the political/artistic/metaphysical, that meeting place where all seeming contradictions and polarities melt, that bicameral mind membrane (jamming at the juncture doo ahh) can be explored more sensibly in some language other than what I’ve been using, prompts me of late to experiment more with new kinds of writing materials and writing forms and to pick up another kind of pencil—the camera.30

This moment in Bambara’s meditation anticipates her work as documentary filmmaker and demonstrates the fluidity in her thinking about the kinds of cultural work she performed, but I call attention to it to highlight her manner of encoding the revelatory project of cultural analysis into The Salt Eaters. To “work at the interface” of the frameworks of the political, artistic, and metaphysical was to identify a common logic between these frameworks. The aim of such work was social transformation, which for Bambara, consisted in a shift in the subject’s identifications. The membranous interface,

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30 Ibid., 43
which she expressed in the bluesy phrase, “jamming at the juncture doo ahh,” points to
the psychoanalytic underpinnings of subjectivity and cultural and political solidarity.

I point to this passage also to introduce the terms in which Bambara understood
the cultural logic that ordered the frameworks she engaged. Her intuited “design” of the
world was what she understood as a cultural cosmology. In the novel, it is a conflict in
cosmologies that accounts for the political fragmentation of the black community. By
working at the interface of the political, artistic, and metaphysical, the novel attempts to
repair that fragmentation. The Salt Eaters, as Bambara explained in a 1980 interview
with poet Kalamu Ya Salaam\(^\text{31}\) and in the 1985 interview with Claudia Tate, materializes
the juncture between aesthetic and political representation and “traditional” medicine, as
practiced by the psychically adept, and modern technology by dramatizing the interaction
of metaphysical and political agents in the black community working to bring about black
liberation. Employing Cold War politics and its corresponding shifts in global capital and
power arrangements as its historical backdrop, the novel depicts the sociopolitical
network of Third World women of color, black male and female political activists and
cultural workers, and the black populace. The Salt Eaters explores the meaning of self-
constitution in a changing sociopolitical and ecological landscape. As Bambara
proclaims at the end of “Salvation Is the Issue,” she worked “to produce stories that save
our lives,”\(^\text{32}\) attesting to the interconnected politics of aesthetic representation and black
women’s political identification.


\(^{32}\) Bambara, Toni Cade. “Salvation Is the Issue,” 47.
The Salt Eaters lends itself to a black feminist observation of the authentic—that is, the identification of a cultural account for political identity—by engaging these politics, illustrating the social context that inaugurates the process of self-constitution. Velma is the chief administrator for the social protest organizations of Claybourne. In the Southwest Community Infirmary, a fabled spiritualist healer, Minnie Ransom, urges Velma to “find meaning where [she is] put,” attributing her psychic illness to the withdrawal of her communal self, which must determine its “way of being in the world” from a “Babel of paths before her.” Velma’s psychic convalescence rests largely on her own conviction to be well; and as her spiritualist interlocutor probes her consciousness, Velma “spins out a song” from the contents of her memory that maps the relationship between the denizens of Claybourne who convene at the infirmary for a spring festival at the moment of Velma’s full recovery. She achieves spiritual or psychic “wholeness” via a narrative account that re-incorporates her into this social matrix.

In the course of Velma’s anamnesis, the novel illustrates the social movement politics that undergird the community of Claybourne and constitute the sociopolitical context of the novel itself. In her article contribution to Barbara Smith’s Home Girls (1984), the title of which signifies on Bambara’s own “What It Is I Think I’m Doing


34 Ibid., 48

35 Ibid. 275

Anyhow,”³⁷ Gloria T. Hull remarks upon the large, variegated cast of characters—which, in part, accounts for the pedagogical difficulty the novel presents—and diagrams Claybourne’s inhabitants in a way that reflects their relation to the town’s infrastructure and social protest organizations. (See Figure 1.) Hull’s tripartite quasi-Venn diagram illustrates the political project to which the representation of a black woman’s psychic reclamation lends itself in service, for the novel, like Hull’s diagram, reveals a projection of the political—the scene of strategic coalition-building among the social organizations that render black subjects visible to one another. The metaphysical element, here, emerges as a primary institutional medium that orchestrates the various psychic identifications that make up individual subjectivity. In this sense, the organizations of Claybourne together represent the substance of subjectivity. In narrativizing Claybourne’s fragmentation, the novel accounts for the communal emergence of Velma as citizen-subject.

The Political Community and Radical Democratic Citizenship

In its representation of Claybourne’s institutional matrix, the novel also reveals its radical democratic thinking, particularly in its conception of citizenship. In her critique of the liberal conception of citizenship, with its emphasis on the rights of the individual as well as the communitarian interest in “the common good,” Chantal Mouffe theorizes

the conditions of the political community in an era of modern democracy. A radical democratic citizenship, she argues, entails “a collective identification with a radical democratic interpretation of the principles of the liberal-democratic regime: liberty and equality.” Conceiving of “the citizen” as an articulating principle through which the various subject positions of the individual is expressed, she suggests that the political community emerges in the collective striving for a provisional “we” achieved in the constructed “chain of equivalence” among differentially identified subjects. The constitution of the radical democratic citizen materializes in the subject’s adoption of the radical democratic principles of liberty and equality as guiding ethical principles of conduct, and political agency accrues in the subject’s various social identifications.

When Velma emerges from her trauma “a burst cocoon” at the end of the novel, she has assumed the political identity of the black woman, though this identity is never formally named in connection to her claim to health. The “black woman” names Velma’s divided allegiance between the cause of forming a black political party and her consciousness of an ideological split along lines of gender among the organizations housed in the Academy of Seven Arts. Illustrating the sociopolitical grounds of the black woman’s emergence, The Salt Eaters consummates one of the aims of black feminist critique by giving an account of the black woman’s subjectivity. In this sense, it surpasses the limits of its multi-generic subtext, The Black Woman, representing in prose

38 More recently, Mouffe has insisted upon the agonistic nature of democracy and the political, contesting the cosmopolitan, “post-political” vision in certain strains of political theory that imagine the elimination of an adversary in On the Political: Thinking In Action. (New York: Routledge, 2005).


40 Ibid.
fiction what the anthology can only tell. The anthology, in turn, concretizes the novel’s promise of a salubrious “wholeness,” providing the political terms in which we are to understand the novel’s project of communal healing.


The anthology endows the black woman with political agency by positioning her as a black feminist critic rather than the object of cultural knowledge production. In the preface, Bambara performed the formation of a black feminist consciousness in her contraction of a “we.” The “we” of the first line that is “involved in a struggle for liberation” remains unspecified until the second paragraph, where it then refers to “we women” who are attempting to “get basic” with one another in the effort to unify under a shared political consciousness, and then black women who largely identified with the black liberation movement and “maintained a critical stance” with respect to knowledge produced about women in the social and hard sciences. Differentiating between the liberalist tendencies of the contemporary moment of the feminist movement and the methodology of the majority of black feminist activists who had turned to an historical

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41 The Black Woman, 1
42 Ibid., 4
analysis to project a vision of social transformation, asking whether “women” as a
category of analysis really obtains for black feminism, Bambara explained that the
content of the anthology emphasizes a demand for “clarifying issues” as opposed to
rights, and insisted that where the contributors speak of demanding rights, they demand
them “as Blacks first, women second.” What characterized Bambara’s sense of a black
feminist consciousness, then, was its historicizing mode of analysis. The political identity
of the black woman coheres in a strategic identification with this black feminist
consciousness, which, in Bambara’s view, prioritized race to gender. In other words, the
blackness of the black woman names the sociohistorical fact of race, and her womanness
names her situation relative to a particular moment in black liberation struggle. The
signifier “black woman” does not merely index its constitutive outside of whiteness and
manhood, nor does it name a homogenous class of citizens, for, as Bambara noted,
“Black women are individuals too.” Rather the black woman politicizes a social
consciousness, situating it in a particularized way with respect to the cause of social
liberation and human rights.

In the assumption of citizenship, the “we” of political identity is articulated
through the agonistic “we” of political community. The Salt Eaters figures the
emergence of the radical democratic citizen in the ethical nexus between the institutional
protections or rights afforded the individual subject and the activities of social agents.
Along with the charge to achieve psychic “wholeness,” Minnie Ransom invites Velma to

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43 Ibid., 5
44 Ibid.
“choose her own cure”—that is, to become an active participant in self-constitution. The infirmary, as the institutional site of spiritualist media, inaugurates this process by empowering Velma to constitute herself as subject. What political theorist Barbara Cruikshank calls “technologies of democratic citizenship” explains the phenomenon of political agency that is both a form of freedom or resistance to state power and domination by the state. Examining the specious division between state authority and the citizen-subject in reformist and democratic discourses, Cruikshank argues, following Foucault, that the production of the citizen-subject is a strategy of government, that the political emerges in the very constitution of the subject, and that “political power is exercised both upon and through the citizen-subject at the level of small things, in the material, learned, and habitual ways we embody citizenship.” Cruikshank argues that to posit modes of resistance within a liberal constitutional schema, we must understand the workings of power, and she historicizes the terms in which reformist thinkers from the mid-nineteenth century to the present have rethought the social as the grounds on which to politicize social problems—that is, to de-localize them from the sphere of administrative government and render them available to the “strategic field” of political

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45 The Salt Eaters, 103


48 Ibid., 124
action. She suggests that the “liberal arts of governance” describes the indirect means by which the liberal state harmonizes the interests of individual subjects and civil society. In this schema, the political does not constitute the domain of a so-called “public” resistance to power or a scene of action detached from a civic realm of de-politicized subjects, as was argued by Hannah Arendt in *The Human Condition*. Liberated from an administrative sphere, democracy is neither reducible to electoral politics nor is it the solution to social inequities, as such liberal theorists as John Dewey, Robert Dahl, and John Rawls implied. Rather the political emerges in the exercise of liberty on the part of individual citizens who struggle to embody power within a liberal democratic framework—the very governmental structure that willed the subjective agency of the citizen in the first place. Equality accrues in the preponderance of the democratic desire for citizenship grounded in the constitution of the subject, and a projection of radical democracy appears in that strategic dimension of embodiment.

In *The Salt Eaters*, the metaphysical is an instrument by which to witness the concomitant resistance and subjection to state governance and stages the formation of subjectivity and the politically transformative potential of citizenship. In its references to such events as the Allan Bakke case of 1978, the Carter administration, COINTELPRO, and the detainment and trials of the political prisoners of the Wilmington Ten and the Charlotte Three, the novel certainly invokes the liberal constitutional framework of the

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49 Cruikshank employs this term in her discussion of the strategic value of data in the establishment of welfare eligibility rules in the 1960s and 1970s. (115-116).


US. However, the citizens of Claybourne exercise their political agency largely through the institutional powers of Claybourne, established by free blacks in the nineteenth century. The position of the infirmary at the narrative center registers Bambara’s own acknowledgement of the historical relationship between the political and the spiritual in her essays and interviews. Whereas in “What It Is I Think I’m Doing Anyhow” (1979), Bambara referred to her yoking of spiritual and political “energies” in *The Salt Eaters*, in a 1987 interview she spoke of the metaphysical as a kind of political sensibility and logic:

One of the ways that we pretend […] is to act as though we live in a logical, rational, ‘two plus two equals four’ setup. Yet reality is also psychic. That is to say, in addition to all the other things, for example, the political, we live in a system that is guided by a spiritual order. Now, there is a Western bias against this kind of thinking that goes back in this country to the Pilgrims […] [T]hey proceeded to ban the drum, ban smoke signals, and ban what they called fetish religions. In its place, they would impose a system of logic on the American psyche, the American sensibility, the American political reality, and, indeed, American life an literature that was aimed all the while at a total control of society by a few.

Contextualizing her sense of the relationship between the political and the metaphysical in terms of the cultural conflict between pilgrims and indigenous populations, Bambara located the foundation of a discursive division between the secular (i.e. state governance) and the “sacred,” which masks the religious conflict at the core of modern US American democracy and nationalism. She went on to explain that state governance in the US is founded on a tradition of cultural repression that informs Western cultural knowledge and patterns of expression and that excludes the “intelligence channels” of the clairvoyant and

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the psychically adept.\textsuperscript{54} Full assimilation to an American sensibility begs repression of those cultural art forms that escape the discursive limits of political thought and an Enlightenment ideology of rationalism and scientficity.

Although her historicization of American nationalism posits the metaphysical in opposition to the state, understanding the metaphysical as the exclusive province of the oppressed, Bambara implicitly suggested that the construction of the secular is founded on the repression of a cosmological conflict. Russ Castronovo’s studies\textsuperscript{55} of the relationship between occult methodologies and democratic politics in the nineteenth century document the fantasy about interiority at the core of democratic governance. Castronovo, who, like Cruikshank, decries the invocation of democracy as a virtue in itself, argues that a preoccupation with death and the afterlife allowed not only democratic theorists to demarcate the boundaries of the social body, imagining a disembodied soul as the basis for democratic equality, but also those who suffered a social death to disrupt the state technology of citizenship with various forms of differentiated embodiment via print media. In light of this history, the invocation of the metaphysical in \textit{The Salt Eaters} disrupts a liberalist US American schema with epistemological formations that, though culturally on the margins by late twentieth-century standards, are endemic to nineteenth-century discourses of democratic citizenship.

\textsuperscript{54} Ibid.

The institutional function of the metaphysical, in this sense, is strategically both exterior and interior to the state. Minnie Ransom’s call for “wholeness” enacts the recovery of the unspecified, culturally repressed cosmology, which serves as a disruptive counter-memory. Bambara rejected the idea of an undifferentiated soul that exists prior to democratic engineering, positing instead a cognitive capacity to decode the sociohistorical grounds of political embodiment. The folk allusion to salt-eating frames the objective of the spiritual rites performed on Velma: to determine “the difference between snakes and serpents, the difference between eating salt as an antidote to snakebite and turning into salt, succumbing to the serpent.”⁵⁶ In “What It Is I Think I’m Doing Anyhow,” Bambara explained that the salt metaphor alludes to both the partial antidote for snakebite and the biblical parable of Lot’s wife and likewise has a dual function in her theorization of the political. In its function as antidote, the metaphor suggests that “to struggle, to develop, one needs to master ways to neutralize poisons.”⁵⁷ Velma finds her allegiance divided between the political organizations of Claybourne and the Master’s Mind in part because of an attempt to negotiate between these institutional structures in terms of the very sociological frameworks—the “useless structures, senseless clutter”—that have contributed to the cultural deprecation of African Americans. In gaining the critical distance that occult methodologies afford, Velma quells epistemic violence by observing its systematicity.

Velma “succumbs to the serpent” when she submits, as if by choice, to a neurosis.

Finding the terms to articulate her condition in the lyrics sung by a “sassy twenties

⁵⁶ The Salt Eaters, 8
⁵⁷ Bambara, “What It Is I Think I’m Doing Anyhow,” 166
⁵⁸ The Salt Eaters, 147
singer”—“Wiiild women doan worreee, wild women doan have no bluuzzzzzz”—she wonders, “[W]hat good did wild do you, since there was always some low-life gruesome gang bang raping lawless careless pesty last straw nasty thing ready to pounce[?]”\(^{59}\) She locates the serpent in the local and global power arrangements that come to be enacted by members of her own community. In the face of these sinister societal elements, Velma disengages from her political work, retreating to her nervous condition. In reference to the salt metaphor’s biblical allusion to Lot’s wife, Bambara explains, “Without a belief in the capacity for transformation, one can become ossified.”\(^{61}\) Velma’s neurosis, in other words, is symptomatic of her loss of faith in political struggle. Her withdrawal from the community precludes the cognitive assumption of political agency.

Just as Velma’s psychic withdrawal from the community reveals the connection between the civic and political spheres, the novel theorizes the relationship between the metaphysical and the political through a conception of communal or collective action. The Old Tree, planted by the free coloreds of Claybourne in 1871 as a gift to Claybourne’s future generations and as a marker of the site of the Infirmary should it be destroyed by anti-black mob violence, metaphorizes the politicization of the community. Bordering the edifice of the infirmary and nurtured by ceremonial loa, or “laws alive,” the tree’s branches stretch “out and up over the first story as the collective mind grew […] The flowers, knotty black hard then berry brown, then lavender and luminous,

\(^{59}\) Ibid., 262

\(^{60}\) Ibid., 278

\(^{61}\) Bambara, “What It Is I Think I’m Doing Anyhow,” 166.
promising the perfect fruit of communal actions.”⁶² The illustration analogizes the growth of the tree to the development of a collective consciousness or identification that generates communal action and political solidarity. In its ties to the ordering principle of the metaphysical, the tree denaturalizes the emergence of the political by exposing the psychoanalytic identifications at the core of communal belonging and political identity.

Of course Velma’s own psychic devolution calls attention to the impossibility of communal action—hence, the divided camps of the Academy and the beginning of political struggle among collective factions. In the attempt at communal solidarity, Velma recognizes the “serpent” at work in collective action—particularly, in the kind of political coalitions that require some degree of renunciation of one’s cultural and political allegiances. She attributes her madness in part to her failure to “stay centered in the best of her people’s traditions” and “not become anesthetized by dazzling performances with somebody else’s aesthetic.”⁶³ Insofar as an expressive tradition, which Velma catalogues when she ponders the means to building immunity to “the sting of the serpent”—“Douglass, Tubman, the slave narratives, the songs, the fables, Delaney, Ida Wells, Blyden, DuBois, Garvey, the singers, her parents, Malcolm, Coltrane, the poets, her comrades, her godmother, her neighbors”⁶⁴—constitutes the cultural grounds on which a black political legibility is founded, Velma understands the integrity of her political agency to rest on her assumption of a political identity. Her participation in the various social protest organizations of the Academy reveals the composite of loyalties that come to be unified under her emergent political identification.

⁶² The Salt Eaters, 146
⁶³ Ibid., 258
⁶⁴ Ibid., 258
Understanding her fall into the “chasm” between the political and metaphysical institutions of Claybourne as the beginning of her recovery, Velma interprets “centeredness” as the bridging of institutional gaps. The serpent appears when the community that identifies in terms of one political identity begs the whole of her allegiance or appropriates the strategies of another community, making “could-be cadres into cargo cults” and rendering the co-opted identity illegible in terms of its former cultural signification. In the 1980 interview, Bambara differentiated between coalition politics-turned-strategic appropriation and a common program when she suggested that coalition politics often involves the adoption “of someone else’s interests, someone else’s agenda”—echoing Velma’s sentiments in a debate with her prayer partner, Jamahl, in the marshes. Velma remonstrates with him about his abstractionist tendency to locate the key to political solidarity in the traditions of “somebody else’s culture,” arguing instead that “the key was to be centered in the best of one’s traditions.” Velma discovers the interconnected constructs of communal belonging and political identity, suggesting that the cultivation of a cultural tradition solidifies political intelligibility by accounting for the sociohistorical emergence and situatedness of identity. The individual’s assumption of political agency presupposes a collective identification with a cultural tradition that delimits the collective’s grounds of commonness. To adopt “someone’s else’s aesthetic” is to forget the local specificity of the subject’s sociohistorical situation.

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65 Ibid., 147
66 Ibid., 258
67 Salaam, 50
68 The Salt Eaters, 169
Crucial to Bambara’s model of the political is the kind of strategizing that entails the recognition of commonness among political factions. In the 1980 interview with Salaam, Bambara imagined the fulfillment of a political “call” for a common program in the novel’s representation of institutions governed by Claybourne’s black inhabitants. The Master’s Mind comprises a circle of twelve spiritualist healers who “merge the best of so-called traditional medicine with the most humane of so-called modern medicine.” Velma’s husband, James “Obie” Henry, bridges the “gap” between medicine and “warriors” (i.e., guerrilla militants) as the primary organizer for the Academy of the Seven Arts, a cultural junction where “the performing arts, the martial arts, the medical arts, the scientific arts, and the arts and humanities were taught without credit and drew from the ranks of workers, dropouts, students, house-wives, ex-cons, vets, church folk, professionals, an alarming number of change agents.” The Seven Sisters, a traveling performance troupe of “Third World” political activists, represent not only the black feminist interest in building coalitions among Third World women of color but also a bridge between “the political worldview and the artistic worldview.” Obie also belongs to the Brotherhood, a black nationalist-type organization that seeks to organize an independent black political party. From a black radical ad-hoc committee that includes members of the Brotherhood emerges the Women for Action caucus, a black feminist adjunct organized in response to the marginalization of the committee’s black female members.

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69 Salaam, 50

70 The Salt Eaters, 120

71 Salaam, 50
The novel illustrates the relationship between these various political and cultural factions in terms of a tradition of black radical organizing. It also critiques the ideological undercurrent of black radicalism by revealing what Obie calls “a replay of all the old ideological splits” while he ponders the Academy’s progress toward the formation of an independent black political party: “the street youth as vanguard, the workers as vanguard; self-determination in the Black Belt, Black rule of U.S.A.; strategic coalitions, independent political actions.”

Whereas cultural traditions reveal the trajectory of instantiations of political solidarity, political traditions have the potential to overdetermine political action in the present moment, reducing political strategy to ideological impulse. Unable to disaggregate the ideological weight of past traditions from the present moment of political objectives, James himself understands the project of forming an independent black political party to be a fulfillment of the aims of the Colored People’s Conventions of the nineteenth century and the African Brotherhood of the 1920s. The reason for the Academy’s current organizational splintering, the novel suggests, is a political climate saddled by the de-historicizing, ideological force of tradition itself.

The black feminist organizations of Claybourne are just as culpable of the reduction of political action to ideological impulses. At a moment when Velma recalls her activist work in the Women for Action caucus, particularly her input at an ad hoc committee meeting at the Patterson Professional Building where a loosely organized group of community members discuss the labor movement and Jay Patterson’s campaign for county commissioner, the decision on the part of the caucus to splinter from the

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72 The Salt Eaters, 90
Brotherhood is compared to that of black women in the Communist Party in the 1940s, the Ida B. Wells Club women of 1913, and African American sororities.\textsuperscript{73} What would be a “loosely strung group of colleagues, chums, frat brothers, soror sisters, business partners, co-workers, neighbors” that “sometimes called itself a committee of this organization or a task force of that association or a support group of this cause or an auxiliary group of that”\textsuperscript{74} quickly splits along lines of gender as a result of Patterson’s push for a more formal organizational structure and the caucus women’s frustration about bearing the brunt of the committee organizing. Fearing that their caucus would find itself “sacrificed on the altar of male ego,”\textsuperscript{75} interpreting the request to curb their input as new members as a sexist indictment of insubordination to black male leadership, the women declare the ad hoc committee to be at a crossroads and formalize their caucus, moving its headquarters from the Academy to Velma’s sister, Palma’s studio.

Where Velma is concerned, gender politics appears as the progenitor of political dissonance, but Minnie Ransom’s charge to achieve “wholeness,” originally posed to Velma, reverberates throughout the novel as the solution to every source of ideological dissension in the Academy. The strategic efficacy of wholeness emerges not so much in terms of its curative connotations but rather in its projection of ethical closure. As Obie laments the lack of “Third World solidarity” among the Academy’s organizations, deciding that his home and the Academy were “all of a piece with Velma around,” he

\textsuperscript{73} Ibid., 27
\textsuperscript{74} Ibid., 26
\textsuperscript{75} Ibid.
recalls the words of Sophie Heywood of the Master’s Mind: “Have to be whole to see whole,” a logic that imagines the subject’s relation to its constitutive outside.

According to Sophie, the ideological splits at the Academy are symptomatic of a greater division between the “material” and the “natural” world. This invocation of the material and the natural combines an Althusserian sense of the materiality of ideology—that is, the imagined relationship of individuals to the real relations of production in which they live and the ahistorical matrix that interpellates the always-already subject—and a Kantian sense of the split between the phenomenal and noumenal world. On the bus that carries the Seven Sisters to the spring festival, a moment of silence ensues when the bus driver, Fred Holt, announces a stop at Claybourne. The passengers privately feel a “moment of correspondence—phenomena, noumena—when the glimpse of the life script is called dream, déjà vu, clairvoyance, intuition, hysteria, hunger, or called nothing at all.” In this first of two cosmic appearances in the novel—the second of which I will discuss later—the passengers momentarily perceive the ideological matrix—the world of conceptual phenomena that renders the material world visible. They witness the material or phenomenal world that is the constitutive outside of identity, the “Babel of paths, of plans” from which individuals undertake the self-constituting process. The “natural” world, here, refers to the context of the being, in the

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76 Ibid., 92


79 The Salt Eaters, 89
Kantian sense, that is prior to one’s interpellation in the phenomenal world, or, as Judith Butler suggests in *Giving Account of Oneself*, the social conditions of emergence from which the “I” cannot fully stand apart. The novel’s representation of the cosmic illustrates the drive for wholeness, which is an identificatory drive for self-constitution in process. It is a drive to witness the reconciliation of the material to the natural, the phenomenal to the noumenal, in the emergence of the social “I” in the material context of the cultural script, and the political “I” in the agonistic, ethical scene of address.

In the spiritual or psychic “membrane” or the “veil to look through […] from the concealed world in the far side of the mind” that Nilda Wyandot of the Seven Sisters perceives in the bus ceiling, Nilda sees the materiality of ideology. The novel imagines the possibility of contact with a pre-interpellated self by performing the revelation and critique of the cultural script. The history of the Southwest Community Infirmary explains the base and superstructure of Claybourne. Inasmuch as the spiritual stands opposed to ideology in the novel, the infirmary represents both a segment of the infrastructure of the town and also an intervention in the superstructural fabric. Built in 1871 by the Free Coloreds of Claybourne, the infirmary stands opposite the Academy of Seven Arts at the base of Gaylord Hill—prime real estate for the town’s black inhabitants. Atop Gaylord Hill lies Gaylord Heights, where the Russell estate, “eager to annex unto itself the whole of Gaylord Hill,” drains the main power supply of the Hill’s establishments. Describing a gaslight that “stood like a sentinel” on the Russell

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81 The Salt Eaters, 89

82 Ibid., 120
estate—the family name most likely alluding to the governmental survey photographer A.

J. Russell—the narration analogizes it to the ideological principle of manifest destiny:

The flame in a nervous flicker always. Fire going out. Animals closing in. The
tongue of the flame darting, striking at the globe. Each year a new globe to
replace the one shattered not by the fanglike flame but by the bus riders just
before turning into the lane. Each year a globe more ornate and preposterous than
the last, as if the Russells were convinced it was their manifest burden to bear the
torch, to bring light to the natives of Gaylord Hill.83

The extended metaphor analogizes the relation between Gaylord Heights and the Hill to
the relation between American expansionists and the inhabitants of the territories they
sought to annex. Countering the “fanglike” flame of the gaslight—a fixture that stands in
for the accumulation of economic and political ideologies in the US—in a move that
resonates with a black nationalist aesthetic, the black schoolchildren, chemical plant
workers, and domestics, traveling by bus from Gaylord Heights, shatter the “globe” of the
gaslight, which represents the cartographical US imaginary, jaded by its own dream of
progress. The bus riders’ failure to disillusion the elite of its presumed neo-liberal
beneficence is evinced by the Russell’s installation of a new, more elaborate globe—
representing a more “preposterous” schema of power relations—to supplant the one
destroyed by the natives of the Hill.

In a subsequent episode, “Doc” Serge, a former gangster who manages the
infirmary, lectures Buster, a teenaged father-to-be, about the ideological basis of the
Brotherhood and posits a black nationalist counter-ideology to that of manifest destiny.
Here, the novel implicitly critiques a notion of selfhood that locates the origin of
subjectivity in the self. Doc Serge explains that the cultural zeitgeist of the “new age”—
that is, the last quarter of the twentieth century—is one of the “latent” or occult destiny of

83 Ibid., 121
the United States that names “a Neptunian thing, a Black thing, an us thing.”\textsuperscript{84} Hoping to report the Brotherhood’s plans for the Spring Festival in a term paper he writes for a journalism workshop at the Academy, Buster turns to various members of the community who urge him to cultivate a political consciousness. One of the Brotherhood’s members explains, “You’ve got good skills and you’ve got drive. But skills and drive without consciousness and purpose make you dangerous, man, dangerous to the community.”\textsuperscript{85} Buster’s mounting frustration about the fact that he would not “get what he’d come for” registers the problem of a political “consciousness” that is articulated in terms of a counter-ideological schema. In a linen closet at the infirmary, Doc Serge, who assumes the responsibility of admonishing Buster and his girlfriend, Nadeen, against their decision to abort their fetus, urges Buster to make a principled choice against abortion on the grounds that the baby “might be the very one who will deliver us.”\textsuperscript{86} In self-contradictory terms, he warns Buster about the communal dangers that a “psychically immature, spiritually impoverished, and intellectually undisciplined” individual presents,\textsuperscript{87} describing a cosmic order of events governed by such “laws” as supply and demand, gravity, a democratic principle of equality, reciprocity, and a principle of attraction and repulsion. Reducing the idea of a cosmic order to a system of laws, he affirms and naturalizes the configuration of power he seeks to subvert, positing a counter-ideological black nationalist schema instead of unmasking the logic in the current system he wishes transform.

\textsuperscript{84} Ibid., 134
\textsuperscript{85} Ibid., 128
\textsuperscript{86} Ibid., 133
\textsuperscript{87} Ibid.
In his misapplication of Sophie Heywood’s spiritualist philosophy, Doc Serge argues that religion is “a technology for living […] a study and application of the laws that govern our lives.” He advocates an approach to living in which ideological principles overdetermine individual conduct and posits a logic of communal belonging by which the individual constitutes him or herself according to a set of communally binding ideologies. In this schema, a black nationalist ethos governs the inhabitants of Gaylord Hill and hierarchizes a reproductive law of “supply and demand”—a principle of the marriage and sexual market in which black men harness the reproductive labor of black women—above all other principles. When Buster asserts the possibility that he did not sire Nadeen’s fetus, Doc Serge explains, “Law of averages says you take care of this one, some other young man will wind up taking care of yours and so forth,” reducing individual conduct to a “player’s” knowledge of the principles that govern the “game” of sex.

A feeling of deficiency evoked by his conversation with Buster undermines Doc Serge’s counter-ideological logic. Registering “no breeze of merit, no vibes” in Buster’s carriage, Doc Serge decides that he is out of sync with the younger generation of Claybourne. As he recites a mantra of self-love to himself, he reveals the source of his principled mettle in the divination of black leadership. Shoring up “a familiar wave of energy” in time to the “smart click click of his Spanish boots on the tiles” and bowing deeply to the “women workers he thought needed his special brand of attentiveness,” Doc Serge proclaims, “I am one beautiful and powerful son of a bitch […] Smart as a whip, respected, prosperous, beloved and valuable. I have a right to be healthy, happy and rich,

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88 Ibid., 127
89 Ibid., 133
for I am the baddest player in this arena or any other […] I love myself as I love The Law […] I love myself as I love The Master’s Mind.”

This supreme law that encapsulates the cosmic laws of his speech in the linen closet is that of self-love, which he recites during his rounds at the infirmary just as he used to recite it during his rounds as a numbers runner. Esteeming his administrative gift as a virtue in itself, without regard to the communal purposes to which it is put, he overlooks the possibilities of a politically transformative cultural analysis. His love of The Master’s Mind merely lends discursive content to his lecture circuit. Indeed, Buster enjoys Doc Serge’s “performance” during the conversation in the linen closet.

The novel’s critique of political leadership as the means to communal solidarity is evinced when Velma recalls a boycott of a Gulf gas station. Observing that the speaker “looked a bit like King, had a delivery similar to Malcolm’s, dressed like Stokely, had glasses like Rap, but she’d never heard him say anything useful or offensive,” Velma critiques black nationalist leadership for its substitution of galvanizing rhetoric for grassroots activism and its tendency to promote programs of action that bear a futilely abstract relation to the political community. She similarly critiques Jay Patterson’s remoteness from the community, pointing out during the ad hoc committee meeting that despite the bylaws of the county, his suburban roots render him a difficult candidate to promote to the people of Claybourne.

The splintering of the ad hoc committee, along with Buster’s reticence to assume paternal responsibilities and Velma and Obie’s marital discord, sublimes the broader ideological split along lines of gender that subtends the political climate of Claybourne.

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90 Ibid., 137
91 Ibid., 35
In a conversation with her deceased spirit guide, Old Wife, Minnie observes, “[S]omething’s up in a fiercesome way between the men and the women,” referring not only to heterosexual coupling but also to the rape of a mother in the community committed by Obie’s brother, Roland. Obie’s ruminations about the ideological splits at the Academy conjures a blissful memory of his marriage to Velma before her miscarriage and the adoption of their son, Lil James (who later renames himself Jabari), and another memory of a conversation after Roland’s rape trial, in which Roland, a veritable Eldridge Cleaver, evinces a male chauvinist anxiety about women’s sexual liberation. While importuning Obie to help him appeal his prison sentence, Roland attempts to exculpate himself by suggesting that the woman he raped was “probably on the pill.” Although Obie condemns Roland’s crime as counter-revolutionary, he remains indecisive about his response, revealing the implicit logic of black female self-effacement and black male divination in his nationalist and liberationist vision. He once aspired to “a new pattern of growth” when Velma responded sympathetically to his despair that his former lovers “kept killing his babies.” Asking, “What kind of poor, abused sistuh would want to kill your baby?,” Velma implicitly responded to the connection drawn between the birth control pill and sterilization abuse on the part of state agencies in black nationalist rhetoric, quelling Obie’s suspicions of black women’s collusion with the state to curtail black male reproductive power.

The novel critiques Obie’s (and black cultural nationalism’s) overly programmatic plan to repair the black community. His marriage to Velma in part

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92 Ibid., 62
93 Ibid., 97
94 Ibid., 99
signified a black nationalist plan of growth “for himself, for him and Velma, for the Academy, for the national community, for the planet,” which promises to fall short of its totalizing aims when Velma objects to his infidelity. In one of her article contributions to The Black Woman, “The Pill: Genocide or Liberation?,” Bambara critiqued the futurity of a black nationalist logic that invited black women to compromise self-sufficiency in the present. Bambara recalled her participation in black cultural nationalist workshops, juxtaposing an account of black female participants’ protestation against their sexual objectification and an account of a black male speaker who asked black women to “throw away the pill and hop to the mattresses and breed revolutionaries and mess up the man’s genocidal program.” Exposing the reductionism in the logic that abandoning birth control would bring about a revolutionary warrior class, Bambara argued that this vision sidestepped the question of liberation in the present moment. Advocating the use of the pill as a means of self-sovereignty and control over reproductive agency, she explained that black nationalism’s denunciation of the pill contributed to the subjection of black women to the ills of the welfare system. In light of Bambara’s critique, Roland’s justification for his act of violence renders the black woman’s body at the disposal of the black nationalist reproductive cause and marks the unconscionable limit of a black nationalist ideology of self-determinism.

The novel’s failed economy of reproductive sex likely registers a sociological subtext identified in The Black Woman: the Moynihan Report (1965) and its ramifications for black popular culture. Speaking of a “Victorian ethos” and the philosophy of separate spheres, social activist Gwen Patton suggested that The Negro

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95 The Salt Eaters, 98

96 Bambara, The Black Woman, 203-204.
Family: The Case for National Action “was partly responsible for dividing black men and women” in black liberation struggle, arguing that Moynihan’s propositions for the structure of the black working and underclass family, in the guise of black power rhetoric, invokes a Victorian ethos that disparages the idea of women as breadwinners. The cultural impact of the report unmasked a belief in this ethos among many black male social protestors who subsequently decried the black female “emasculator” and called the femininity of black women into question.

As in many of the anthology’s article contributions, Patton’s polemic detects the counter-ideological logic of black nationalist insurgency and posits a black feminist cultural analysis as the gateway to social transformation. Patton’s humanist solution—a renunciation of the philosophy of separate spheres for the sake of “the love of humanity”—echoes Bambara’s argument in another of her article contributions, “On the Issue of Roles,” where she critiqued the reduction of political action to masculine and feminine performance and alternatively proposed a commitment to “blackhood.” In her implicit response to the Moynihan Report, Bambara re-imagined the black family as a cell in an extended kinship system united in political action. Drawing upon Frantz Fanon’s depiction of the Algerian family in A Dying Colonialism, in which he observed that Algerians reconstituted themselves against traditionally prescribed modes of behavior in preparation for liberation struggle, Bambara argued that “revolution begins with the self, in the self.” What she proposed was not an alternative to black nationalism but its politicization—that is, a strategic prioritization of self-health over

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98 Ibid., 185
99 Ibid., 133
romanticized notions of guerilla warfare and counter-movement. The key to social transformation, as both The Black Woman and The Salt Eaters suggest, is the recognition of the logic that subtends social oppression; and the site at which that oppression could be identified is the citizen’s social context of emergence, where the citizen-subject struggles to embody subjectivity in the fraught nexus of political activity.

Social Transformation and The Ecology of the Self

Like the article contributions of Patton and Bambara, the widely anthologized article contribution of the social activist and journalist Frances Beale, “Double Jeopardy: To Be Black and Female,” similarly disparaged black cultural nationalism for petitioning black women’s self-sacrificial participation in the liberationist cause and famously characterized the black feminist movement as a struggle for “total emancipation” from racism, sexism, capitalism, and imperialism. Deeming the call for black women’s submission to black male leadership “a dangerous doctrine to project,” Beale argued that the cultivation of a political consciousness and meta-ideological analysis required black male revolutionaries to recognize black female revolutionaries as their equals. For Beale, the question of social revolution was a question of citizenship. The participation of black women in social transformation was a humanist venture to bring about a community in which “each citizen can grow up and live as decent human beings, free from the pressures of racism and capitalist exploitation.”100 The problem with black nationalism’s vision of political solidarity was its failure to account for political community, its disavowal of the ethical in its preoccupation with self-determinism. The anthology’s black feminist cultural analysis recalibrates the grounds of political solidarity by exposing the ideologies

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that mask the agonistic struggle of sociohistorically differentiated subjects and that disrupt the chain of equivalence articulated through the radical democratic citizen.

The Salt Eaters in turn illustrates the relationship between the political community and social transformation. It suggests that in order to imagine the possibility of social transformation, the political community would have to re-define its grounds of commonness, which entails a protracted process in which each citizen re-negotiates his/her political identifications. For Bambara, the kind of counter-ideological resistance exercised by Doc Serge, the Brotherhood, and the Women for Action caucus represents a “politics of despair,” as she explained in her sense of anti-colonial movements in the interview of 1980: “There was something before colonialism and there is something that persists in spite of it. It’s that core that interests me. Colonialism was just a moment in our history. It’s a very temporary thing.”¹⁰¹ To formulate a principle of resistance in terms of the targeted oppressive ideological schema, she went on to explain, is to collaborate with that schema. The principal violence of oppressive ideology is its foundational act, against which the only viable resistance is the revelation of its constructedness and the recovery of repressed cultural traditions.

The ideological splits in the Academy substitute for the normativizing technologies of the state by legitimating the naturalizing function of ideology. In the 1987 interview with Claudia Tate, Bambara saw the revelation of the democratic technologies of the state as the activity that characterized the movements of the sixties, which she understood to be aimed at “the demystification of American-style ‘democracy,’ the bold analytical and passionate attention to or condition, status and

¹⁰¹ Salaam, 51
process” that led to a movement in the seventies characterized by “a refocusing on the self.” Against the popular characterization of the seventies as a retreat into narcissism, Bambara saw a humanist attention to the self as “the main instrument for self, group and social transformation.” Bambara’s own investment in the development of an independent black political party, which emerges in *The Salt Eaters* in terms of a question about communal and self-sovereignty, frames the question about the political strategies that would synthesize collective and independent struggle. The revelation of democratic technologies, in other words, brought about an attentiveness to the nature of political agency, which Bambara articulated in terms of the hegemonizing “truths” about the human condition. The interrogation of the political on the part of the sixties movements reveals that the citizen-subject is interior to the mechanisms of state power—that political power is exercised upon and through the citizen-subject—such that social transformation would be won when political agents organized “cell by cell […] block by block.” *The Salt Eaters* illustrates how counter-ideological resistance fails to change the internal mechanisms of state power, suggesting that state power is observed at the level of the individual, whose political agency is also the means to social transformation.

In its critique of ideology, *The Salt Eaters* also suggests that identifications with collective action are differentiated at the level of the individual, that difference and

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102 Tate, 13
103 Ibid.
104 In “Salvation Is the Issue,” Bambara explains that *The Salt Eaters* “in motive/content/structure design” poses the question, “[D]o we intend to have a future as sane, whole, governing people?” (47)
105 Tate, 17
106 Ibid., 13
political struggle result from the contentious allegiances of the citizen. Velma’s work in the black radical ad hoc committee and in the Women for Action caucus represents the principal loyalties by which her unnamed identity is split. The novel illustrates the formation of “the black woman” as a political signifier by theorizing the way collective action often operates under the myth of uniformity. The aim of forming an independent black political party is beset by competing modalities of embodiment and performance. Embodied difference, in other words, is the sign of contentious ideologies—what Sophie Heywood calls “the Babel of paths”—that emerge as performative and principled modes of resistance.

The difficulty of bringing about a black polity, then, differentiates between uniformity and political commonness. The cultural common ground that Velma believes would stabilize her assumption of a black political identity is inadequate for articulating the current political situation of the “community” relative to state power. The tradition of black cultural expression that Velma catalogues when she ponders the means to avoid the “fangs of the serpent” documents the accretion of black radical political strategies over time. Pondering the viability of cultural “centeredness” in building immunity to the force of state technologies, Velma implicitly marks the passage of the whole weight of a cultural tradition that marks historically specific moments of political strategizing into an atemporal ideology of blackness. She thinks, “[T]he workers of the sixties had pulled the Family safely out of range of the serpent’s fangs so the workers of the seventies could drain the poisons, repair damaged tissues, retrain the heartworks, realign the spine. […] But amnesia had set in anyhow. [… ] And the folks didn’t even have a party, a consistent
domestic and foreign policy much less a way to govern.” The “amnesia” that sets in after the sixties marks the ideologizing force of cultural tradition, the willful forgetting of the black nationalist “family”’s political construction. The element that is “missing” from the “political/economic/social/cultural/aesthetic/military/psychosocial/psychosexual mix” that marks the various frameworks through which black radical organizing has been articulated is the identification of a new, temporally specific, and indeed, structurally authentic discourse that recovers the meta-ideological vantage point (i.e., “the natural”) that marks the beginning of black radical struggle in the service of a contemporary moment of political strategizing.

The novel locates that contemporary discourse in the ecological, which materializes the contemporary moment of Cold War global politics. Following her debate with Jamahl in the marshes, Velma begins the quest for the “serpent,” which she finally locates, the novel implies, in the appearance of the global in the local:

She waited. And it was no different from the waiting most people she knew did, waiting for a word from within, from above, from world events, from a shift in the power configurations of the globe, waiting for a new pattern to assemble and reveal itself […] She waited for panic. Panic. Pan. Pan-Africanism. All of us. Every. God. Pan. All nature. Pan. Everywhere.  

Encoding a sort of drive for the “natural,” the narration encapsulates the global, the ecological, and the metaphysical in the various permutations of “pan.” Velma settles on “panic,” preferring the activity of the landscape—the river sinking into the woods, lichen coating the trees of the marsh—to “occur to her” as opposed to societal elements “tracking her, haunting her, terrorizing her, catching her up, taking her over till she

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107 The Salt Eaters, 258-59

108 The Salt Eaters, 170
thought she was losing her mind.”109 She overlooks the possibility of resistance in the analogous conceptions of the global and the metaphysical.

The ecological emerges in the relation between the infirmary and the Old Tree as well as the relation between the environmental landscape of Claybourne and the town, particularly the nuclear power plants constructed after World War II. In this sense, ecology encapsulates the metaphysical and the global and renders the local effects of global power arrangements visible. In a moment of clarity after the onset of her neurosis, Velma recalls the adoption of her son from a non-Western locale. The private joke she and James utter to one another—“I orient myself […] I de-occident myself”—triggers Velma’s pronouncement, “Health is my right,” a phrase inscribed on the archway of the infirmary.110 Recovering the infirmary’s maxim, which had come to mean, “Pay what you can when you can if at all,”111 Velma reinterprets it as a radical democratic principle. Velma, who works in the office wing of the Transchemical Company, discovers that the company is shipping its byproducts through the neighborhood for the benefit of a nuclear plant in Alabama and is under suspicion for destroying the company’s records. Although she resists the danger that the Transchemical Company poses to the community, Velma also exposes herself to its radioactive waste, thereby becoming “an accomplice in self-ambush,”112 according to the philosophy of the Master’s Mind. In another instance of the mention of nuclear waste in connection with Gaylord, Fred Holt recalls a newspaper

109 Ibid., 171
110 Ibid., 119
111 Ibid., 114
112 Ibid., 107
article that reports a lawsuit against a nuclear plant whose former employees are dying of cancer. In conceiving of health as her “right,” then, Velma acknowledges not only a protection afforded her by the infirmary but also the imperative to “de-occident” herself, to cease collaborating with capitalist forces through self-endangerment, and to assume political agency as a citizen in the name of physical well-being.

That the relation between global power configurations and the local formation of a black political party is not immediately apparent to Velma indicates the alienation of the black populace from the discourse of global politics. In the midst of Ruby and Jan’s failed attempt to meet with Velma at the Avocado Pit Café to discuss the inquiry about the Transchemical controversy, Ruby smugly invokes the ecological “buzz words of [her] era” while perusing a menu. Mocking their server, Campbell, who had developed an educational board game for “sophisticates of the nuclear age,” Ruby presumes that ecological concerns are just a diversion from political talk about race—until, that is, Jan alerts her to the ecological danger close to home:

Whose community do you think they ship radioactive waste through, or dig up waste burial grounds near? Who do you think they hire for the dangerous dirty work at those plants? What parts of the world do they test-blast in? And all them illegal uranium mines dug up on Navajo turf—the crops dying, the sheep dying, the horses, water, cancer, Ruby, cancer. And the plant on the Harlem River [...] You think there’s no connection between the power plant and Transchemical and the power configurations in this city and the quality of life in this city, region, country, world?\(^\text{116}\)

\(^{113}\) Ibid., 71

\(^{114}\) Ibid., 212

\(^{115}\) Ibid., 209

\(^{116}\) Ibid., 243
For Ruby, talking “political” is talking “black.” Sidestepping the “nuclear issue” in the formation of an agenda for the caucus, Ruby prioritizes the “local” concern of united black political action over the “global” concern of nuclear power, deciding that ecological matters “are too big for [her]” and limiting the political action of the caucus to its “input” in the ad hoc committee. She fails to recognize that the grounds for collective action are to be located in the social conditions that infringe upon her yet-to-be-recognized right to health, that the rehearsal of old ideological splits merely pits self-interest against prescribed ideologies of conduct. Jan’s recapitulation of the ecological threat of nuclear waste politicizes the provisional coalition among the black social organizations of Claybourne, identifying in the ecological the discursive medium by which these organizations would be inter-articulated in radical democratic citizenship.

In this ecological threat, Velma discovers an ethical impetus that revives her democratic desire for citizenship, constituting herself in relation to a right to health against the material conditions of her existence. Illustrating the constitution of the citizen-subject, the novel locates a strategic zone in the source of domination—the institutional network of the Transchemical Company and nuclear power plants in relation to global power configurations. The novel suggests that political agency could be claimed via the interpretation of liberty and equality not as democratic ideologies that prescribe our conduct but rather as radical democratic virtues to be pursued in political action.

Velma’s discovery also paves the way for social transformation. Following Ruby and Jan’s conversation at the café, a cataclysmic lightning flash, much like the moment of silence on Fred Holt’s bus during which the membrane dividing the noumenal and phenomenal world appears, marks a radical shift in the configuration of black political
solidarity. In its re-politicization of black political identity, the ecological “would radically alter all assumptions on which ‘security’ had once been built.” This moment, the novel assures us, would “have more lasting potency than circumstances remembered of that November day in ’63” and every other moment in which black and Third World political solidarity asserted itself, which the narration catalogues in its allusions to Lumumba, Malcolm X, Martin Luther King, Jr., Ho Chi Minh, the Vietnam War, Maoism, Che Guevara, Fannie Lou Hamer, Inez Garcia, Angela Davis, African decolonization movements, the anti-apartheid movement in South Africa, and grassroots activism in the US.

Here, Bambara’s preoccupation with the last quarter of the twentieth century lends critical moment to the identification of the ecological as the political question and ethical principle by which black political subjectivity would be constructed. Jan and Ruby’s acknowledgement of the local impact of ecological disaster initiates not only the lightning crash but also the last phase of Velma’s recovery and a drive for the metaphysical among Claybourne’s inhabitants, who “run the back roads to the woods” to commune with the spirits and who “tap the brain for any knowledge of initiation rites lying dormant there, recognizing that life depended on it, that initiation was the beginning of transformation and that the ecology of the self, the tribe, the species, the earth depended on just that.” When Velma declares health to be her right, she recognizes the possibility of social transformation—the good life—in the revolutionary struggle of the individual selves that constitute the community. The social agent’s psychic identification with a community is a provisional kinship against a common danger. The ecological

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117 Ibid., 246
118 Ibid., 247, my emphasis
threat posed by the nuclear power plants and the Transchemical Company initiates the strategic reconstitution of the citizen-subject, and the ecology of the self—the sociopolitical context that materializes the principle of self-health—locates the source of health in the strategic embodiment of citizenship as opposed to counter-ideological struggle.

**Coda**

In a 1980 issue of *First World: An International Journal of Black Thought*, the political economist and historian Manning Marable remarked on the various uses to which the concept of race had been put in black politics across a changing social context from the early part of the twentieth century to the 1980s. Broadly conceiving of black politics as divided between integrationist and black nationalist factions and assessing the success of their strategies against a 1970s sociological backdrop that measured black empowerment in terms of access to electoral politics and economic achievement, Marable proposed a “common program” for black nationalist politics to resolve “the crisis in black leadership.” Contrasting his conception of a common program with “coalition,” he explained,

> Tactically, one of the central ways that the dual traditions of nationalism and integration have been consistently at odds has been expressed in the politics of coalition. Since the antebellum period, integrationists have insisted that the only means to achieve economic, social, and/or political advancements for Blacks as a group could only be gained through a series of principled coalitions with sympathetic whites.”

Marable differentiated between the concept of coalition and a “common program” on the grounds that the former strategy unified political factions in terms of the “lowest common

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A denominator” of consensus while the latter sought social transformation via “incremental yet structural change of institutions,” as in the Gramscian sense of the “war of position.” According to Marable, the reason for the prevalence of coalition politics was that both black nationalist and integrationist organizations along with their white leftist supporters operated under a behavioral myth about a “black belt nation,” and that such integrationist organizations as the NAACP and such politically moderate leaders as Frederick Douglass, A. Phillip Randolph, and Martin Luther King, Jr. were too accommodationist to benefit a predominately urban-situated and working class African American demographic. That is, the black liberation struggle had largely failed to define the population it sought to help and instituted programs that neglected the real material interests of a black majority. Whereas black nationalists saw the “black working class” as a sort of rhetorical “prism,” an educated and integrationist black elite used race as an “ideological and cultural tool.”

Marable’s proposed strategy would correct what he perceived as the black liberationist penchant for pursuing the principle of “equal opportunity” without some kind of structural analysis—a tendency he exemplified when he quipped, “Equal opportunity within the existing status quo, to the NAACP, means leading support to the promulgation of nuclear power plants, so long as blacks are hired as engineers and industrial workers.

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120 Ibid., 18

121 Nikhil Pal Singh interestingly places King in a tradition of black social protest thought that understood the symbolics of racial discourse as coextensive with the global reach of U.S. state power. Singh aligns King’s thought with the writings of such radical twentieth-century thinkers as W.E.B. Du Bois as well as such Black Power nationalists as Huey P. Newton, Bobby Seale, and Eldridge Cleaver, who described black power as “a projection of sovereignty,” a challenge to the supposed universality of Americanism. Black Is a Country: Race and the Unfinished Struggle for Democracy. (Cambridge and London: Harvard University Press, 2004).
equally.” In contrast, Marable’s common program, adapted from W. E. B. Du Bois’s 1945 address “Human Rights for All Minorities,” would not depend on leadership at all but rather “independent cooperation around the specific points of the agenda for action”—a strategy that entails the identification of commonly held principles rather than the production, fusion, and imposition of ideologies.

Marable’s outline of a common program bears striking resemblance to Bernice Johnson Reagon’s definition of coalition politics, as discussed in chapter one. Her concept-metaphors “home” (i.e., the nurturing space for the constitution of discrete political identities) and “the streets” (i.e., the site where consolidation around commonly held principles takes place among differentially identified individuals) coincides with Marable’s sense of diffuse leadership among cooperative individuals who identify as members of socially distinct demographic groups.

In Marable’s schema, leadership implies the emergence of a gap in the social between the leader and “the people” that is bridged by ideology, as in his sense of an integrationist strategy of coalition. In contrast, Reagon employs coalition to refer to the project of the political itself.

Contextualizing Reagon’s speech in a black radical tradition reveals the way black feminism functions as a philosophical projection of the political much in the same way as black power. Differentiating between the kinds of coalitions that reflect an integrationist objective and the kind of coalition forged among Third World activists, Bambara hoped that The Salt Eaters would direct community organizers to bridge gaps

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122 Ibid., 17-18
123 Marable, 18
amongst themselves. Believing these commonalities could be identified in the “cosmologies” of political organizations and ethnic groups, Bambara theorized the social in its relation to selfhood: “Everything in [The Salt Eaters], the way it’s structured, the avoidance of a linear thing in favor of a jazz suite, the numerous characters […] everything becomes a kind of metaphor for the whole. We have to put it all together. It deals with the senses and also different kinds of ways to meditate, different kinds of ways to tap into the center.” Speaking of the novel’s structure and its conception of the social in terms of a logic of content, Bambara implied that selfhood is an effect of social membership and that the relationship between individuals and organizations metaphorically reveals the social body in its entirety. The “centeredness” or health of the self results from the self’s ethical relation to the other, wherein the self, as Bambara further explained, discovers its “own best traditions” that would “keep [it] in touch with the best of [it]self.”

The Salt Eaters theorizes a kind of democratic self-health achieved in the process of coalition politics. Bambara suggested that by “bridging the gaps” among third world women of color, between the “traditional” and the modern, between the aesthetic and the political, a self-in-relation to the social would emerge, which in turn implied that a viable selfhood could not be conceived apart from a vital community. The source of that health is “never outside,” as Minnie Ransom instructs Velma, nor is it “out there, in the public sphere or realm” as Barbara Cruikshank argues, but rather “in here, at the very soul of

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124 Salaam, 50.
125 Ibid.
126 Ibid.
subjectivity.” As the aim of revolutionary visions of social transformation, radical democracy is not achieved in the citizen-subject’s accumulation of rights, but rather in the embodiment of the principles grounded in those rights. For Bambara, social transformation was the transcendent dream of the optimistic and forward-looking citizen-subject who identified the momentous possibilities for the global at the level of the local; and the beginning of that revolution was the subject’s assumption of a place in a sociopolitical context of emergence.

127 Cruikshank, 124
CHAPTER THREE

“A Wide-Angled Lens”: Black Feminist Historiography and the Textual Image

“[I]t seems to me that the novel is needed by African-Americans now in a way that it was not needed before—and it is following along the lines of the function of novels everywhere. […] It should be beautiful, and powerful, but it should also work. It should have something in it that enlightens; something in it that opens the door and points the way. Something in it that suggests what the conflicts are, what the problems are. But it need not solve those problems because it is not a case study, it is not a recipe.”

In the past forty years, a number of African Americanist scholars writing on subjects related to black feminist thought have been concerned with the discursive event that rattled the black intelligentsia in 1965—the whipping boy of public policy discourse known as the Moynihan Report. In addition to several of the writers whose article contributions are compiled in Bambara’s The Black Woman, as I discussed in chapter two, such scholars as Joyce A. Ladner in her 1971 sociological study of black female adolescence, Tomorrow’s Tomorrow: The Black Woman; Michelle Wallace in her 1978 polemic Black Macho and the Myth of the Superwoman; Angela Davis in Women, Race & Class (1981); Paula Giddings in her historical study of black women, When and Where I Enter, in 1984; Hortense Spillers in her famous 1987 reading of the cultural “grammar” of race and gender in “Mama’s Baby, Papa’s Maybe;” and Patricia Morton’s account of the “historical assault on Afro-American women” in Disfigured Images (1991) took the image of the black matriarchate and the “pathological” character ascribed to it both in the Report and the debate it spawned as one of their critical points of departure.

More recently, Roderick Ferguson has critiqued the neo-liberal logic of the Report in its definitions of the democratic principles of liberty and equality as the critical grounds for civil rights policy concerning African Americans. Ferguson contends that in conceiving the possibility of equality of material conditions as contingent on the cultural
readiness of blacks to meet the challenges of the liberal capitalist nation-state, the Report implicitly blamed the difference of blacks from the rest of US American society on the “nonheteronormative disfigurements” of their familial arrangements.\textsuperscript{1} In her 2005 study of black feminist organizations of the seventies, black feminist scholar Kimberly Springer similarly maligns the Moynihan Report as an indictment of black women’s “nonnormative enactments of womanhood,”\textsuperscript{2} citing the evidence that many black feminist writers did to refute the myth that socially, black women were faring better than black men in the sixties. And Candice M. Jenkins situates the Report in the context of writings by black sociologists like E. Franklin Frazier and Kenneth Clark, who argued that black female familial dominance was a cultural survivalism of slavery that repressed the expression of black masculinity in the present.\textsuperscript{3} The difference between the work of sociologists like Frazier and Clark and that of the late former senator Daniel Patrick Moynihan, Jenkins explains, was the Moynihan Report’s emphasis on the pathological character of the black family, and she locates the epidemiological source of that pathology in the cultural distinction that emerges between impoverished blacks and the black middle class in Moynihan’s report.

This critical trajectory calls attention to the implicit indictment of black America that African Americanist scholars have critiqued about the Moynihan Report and the intervention by black women writers and critics in its discursive aftereffect. The thesis of

\textsuperscript{1} Ferguson, Roderick A. \textit{Aberrations in Black: Toward a Queer of Color Critique}. (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2004), 119.


\textsuperscript{3} Jenkins, Candice M. \textit{Private Lives, Proper Relations: Regulating Black Intimacy}. (Minneapolis and London: University of Minnesota Press, 2007), 64.
Moynihan’s report that circulated in public policy discourse was that the economics of slavery had produced a matrifocal family pattern primarily among the black working class, and that this familial structure produced a self-sustaining instability, termed “tangle of pathology,” evinced by high rates of unemployment and births to unwed mothers. The thesis, as many sociologists granted after the release of the actual document, *The Negro Family: A Case For National Action*, was oversimplified in journalism and public policy. Nevertheless, it is this rendition of the Moynihan Report’s thesis that sparked so much controversy and has received the most critical attention in black feminist thought. The actual document is a strategic polemic informed by the logic of Catholic social thought, and, as Jenkins points out, invokes the language of black sociologists from the 1930s to the sixties: Moynihan borrowed the phrase “tangle of pathology” from Clark’s *Dark Ghetto: Dilemmas of Social Power* (1965). This is not to say that Moynihan’s report and the policy proposals it informed did not deploy conservatively normative ideologies of motherhood and masculinity, but to read Moynihan’s document in terms of its normative ideologies mischaracterizes his liberal democratic thinking as neo-liberal and belies the way Moynihan complicates the trope of social pathology. In other words, I am distinguishing between the political strategy of the document and the normative ideologies invoked by its language in order to demonstrate how the document participates in an ongoing discourse about the intersection of nationalism, culture, race, and democracy that precedes and succeeds the writing of the report.

Several texts that invoked black feminist thought and appeared after the report’s release implicitly responded to its democratic thinking. 1965 was also the year that Toni Morrison began writing her first novel, *The Bluest Eye*, published in 1970. Set in Lorain,
Ohio in 1940 to 1941 and summoning the historical backdrop of the entrance of United States into World War II, the novel prognosticates what Moynihan called the “virus of racism” in the lives of African American families—principally, the working class McTeers, the impoverished Breedloves, and an unnamed middle-class family. The touchstone of this virus is the consumptive admiration with the US American aesthetic ideal of blue eyes on the part of Lorain’s pariah, Pecola Breedlove—an admiration that symptomatizes Pecola’s desire for bourgeois respectability. One of the novel’s most remarked attributes in literary analysis is its structural movement and seasonal pronouncements from the autumn of 1940 to the summer of 1941. Epilogues precede each section that play with the punctuation of a grade school primer, depicting the syntactic deformation of the normative convention of the nuclear family arrangement when juxtaposed with accounts of African American families of any class distinction. We learn in the opening pages of the novel that the death of Pecola’s incestuously conceived baby is supernaturally linked to the failure of marigolds to bloom in the fall of 1941. The novel then proceeds to account for how this tragedy occurs since why, as the child narrator, Claudia McTeer, tells us, is “difficult to handle.”

To read *The Bluest Eye* as an implicit response to the Moynihan Report is not a novel idea. A favorable New York Times review deemed it a blend of “history, sociology, folklore, nightmare and music” and lauded its portraits of “those abiding black

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women who so torment our Daniel Moynihans.”\textsuperscript{6} Writing of the historical “backgrounding” of a racistational national history in the United States in the context of US intervention in World War II and its foregrounded crusade against racialized forms of nationalism abroad, literary and film critic Jennifer Gillan points up the failure of the Moynihan Report and US society in general to acknowledge the artificial normative boundaries of citizenship, gender, race, and history.\textsuperscript{7} Gillan understands the Moynihan Report to have advanced an ideal of disembodied citizenship that \textit{The Bluest Eye} critiques in its portraits of African American families.

By speaking of the normative, and presumably, deracinated and ungendered subject position of the citizen, Gillan, like Ferguson and Jenkins, understands the convergence of liberal and nationalist ideologies, filtered through a masculinist bias in Moynihan’s report, to have reinforced a denigrating theory of black matriarchy. Whereas in Ferguson’s work, the Moynihan Report is set in a trajectory of canonical sociological thought and, I would argue, implicitly maligns its heteropatriarchal character as programatically regulatory, in Jenkins’s work, the report’s heteropatriarchalism is rendered more as an inadvertent effect of argumentative logic.\textsuperscript{8} My reading of the Moynihan Report is aligned with the unintentional character Jenkins ascribes to the report’s theoretical ills. For Ferguson and Jenkins, Morrison’s second novel \textit{Sula} (1973), in its depiction of black matriarchs who fail to meet a bourgeois model of respectability,

\begin{itemize}
\item \textsuperscript{7} Gillan, Jennifer. “Focusing on the Wrong Front: Historical Displacement, the Maginot Line, and \textit{The Bluest Eye},” \textit{African American Review}. 36 (2002): 283-298.
\item \textsuperscript{8} Describing her coined phrase “the salvific wish” as a “desire to rescue African Americans as a group from racist stigma through the embrace of bourgeois strictures of decorum and propriety,” Jenkins suggests that the Moynihan Report unintentionally recalls the black middle-class ideology” that informs the salvific wish (67).
\end{itemize}
functions as a corrective illustration to that provided in the Moynihan Report. As Jenkins astutely points out, reading *Sula* alongside the Moynihan Report is only fitting since its final chapter, entitled “1965” and temporally out of sync with the rest of the novel’s historical chronology, clearly references the fraught sociopolitical climate of that year.\(^9\)

In contrast to *Sula*, *The Bluest Eye* implicitly engages the radical democratic thinking of Moynihan’s Report by illustrating its polemical logic, the malignant effect of which was the image of the black matriarch.

My reading of the report also picks up on what Gillan has articulated about a longstanding liberal ideology of citizenship, bound up with ideologies of race, gender, and nationalism, by attending to a radical democratic theory of citizenship—one that presumably does not hierarchize the subject position of the citizen in relation to the various subject positions that social agents occupy. Rather the agent’s various social identifications are inter-articulated through the “we” of citizenship. If *The Negro Family: A Case for National Action* laid the polemical groundwork for public policy targeting African Americans—policies that largely advocated self-help and rewarded efforts among working class black families that approximated the nuclear family ideal—then what we call the “Moynihan Report” is not the polemic of the document but rather the debate following its release and its attached memorandum of policy recommendations.

This sense of the report appears to ask, as civil rights leader Bayard Rustin put it in his 1966 article, “Why Don’t Negroes….”\(^{10}\) In contrast, the document strategically

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9. Jenkins, 64

polemicizes how the question of “the Negro family” poses a democratic problem, for which The Bluest Eye accounts in the form of the novel.

The Discursive Tangle of Liberalism

According to sociologists Lee Rainwater and William L. Yancey’s 1967 study The Moynihan Report and the Politics of Controversy, the Moynihan Report essentially describes two texts: The Negro Family: A Case for National Action and the body of discursive events informed by it in 1965, beginning with President Johnson’s address at a Howard University commencement in June and continued in the journalistic response to the release of Moynihan’s document later that fall. In light of the controversy, Rainwater and Yancey’s study concerned the use of social science data in public conflicts and defended Moynihan’s report on the grounds that it presented the conclusions of statistical data much in line with social science research on poverty since the 1930s. They argued that The Negro Family is a hybrid between a scholarly article and a position paper prepared by “a new breed of public servant” known as “the social scientist-politicos,” which aimed to “present certain social science facts and at the same time argue a particular and rather unusual policy position.”

Moynihan called this moment the “professionalization of reform.” He became assistant to Secretary of Labor Goldberg in 1961 and Assistant Secretary of Labor and director of the Office of Policy Planning and Research in 1963 and had been interested in questions of race relations and poverty for some time before he wrote his report: As Rainwater and Yancey pointed out, a section on “the Negroes” in Beyond the Melting Pot, co-authored with sociologist Nathan Glazer in

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11 Rainwater and Yancey, 17

1963, anticipated his concern for family stability and social pathology in the 1965 report.\textsuperscript{13}

Moynihan’s personal history might account for the connection he drew between family structure and welfare and suggests his sympathetic identification with the plight of working class black families. Born in 1927, he enjoyed a suburban upbringing in New Jersey and Queens, until the age of ten when his father, an advertising copywriter, deserted the family after racking up gambling debts.\textsuperscript{14} His mother applied for welfare, and the family eventually settled in Hell’s Kitchen in New York City, where as a teenager Moynihan shined shoes and worked on the docks alongside blacks. Rainwater and Yancey suggested that his early experience might have led him to draw a parallel between the “wild Irish slums” of the late nineteenth century and black ghettos of the 1960s in his later work.\textsuperscript{15}

Moynihan’s concern for the structure and economics of the family was also influenced by Catholic welfare philosophy, which emphasized familial interests in social policy making; and Moynihan felt that the Kennedy administration’s war on poverty,

\textsuperscript{13} Rainwater and Yancey, 22. Interestingly, Patricia Morton argued that Beyond the Melting Pot implicitly characterized black mothers and fathers of any class distinction as neglectful parents who resented their children in \textit{Disfigured Images: The Historical Assault on Afro-American Women}, (New York, Westport, Connecticut, London: Greenwood Press, 1991), 3. I would argue, however, that Moynihan at times assumed the mode of free indirect discourse. In the line Morton quotes, which begins, “Broken homes and illegitimacy do not necessarily mean poor upbringing and emotional problems. But they mean it more often when the mother is forced to work (as the Negro mother so often is), when the father is incapable of contributing to support (as the Negro father so often is), when fathers and mothers refuse to accept responsibility for and resent their children,” Morton quotes the end of this line, “as Negro parents […] so often do.” She elides the phrase “overwhelmed by difficulties,” which when inserted would suggest that Moynihan is sympathizing with the black working class family. See Glazer, Nathan and Daniel Patrick Moynihan, Beyond the Melting Pot: The Negroes, Puerto Ricans, Jews, Italians, and Irish of New York City, (Cambridge, Massachusetts: The MIT Press and Harvard University Press, 1963), 50.


\textsuperscript{15} Rainwater and Yancey, 22
with its emphasis on community action programs, had done little to help families. More broadly, his invocation of the family reinforced a liberal discourse—as it was articulated in such texts as E. Franklin Frazier’s *The Negro Family in the United States*—that had privatized and feminized social pathologies since the 1930s. Tracing the trajectory of psychosocial thought from Franklin D. Roosevelt’s New Deal to John F. Kennedy’s New Frontier and Lyndon B. Johnson’s Great Society, historian Ruth Feldstein explains how liberal and generally progressive attitudes towards race converged with conservative ideologies of gender to define the “healthy” citizen and democracy.\(^\text{16}\) The liberal discourse that established public policy for such programs as Aid to Dependent Children in the 1930s and 1940s stigmatized “bad” women and mothers, formulating criteria that often excluded working class black mothers and generally depoliticized all women by relegating them to a private sphere. Throughout this period, liberal discourse drew on classical liberalism in its emphasis on independence and self-reliance, assigning a masculine citizen to the public sphere and enlisting the state in ensuring the collective liberty of the body politic. The private sphere was understood as the source of psychological health and women of all race and class distinctions were assigned the position of mothers responsible for raising psychologically fit citizens.\(^\text{17}\) While the question of race became increasingly a matter for the state to address with the help of protest movements, the question of gender, and particularly manhood and masculinity, as the normative grounds of citizenship was not challenged in public policy until the advent of second wave feminism. Hence, Moynihan’s contemporary critics malign his


\(^{17}\) Ibid., 43
invocation of normative ideologies of masculinity, mothering, and womanhood that were quickly losing sway in the moment in which he was writing the report.

That the Moynihan Report has been contextualized within a discursive tradition allows us to disentangle its political liberalism from the vehicle of normative ideologies of gendered agency and to locate the source of the indictment of black “matriarchy” as social pathology outside of Moynihan’s document. Moynihan’s The Negro Family is testament to a radical democratic scenario in which Moynihan the bureaucrat answers the political demand of black liberationists for social equality for African Americans. The normative ideologies of gender that appear in the document are the language of that political demand. My reading of the report draws upon Moynihan as political thinker as opposed to sociologist: The published and unpublished social science data he incorporates is not the fruit of his own field work. In a 1967 lecture series published under the title Maximum Feasible Misunderstanding, Moynihan described the decline of classical liberalism by the 1950s, drawing upon Robert A. Nisbet’s The Quest for Community, as a “collapse of the rationalist view of man,” an erosion of the chain of institutions that “mediated between the individual and the state,” which brought about a modern political lexicon, the key words of which were “‘disorganization,’ ‘decline,’ ‘insecurity,’ ‘breakdown,’ ‘instability.’”18 The argument ran that individuals, specifically men, had been so thoroughly liberalized from the state that they were detached from one another and turned to the state as a surrogate for community—a condition that characterized the state as despotic. In the moment in which Moynihan wrote his report,

he invoked a political logic in which the state would end this quest for community and
kinship, liberalizing not the individual, as in classical liberalism, but the family.

In a February 1965 conference on poverty at the University of California,

Berkeley, Moynihan spoke of the effect of social policy on family structure, arguing,

[T]he primary function of community welfare programs is to provide surrogate
family services. The logic of this relationship has taken us well beyond the
original provision of food and clothing and money to far more complex matters of
providing proper attitudes toward work, reasonable expectations of success and so
forth. Obviously these are matters which [sic] for most persons are handled
within the family system, and most of us would risk the expectation that the
traditional family arrangement is probably the more efficient one.\(^{19}\)

In terms of welfare policy and sociological paradigms from the 1930s onward,

Moynihan’s interest in family structure was based on a policy schema that positioned the
family as the primary unit of the social body. In such a position, it indexed the body
politic’s disposition. Tellingly, Moynihan understood welfare programs to stand in a
“surrogate” relation to family structure, and he aimed to alleviate not only poverty but
also welfare dependence. In other words, he was concerned with increasing the positive
liberties (i.e., political agency) of welfare recipients.\(^{20}\) I point to Moynihan’s February
conference presentation to attenuate what could be read as a programmatically normative
and regressively conservative indictment of black families in *The Negro Family*.\(^{21}\) That

\(^{19}\) Rainwater and Yancey, 20.

\(^{20}\) Drawing upon the work of such political theorists as Frances Fox Piven, Richard Cloward, Charles
Murray, and Theresa Funicello, Barbara Cruikshank describes the democracy of a liberal constitutional
framework—the kind of governance in which the liberties of the citizen are derived from within the
interstices of authority—in terms of the Foucaultian concept of “biopower,” or the governance of life.
Welfare, she argues, conceives of welfare recipients as always already citizens, “constituted and put into
action by power” as opposed to the oft-repeated assumption that welfare recipients are excluded, “socially
constructed, controlled, and manipulated” by power. In *The Will to Empower: Democratic Citizens and
Other Subjects* (Ithaca and London: Cornell University Press, 1999), 41.

\(^{21}\) See, for instance, Carl Ginsburg’s *Race and Media: The Enduring Life of the Moynihan Report* (New
York: Institute for Media Analysis, Inc., 1989), where he explains about Moynihan’s inspiration for his
argument about the “tangle of pathology,” “It appeared to him that black poverty was no longer the result
is to say, the Moynihan Report, both the document and media event, might reveal that alternative logics of citizenship, as launched by such efforts as the President’s Commission on the Status of Women in 1961, had not yet gained their footing. The Moynihan Report materializes the inter-articulated logics of its political and cultural moment, and Moynihan’s speech suggests that his interest in the “traditional family arrangement” was due to its “feasibility” relative to a tradition of liberal discourse regulating welfare policy criteria.

At the end of the February conference on poverty, Moynihan went on to say that “the problem of the Negro family is practically the property of the American government,” in the sense that the government devoted a large amount of its funds to programs designed to alleviate poverty. Interestingly in this statement, the “Negro family” functions as discursive shorthand for the impoverished family receiving welfare benefits. However, in the context of the Civil Rights Movement, the primary concerns of which had changed from legal equality to social justice by 1965, and urban unrest as in the Harlem riots of 1964, Moynihan was concerned with bringing about immediate social change for the black urban poor. In other words, the slippage between “the Negro family” and the “welfare family” might be accounted for not only by the implied targeted recipients of Moynihan’s social policy but also the demand on the part of black liberationists for economic equality for the black working class. Considering the way ideas about masculinity helped shape social protest strategies during the Civil Rights of ‘external forces,’ such as general economic conditions, but rather that the black family had inflicted upon itself its own demise such as to render it ‘disturbed’” (5).

22 Ibid., 24
23 Ibid., 13
Movement, historian Steve Estes places the Moynihan Report in the context of Malcolm X’s assassination in February 1965. Malcolm X, like Martin Luther King, Jr., urged black men to get off of welfare in his speeches. As Estes notes, when black radical leaders demanded economic equality and social justice, social science scholarship began focusing on black manhood and black family structure—the same themes that appeared in Malcolm X’s speeches but that sounded like “just another white challenge to black manhood” when these themes were articulated by white social scientists and policymakers.  

The polemic of *The Negro Family* links the phenomenon of poverty and social inequities with the history of race thinking in the United States. The preface announces “a new crisis in race relations” that would take the nation beyond civil rights and towards expectations for “equal results.” The objective of social equality, the preface warns, would be impeded by a “racist virus in the American bloodstream,” the symptoms of which were race prejudice in the contemporary moment and the “collective” inequality of blacks relative to “the spectrum of American ethnic and religious and regional groups.” In the terms of Great Society liberal logic, Moynihan urges the state to assume responsibility for the “structure” of black families as the ordering principle mediating between individual African Americans who “reach the highest peaks of achievement” and the autonomous collective of African Americans, the democratic health of which is charted in government statistics.

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24 Estes, 106.

In her interrogation of the intersection between the projects of biology and culture in “Mama’s Baby, Papa’s Maybe: An American Grammar Book,” Hortense Spillers critiqued Moynihan’s use of “ethnicity” as a presentist and falsely equalizing term that masks the transhistorical fact of cultural difference.\(^\text{26}\) The implication of Spillers’s reading is that the sociohistorical fact of race as a hierarchizing logic is immutable, and the category “ethnicity” bears the false promise of racial equality. While the categories of race and ethnicity have culturally distinct meanings, in the political logic of Moynihan’s document, they are equally situated with respect to the liberalizing influence of the state upon “collectivities.” Moynihan describes the “virus of (modern) racism” in the United States as a cultural effect of the economics of slavery. As a metaphor, the virus of the fictional concept of race\(^\text{27}\) de-essentializes and dislocates the cultural difference between raced and ethnicized collectivities, rendering that difference negotiable through family structure and sealing the political sameness between these collectivities through the demand for economic parity.

In Moynihan’s model of the liberal circuitry of the US American social formation, it is this demand on the part of the “Negro American Revolution,” discussed in the report’s first chapter, that activates a reconceptualized bureaucratic duty of the state to its inhabitants.


\(^{27}\) Such race theorists as Robert Bernasconi and Walter Benn Michaels have genealogized the concept of race in seventeenth and eighteenth-century philosophy and nineteenth and twentieth-century American literature, respectively, demonstrating how it is a concept that, as Kant explained in On the Use of Teleological Principles in Philosophy (1788), “has nothing to do with the nature of the object but seems instead to be only a preoccupation with our own ends and needs.” See Bernasconi, Robert. “Who Invented the Concept of Race? Kant’s Role in the Enlightenment Construction of Race.” In his own Race. (Malden, Massachusetts: Blackwell, 2001) and Michaels, Walter Benn. “Race into Culture: A Critical Genealogy of Cultural Identity.” In Identities. Eds. Kwame Anthony Appiah and Henry Louis Gates, Jr. (Chicago and London: The University of Chicago Press, 1995).
citizens. In five chapters, *The Negro Family* genealogizes the virus of racism from the moment of the sixties era of social protest back to the economics of slavery and forward again to a projection of collective sovereignty and democratic community. Moynihan describes the conditions of possibility for the demand for equality as the mass social movement among African Americans across religious, bi-partisan, and class allegiances; the commitment of the Kennedy and Johnson administrations to racial equality; the legal events of the Civil Rights movement since *Brown v. Board of Education* in 1954; federal efforts to end economic inequality; and the Civil Rights Act of 1964, ending legal discrimination and de facto segregation.

The challenge to meeting the demand for equality, Moynihan explains, is the terms in which equality is cast. Moynihan suggests that the political moment of 1965 bred a conflict between classical liberal and radical notions of equality. While the “twin ideals” of liberty and equality persist in “coeval” relation in Western political thought, in American democracy, liberty as the “middle class aspiration, par excellence” is liberalized from equality as social outcome. The idea of equality of material conditions “has enjoyed tolerance more than acceptance” insofar as it implies a social liberalism that guarantees equal results, which in turn implies a limitation on liberty. Instead, equality in the liberal constitutional framework is understood as “equality of opportunity,” (i.e., equal liberty). Quoting Bayard Rustin and Nathan Glazer, Moynihan explains that equality of opportunity “now has a different meaning for Negroes than it has for whites. It is not (or at least no longer) a demand for liberty alone, but also for equality—in terms of group results […] a distribution of achievements among Negroes roughly comparable to that among whites.” He warns that without a guarantee of equal results, “there will be
no social peace in the United States for generations.” The tables and graphs throughout the report, admittedly inaccurate due to the slippage between the categories of “non-white” and “Negro” and later determined all the more faulty for the neglect of class distinctions, provide statistical representations of social illness. To represent democratic health and disease in this way does not require statistical accuracy but rather discursive consistency. The tables and graphs arrange the data of government statistics according to the sociological categories “white” and “Negro,” echoing the terms in which demand for equality had been originally cast.

What Moynihan calls “the deterioration of the fabric of Negro society” in the second chapter constitutes the symptom of the “breakdown” in the liberalizing Benthamite chain from the state to the collectivity of African Americans, to the African American family, to the individual. Opposing the normativized image of the white, middle-class suburban American family ideal, Moynihan gestures towards a “discontinuity” in the “American family system.” As the “basic socializing unit” grooming children for adult citizenship, family structure constitutes a kind of organizing principle for American nationalism in Moynihan’s schema.

In Rainwater and Yancey’s history of the report, the February 1965 conference that Moynihan attended generated considerable discussion about the problem of preferential treatment for blacks that a targeted welfare policy implied.28 The difficulty that this presented for Moynihan was a matter of feasibility: The “problem of the Negro family,” as it had been articulated by black sociologists and in black liberationist rhetoric, had to be explained in democratic terms. After the report was published, policymakers

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28 Rainwater and Yancey, 24
were concerned that if the report were released to the public, its polemical logic would be read to imply the inferiority of African Americans. Indeed, Moynihan adopts the bifurcated nationalism of black liberationist rhetoric, locating the most acute sign of the “great discontinuity” in family structure “between the white world in general and that of the Negro American.” I am arguing that the “breakdown” or “disorganization” of the black working class family in Moynihan’s polemic does not represent the black family as ideologically deviant but rather democratically ill in terms of a mid-1960s consensus about the undesirable social “pathologies” of racism, unemployment, poverty, and welfare dependence, articulated through the historical moment’s normative ideologies of gender. Indeed, Moynihan argues that presumably there is “no special reason” (read: ideological reason) for the preference of a patriarchal family structure but the fact that in the present moment it would condition equality of opportunity among the nation’s autonomous collectivities.

In the third chapter, Moynihan draws upon the work of Glazer, Stanley Elkins, and Thomas Pettigrew to distinguish between Brazilian slavery, in which blacks were accorded some protections by the state, and US American chattel slavery, in which slaves had virtually no legal protections. The work of Eugene Genovese, Herbert Gutman, John Blassingame, and others29 to the contrary, Moynihan argues that slaves had little control over the structure of their families, and that despite the liberty granted to them by the Emancipation Proclamation, they struggled to maintain a dual parent household due to the virus of racism. This virus was the cultural effect of the “peculiar institution” and

metastasized to urban centers during Reconstruction and the Great Migration. In the normative terms of separate spheres, Moynihan politicizes masculinity as the cultural expression of the fulfillment of fatherly duty—a civic duty from which impoverished black males were largely excluded. Moynihan historicizes the essentialist logic evinced by the oft-quoted line, “The very essence of the male animal from the bantam rooster to the four-star general, is to strut” as “a particular type of exaggerated male boastfulness” popularized in the nineteenth-century as a “national style” but rendered largely unavailable to black men by the threat of the lynch mob.

Proposing in the final chapter that public policy enhance the liberty of the Negro family, he invokes the concept “tangle of pathology” in the fourth chapter to describe the failed inter-articulation of the political liberalism of democracy and the normative ideology of gender that is sustained by the presumed cultural expectations of black mothers in childrearing. The solution to this discursive tangle of liberalism is not simply the reorganization of the impoverished black family’s structure but rather the activation of political agency—that is, the exposure of black men to the “healing powers” of democratic ideals. Moynihan metaphorizes the military as a crucible of liberal democratic politics and contemporary ideologies of gender, in which black men would momentarily experience a social liberal ideal of equal material conditions with differently raced and ethnicized men and thereby claim political agency, having been disciplined into the “national style” of masculinity. Staging the interplay of liberal and radical ideas of equality, Moynihan suggests that the latter would activate the former in the transformation of depoliticized men into citizen-subjects.
Propelling the demand for social justice to a small audience “at the highest level of the administration,” The Negro Family redefined the question of civil rights as a public policy issue.\textsuperscript{30} Originally distributed within the Department of Labor, it was later forwarded to President Johnson, who used its differentiation between equality as a “right and a theory” and “equality as a fact and as a result” in his Howard University commencement speech in June of 1965. The report was circulated in various forms to a wider audience within the White House until it was released to journalists in August. When journalists reported on President Johnson’s speech and the early policy planning conferences following the report’s publication, they emphasized the “fundamental disorganization of the Negro family” as though the source of poverty were the black family itself and not such social ills as unemployment and racially discriminatory hiring practices.\textsuperscript{31} This reduced version of the report’s argument precipitated the release of the written document. When the Watts riot broke out in August of 1965, reporters referenced “family breakdown” as its cause, citing Moynihan’s report. King similarly concurred with the reduced version of Moynihan’s thesis, referencing the “dissolving family structure” in urban ghettos to explain the Watts riot.\textsuperscript{32} Hence the text known as the “Moynihan Report” could be understood as what Rainwater and Yancey called “press treatment” that “reflects the reductionist habits of journalists manifested in the dynamics of headline writing, the need for condensation of complex arguments (and the impatience with complexity because of this), the interest in ‘human interest’ handles, and the desire

\textsuperscript{30} Rainwater and Yancey, 26

\textsuperscript{31} Ibid., 136-154

\textsuperscript{32} Estes, 119
for reader identification based on sympathy rather than understanding.” It is this sense of the report as press treatment that I contend in my reading of The Negro Family.

After the release of the report to the public, social scientists refuted Moynihan’s statistical data on impoverished black families with new evidence in an attempt to rescue the public image of blacks, which had been tarnished by the oft-repeated phrase, “the breakdown of the Negro family.” These efforts aimed to show that economic disparities, out-of-wedlock births, and the female-headed household were not in themselves “pathological” phenomena. Indeed, extended kinship systems among black families were adaptations contributing to their “stability.” This kind of response, I would argue, targets the press treatment version of the report by rectifying the image of the black family that accrues there as opposed to the polemical logic of the document—a logic that is limited in its strategic scope to generating public policy and achieving social justice after the legal gains of civil rights. In response to black liberation, The Negro Family attempts to answer the question of how to incorporate blacks into the nation politically. While the implicit policy proposal of the Moynihan Report proved to be, as Paula Giddings observed, culturally untimely and “myopic,” its political strategy was only provisionally hegemonic in effect: Estes notes that in the wake of the controversy and the White House conference in November 1965, the issue of the family was sidelined in public policy planning. Withdrawing resources from the War on Poverty and civil rights, President Johnson recruited black men for the Vietnam War.

**The Intervention of Black Feminist Historiography**

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33 Rainwater and Yancey, 154


35 Estes, 120
Moynihan understood economic inequity and racism to pose an obstacle to citizenship and deployed the political liberalism of welfare policy as the mechanism by which the economically disadvantaged would embody the subject position of the citizen. By critiquing the image of the black family that emerges in the press release version of the Moynihan Report, members of the black intelligentsia implied that impoverished blacks already embodied citizenship, implicitly critiquing Moynihan’s politicization of the father as an invocation of the bourgeois individual and calling for material conditions that lived up to a representation of social liberalism. When journalists reported the implied policy proposal of the report as a recommendation for self-help, they re-articulated Moynihan’s answer to the demand for equality as an illustration that cast aspersions on the impoverished black family as a social pathology in itself. Although black liberationists articulated a democratic desire for political equality in terms of family structure prior to the Moynihan Report’s release, the fact of Moynihan’s racial identity rendered his response anti-democratic, evacuating it of its liberal-democratic logic. Indeed, criticism of the Moynihan Report’s representation of the black family revealed the undemocratic nature of the original demand for equality: Although The Negro Family returned the desire for equality in the same liberal-democratic terms in which it had been launched, Moynihan revealed the import of that demand as one for immediate ethno-national inclusion—a kind of inclusion granted by the state rather than achieved via the political processes that effectuate social transformation. Whereas the model of political liberalism in Moynihan’s document implied the derivation of political commonness in spite of cultural difference, the demand for equality of results imagined a post-political utopia of economic equality as an antidote to the hierarchizing virus of racism and the
immutable, transhistorical fact of difference that black nationalists supposed a liberalizing politico-legal framework could not overcome.

In the radical democratic scenario staged by the Moynihan Report, racial embodiment revealed the drive for inclusion subtending the democratic desire for equality. As I discussed in chapter one, black feminist critics later adopted this drive for inclusion in the name of a democratic project of knowledge production. As a forerunner in the disciplining of black women’s writing, Mary Helen Washington, black feminist critic and former president of the American Studies Association, identified a historiographic and sociological project in the renaissance of black women writers whose novels, poetry, and short stories were published in the 1970s. Unlike later black feminist critics, Washington did not name this project in explicitly democratic terms, though she did politicize the work of knowledge production, speaking of black women writers as wresting the authority of image production from their raced and gendered “others.”

In chapter two, I discussed the cultural impact of the Moynihan Report in the debate between black female and male social activists about the presumptive threat of the black matriarch to masculine agency. The culturally entrenched image of the black matriarch, which for Washington and other black feminist critics recalled such cultural signifiers as the asexual “mammy,” the cantankerous “sapphire,” and the rapacious “jezebel,” was the figure against which not only the political agency but also the creative and intellectual agency of black women was articulated in black feminist critical circles from the 1970s onward. In her 1989 essay “But What Do We Think We’re Doing Anyway,” the title recalling Toni Cade Bambara’s and Gloria T. Hull’s essays on Bambara’s work, Barbara Christian remembers a momentous event that prefigured black
feminist criticism: the publication of the August 1974 issue of Black World, which featured a picture of Zora Neale Hurston on its cover and a range of essays that drew attention to the centrality of black women’s experience in the work of black women writers. Although literary analyses of black women’s writing had appeared in previous issues of Black World, the fact that a once little known writer like Zora Neale Hurston had been recovered for African American literary history—this in the context of black cultural nationalist rhetoric in the 1960s that maligned black women and the publication of such essays as Alice Walker’s “In Search of Our Mother’s Gardens” in the May 1974 issue of Ms. magazine and anthologies like Bambara’s The Black Woman in 1970—signaled to Christian that “Afro-American women were making public, were able to make public, their search for themselves in literary culture.”

Calling the cultural work of black women writers in the 1960s and 1970s a form of “literary activism,” Christian situated Washington’s essay in the 1974 issue of Black World, entitled “Black Women Image Makers,” within a history of black feminist criticism and social movement politics both within and outside of academia.

The project of black feminist “herstory” was to correct the perceived threat of those differently raced and gendered scholars who presumably, as Christian felt along with Barbara Smith, would not “know how” to respond to the work of black women writers. That is to say, black feminist criticism, to some extent, claimed the work of black women writers as its sole province of knowledge production. Washington’s

37 Christian, 62.
starting critical assumption was that the black female critic was poised to combat the
image of black women produced in cultural media. Observing that critics in Black
Studies had begun to “scrutinize those negative and false depictions of the Black woman
we are all so familiar with,” she recognized the desire of contemporary black studies
scholarship that pointed up these images to “alert Blacks to the ever-present danger of
allowing whites to create our images for us.” 38 Such a project was undoubtedly an
implicit response to the Moynihan Report that Washington felt would stagnate
intellectual progress. By giving critical attention to black women writers, Washington
argued, critics would progress towards an understanding of the “real black woman”—that
is, a cultural account for her political subjectivity that would replace an incommensurate
cultural image. Constructing a thematic history of black women’s writing, including
works published prior to the seventies, such as Gwendolyn Brooks’s Maud Martha
(1953), Washington ironically engaged the identity politics she argued against, producing
not a political theory of black women’s writing but a sociology that would “combat
whatever stereotypes of Black women still persist.” 39 Washington lauded depictions of
black mothers that did not live up to the presumed personality of the black matriarch in
the work of Maya Angelou and Alice Walker as well as Brooks’s portrayal of the psychic
effect of a felt social inferiority that disparaging cultural images elicit in Maud Martha.
In doing so, Washington implied that contemporary black women have interiorized their
cultural image such that their subjectivity was derived a posteriori from an ethical scene
of address structured by the demand to know why blacks are not like whites.

39 Ibid.
The drive for inclusion in the scene of image making appears throughout Washington’s writings in the mid- to late 1970s. As in Barbara Smith’s prescription for black feminist criticism, black feminist historiography politicizes the scene of knowledge production by appointing the black feminist scholar to reveal the tradition of black women’s writing. In contrast to Smith, Washington politicized solely the scene of knowledge production and not her use of black women’s writing. Ushering in the intervention of the black woman’s critical voice in the enterprise of history making, Washington argued in a 1980 essay that black women were “the disinherited” in a literary history dominated by black male critics and artists and that a tradition of black women writers emerged because of a “nurturing female community” that “conveys to the writer the power and authority to speak.”

Alternatively, in a 1981 article, she strategically characterized the unfamiliarity of white feminist critics with the work of black women writers as chauvinistic neglect that was symptomatic of a cultural estrangement between black and white women, thereby addressing a prominent face in the “collective American psyche” where the reverberating media image of the black matriarch could be found lurking. Recapitulating a literary history of black women image making, Washington observed a favorable movement from an image of the black woman as what Hurston in

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Their Eyes Were Watching God (1937) and Morrison in Sula (1974) called “the mule of the world,” to a “new imagery” that encapsulated the “hardiness and resiliency of black-eyed susans, the hunger and yearning of the mysterious midnight bird.”

Anthologizing the literary history of black women image makers, Washington mapped a literary world that re-assigned cultural value to black female subjectivity—a value that the black woman literary artist would create herself.

In the novels of Toni Morrison, Ann Petry, Paule Marshall, Alice Walker and short stories of Toni Cade Bambara, Jean Wheeler Smith, Louise Meriwether, Alexis Deveaux, Paulette Childress White, and Shirley Ann Williams, Washington identified a “new feminism” of self-definition that she pursued in her edited anthologies Black-Eyed Susans (1975) and Midnight Birds (1980), later combined in a volume published in 1990. In the first edition of Black-Eyed Susans, Washington included biographical sketches of the writers along with her selections from their writings arranged according to such sociological themes of black women’s lived experience as “the intimidation of color,” “the black mother-daughter conflict,” and “the disappointment of romantic love.”

Reading Jean Wheeler Smith’s “Frankie Mae,” for instance, in relation to Ladner’s Tomorrow’s Tomorrow, she understood its prominent theme of the black woman’s upbringing to follow Ladner’s conclusions “in every detail.” As the opening selection, it begins the anthology’s movement from the “unnecessary tragedy” of a girl who births her

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42 Ibid. The title of Washington’s Midnight Birds was most likely suggested by the end of Paulette Childress White’s “The Bird Cage” about a black woman writer disturbed by the sounds of a lounge at midnight, where the narrator, hopes that the Bird Cage would be closed “and we hungry midnight birds will have our chance to swoop at a morning sky.” In Washington, Mary Helen, ed. Midnight Birds: Stories By Contemporary Black Women Writers. (Garden City, New York: Anchor Press/Doubleday, 1980), 41.

43 Her later anthology Invented Lives (1987) presented the same themes as her earlier anthologies across the literary tradition of black women writers from 1860 to 1960, and her latest anthology Memory of Kin (1991) addresses the image of the black family in works by African American writers both male and female.
In Black-Eyed Susans, more so than in Midnight Birds, Washington was as much concerned with historicizing the social consciousness of black women, presenting its thematic topography, as she was concerned with mapping the trajectory of black women’s lived experience. About the theme of romantic love, Washington observed, “The literature of black women strongly implies that in the future the black woman will more and more choose to be alone. Look at the evidence. At the end of nearly all the short stories and novels written by black women in the seventies, the major female character is without a man.” Citing such examples as Pauline Breedlove in The Bluest Eye and Sula and Nel in Sula, Washington attributed sociological expertise to black women literary artists whose protagonists were culturally authentic representations of black women’s political subjectivity.

Midnight Birds expanded the project of the literary sociology in Black-Eyed Susans, taking a historical approach that applied “a wide-angled lens, opening up the picture of black women’s lives in every direction.” Redefining the project of her first anthology as “nothing less than a revision of history,” Washington described the

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44 Washington, Black-Eyed Susans, xiii

45 Ibid., xxvii

46 Washington, Midnight Birds, xiv-xv
interpretative work of the black woman writer as one that monumentalized and mythologized black women's lives in world history.

She anticipated the project of her second anthology in an essay of 1977, where a couple of interviews with Alice Walker suggested an approach to reading and teaching the works of black women writers. In Washington's own interview with the writer who coined the womanist ethos of black feminism, Walker suggested that the history of the black woman's lived experience followed a progression from a woman who is physically and psychically victimized to one whose black feminist consciousness is emergent. Charting these historicized images across the trajectory of black women writers from the late nineteenth century to the late 1970s, Washington organized a chronology of textual images of black women, irrespectively of the publication dates of the texts in which they appear, into the categories of the physically abused “suspended woman” of the late nineteenth to early twentieth centuries, the psychically oppressed “assimilated woman” of the 1940s and 1950s who denied her racial identity, and the “emergent woman” of the sixties whose black feminist consciousness prompted her to pursue herself as a central subject in her own history. Adapting her black feminist history to the project of a literary sociology of black women’s lives, Washington anticipated that Midnight Birds would culturally legitimate black women writers and readers with the celebratory spirit of their textual image, the genesis of a “new Eve awaiting creation.”

Textual Irreverence and The Bluest Eye

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48 Washington, Midnight Birds. xxiv.
The black feminist critical project of pursuing black women’s subjectivity in the publishing market points up the problematic of the textual image, which reduces the identificatory dynamics of subjectivity to the ideologies that name identity. The desire to rectify the cultural meaning of black women subtended Washington’s investment in the textual image of the black woman, and the genre of fiction was the medium by which “real” black women accounted for themselves. Washington’s reverential attitude toward the text augured against a poststructuralist reading of fiction as representation—a position she retracted in her 1990 publication of Black-Eyed Susans/Midnight Birds. Citing Robert Scholes’s *Textual Power*,49 in which Scholes advocates a poststructuralist orientation toward literary analysis—one that historicizes our critical practices and marks the difference between teaching the sacred text and studying its codes—Washington historicized the textual image of the black woman and contextualized its use value in relation to black liberation struggle of the sixties and the cultural communities out of which black women writers emerged. To be sure, her own complex social consciousness, differentiated by various class and cultural communities as she remarked in the introduction to the 1990 edition, was fashioned in part by black liberation and had transformed the original editions of her first two anthologies into period pieces.50

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Toni Morrison similarly historicized her own social consciousness in her first novel, which was excerpted in Black-Eyed Susans. Speaking of the inspiration for The Bluest Eye in the afterword to the 1994 edition and in a 1981 interview, Morrison explained that the novel responded to a conversation she had as a child with a dark-complexioned black girl about the existence of God. Her classmate, whom she considered beautiful in her own right, had determined that God did not exist because He had not answered her prayer for blue eyes. Reviled by what she understood as an aesthetically preposterous request—blue eyes in a very black skin—Morrison found impetus to express her reaction during the era of the Black Aesthetic movement. Questioning why the reclamation of racial beauty needed to be articulated within the black community—why, that is, the beauty of blackness would not be normatively understood and would require public pronouncement—Morrison began turning the story of the black girl who desired the bluest of eyes into a novel that explained how African Americans had come to internalize assumptions about racial inferiority.

Born Chloe Anthony Wafford in Lorain, Ohio in 1931 to a working class family, Morrison once characterized her family as “arrogant” in a 1989 interview with publisher Margaret Busby, explaining that she had never felt culturally devalued on account of her race or socioeconomic status. Disparaging racism as pathological, Morrison suggested

51 The second section of the novel announced by “Winter” and the “coming of Maureen Peal” appears in the anthology’s first section entitled “The Intimidation of Color.” The story of Pauline Breedlove appears in the anthology’s penultimate section on “The Black Woman and the Disappointment of Romantic Love.”


that had black liberationists achieved the democratic ideal of equality in the 1960s, a prior moment would have been forgotten. Shoring up against the possibility of cultural amnesia, Morrison wrote *The Bluest Eye* to explore racism as a foundational social phenomenon in US American culture. In its treatment of the fetishization of color and the importation of illicit sex onto blackness, the novel was a precursor to Morrison’s famous 1992 work of literary criticism, *Playing in the Dark: Whiteness and the Literary Imagination*, in which Morrison weighed the possibilities of fictional representation against the racial ideology inherent in texts of the US American literary canon. A champion of cultural difference, Morrison identified the symptoms of the pathology of racism in the ranking of difference, the fear of proximity to the other, and the idea that the other withholds knowledge from the self.⁵⁵ She believed that the cure to this condition was to eradicate the equation between the concept of whiteness and republican uniformity.

The phrase that begins Claudia McTeer’s narration, “Quiet as it’s kept,” as Morrison explained both in the afterword and her essay “Unspeakable Things Unspoken” about canon formation and the critical treatment of African American literature,⁵⁶ is a phrase reminiscent of a black folk tradition. My epigraph comes from Morrison’s comments on the function of black art. Describing her work as “political,” Morrison once explained that she wrote novels not only because the length of her prose tended to fit the parameters of that genre but also because the history of the African American

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novel suggests that it is one of the primary media by which African American communities passed on their stories.\textsuperscript{57} Opposed to any conception of the literary artist who stands detached from the community for which s/he speaks and critiquing a tendency in contemporary autobiography to represent the solitary voice of an exceptional individual, Morrison understood the tradition of African American artistic expression to be characteristically communal and participatory. The novel of black literary artists, in Morrison’s view, supplanted spirituals, the musical forms of blues and jazz, and folklore in its affective resonance.\textsuperscript{58}

Morrison painstakingly developed a prosaic style that was “indisputably black”—one free of “racial hierarchy and triumphalism”\textsuperscript{59}—not only to contribute to a black aesthetic tradition but also to compete in the publishing market. This style incorporated the tonal registers of the blues aesthetic as one expression of what she called “truth in timbre,” or the form and style that the telling of stories assumes, and as a kind of cultural coherence that she felt rendered US American culture more intelligible.\textsuperscript{60} As an editor of a Random House subsidiary from 1964 to 1983, she observed that distribution in the publishing market posed a challenge to publishing black women writers. When she published the novels of Bambara and Gayl Jones, for instance, they failed to sell to the


\textsuperscript{58} See Jones, Bessie W. and Audrey Vinson. “An Interview with Toni Morrison.” In \textit{Conversations with Toni Morrison}, 183.

\textsuperscript{59} Morrison, “Afterword,” 211.

degree that her first two novels did.\textsuperscript{61} She explained that when black writers were not as fashionable among a popular readership, the marketplace was prepared to receive only a few of them at a time. One of the unexpected benefits of developing a style that was “relentlessly Black” was that Morrison increased the market for black women writers more generally. The political project of her novels combines the aim to be recognized in the publishing market and to cultivate a readership for black women writers as well as the challenge to represent the cultural particularity of the black community in prose fiction. This project of cultural recognition can be distinguished from Washington’s project of inclusion on the score that Morrison did not direct her missionary zeal towards a democratic vision but rather aroused a black readership’s nostalgia for a moment prior to democracy’s near fulfillment. Whereas Washington posited a revisionist literary history of black women, Morrison contextualized the passing of a social consciousness. For Morrison, the era following black liberation was one of a significantly diminished black cultural coherence.\textsuperscript{62}

The Bluest Eye historicizes the race consciousness of 1965 by illustrating its development. This adolescent consciousness in the context of 1941 matures in the era of black liberation, challenging the normative grounds of citizenship and rendering Pecola’s request for blue eyes absurd. That a child narrator’s perspective predominates in the telling of the story evinces one of Morrison’s concerns while writing the novel: an

\textsuperscript{61} See Wilson, Judith. “A Conversation with Toni Morrison.” \textit{Essence}, (1981): 84-86, 128, rpt. in \textit{Conversations with Toni Morrison}. Ed. Danille Taylor Guthrie. (Jackson: University of Mississippi Press, 1994), 133, where Morrison notes the exponential increase in sales of her first three novels: 2,000 hardcover copies of \textit{The Bluest Eye}, 12,000 to 15,000 of \textit{Sula}, and triple the amount of \textit{Sula} for \textit{Tar Baby}.

\textsuperscript{62} In response to a question about the overriding concern of contemporary African Americans, Morrison explained in a 1985 interview, “[Y]ou used to be born Black, and that meant something. It meant that when you saw another Black person you knew all sorts of things right away. […] Being Black now is something you have to choose to be. Choose it, no matter what your skin color.” Jones, Bessie W. and Audrey Vinson. “An Interview with Toni Morrison.” \textit{In Conversations with Toni Morrison}, 186.
affectionate recovery of the past that anticipates psychic maturation.\footnote{In the California Newsreel Production interview, Morrison explained that our “relation to the past ought to be more affectionate […] It’s avoiding it, deceiving ourselves that causes the problem of growing up, paralyzes growth and the possibility of getting through it and reaching bliss, and a sense that you really belong.”} Morrison explained that in addition to revealing a secret, the line, “Quiet as it’s kept, there were no marigolds in the fall of 1941,” invokes the voice of a child who poses as an adult.\footnote{Morrison, “Afterword,” 213.} The child’s voice surfaces when it prioritizes the unexpected absence of marigolds to the trauma that befalls Pecola. The “fall” of 1941 refers not only to the autumnal season but also the attack on Pearl Harbor in December 1941. Thus, by analogy, the impact of Pecola’s “fall” in connection to the historical event and the season is rendered atmospheric. In the opening of its “summer” section, Claudia narrates her mother’s memory of a tornado in the summer 1929, imagining her mother bravely anticipating Lorain’s destruction and “mixing up her [mother’s] summer with [her] own.”\footnote{Ibid., 188}

Observing that “public fact becomes private reality, and the seasons of a Midwestern town become the Moirai of our small lives,” Claudia renders the seasons as a cultural zeitgeist in which public memory accumulates transhistorically and as the normative context that conditions the development of a social consciousness.\footnote{The Bluest Eye, 187}

The novel’s foregrounding of juvenilia recalls a liberal tradition attributing rights to children. Situating this tradition in relation to a contemporary movement of abuse recovery and therapeutics, which invokes a figure of the child endowed with rights, Gillian Brown explains how a political theory of the child wronged by his/her parents in
John Locke and Thomas Paine’s writings produced the concept of the entitled citizen-child that has survived into contemporary discourse on children’s rights. Specifically, in Paine’s *Common Sense*, the descendents of American settler-colonists inherited the common “debt” of their revolutionary ancestors and shared the “common cause” of redressing their wrongs. In *The Bluest Eye*, the children inherit the racialist ideology of their parents. In the character of Pecola, Morrison constructed a singular case of racial self-contempt that is most obviously inherited from the Breedlove’s conviction of their ugliness and devotion to their martyrdom. To recall the story of the black girl who wanted blue eyes during black liberation is to redress the wrongs of those ancestors who were psychically violated by the virus of racism.

The writing of *The Bluest Eye*, Morrison explained, was a disclosure of “secrets” shared among members of the black community and secrets yet unknown to them. The principal secret the novel unveils is that of racial self-loathing—an outcome of an encounter with a racialist gaze. What Morrison and such film critics as Ed Guerrero have termed “the gaze” functions as a number of failed ethical scenes of address in *The Bluest Eye* that situate characters in relation to such normative narratives of cultural coherence as the Dick and Jane story. As Morrison explained in a 1981 interview, the story of the primer represents not only how the national culture of a predominately white populace was presented to African Americans but also the absence of African Americans

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68 Morrison, “Afterword,” 212.

from that literary account.\textsuperscript{70} Throughout the novel, variations on the pristine image of Dick and Jane recur in the smiling, blue-eyed Mary Jane pictured on the wrapper of the candies Pecola eats in Mr. Yacobowski’s store, the white house near Lake Shore Park where Pauline Breedlove works as a domestic, the Shirley Temple fetish, and the “high-yellow dream child” Maureen Peal—long-haired with braids that mimic “lynch ropes,” raised in a family as wealthy as the wealthiest of whites, and “swaddled in comfort and care.”\textsuperscript{71}

The juxtaposition of the primer with the narrative account of Lorain’s black community suggests a comparative framework, and such scholars as Michael Awkward and Susan Neale Mayberry have employed this framework in their readings of the novel’s black counter-narrative to the story of Dick and Jane.\textsuperscript{72} I would argue, however, that the novel’s opening narration of the Dick and Jane story is not the figurative locus of a panoptic gaze colored white, but instead posits the cultural logic that is called forth both among members of the black community and between them and their non-black neighbors. Every character, with the exception of Claudia McTeer who dismembers white baby dolls and whose race consciousness recalls that of the precocious nine-year-old Chloe Wafford, unconsciously submits to the racialist regime. Morrison’s syntactic and typographical deformation of the primer—a kind of textual irreverence that calls its normative application to black families into question—can be analogized to Claudia’s

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\textsuperscript{71} The \textit{Bluest Eye}, 62.

\end{footnotesize}
dismemberment of Shirley Temple dolls: She dethrones a US American racial ideology as a prolepsis to the later emergence of black cultural consciousness.

In its representation of a failed ethical scene of address—a scene to which Washington’s anthologies and much of the critical response to the Moynihan Report responded—The Bluest Eye explains how the question of why blacks are not like whites came to be posed in the era of black liberation. The ethical scene of address that supposedly emerged between Moynihan as white statesman and his black critics and the revisionist history and black counter-narrative that ensued reinforced the transhistorical hierarchization of difference presumed by the question, “why?” The hortatory implications of this question—that blacks should be like whites or that blacks should be weighted equally in the pseudo-scientific valuation of human subjects—fails to account for the materiality of cultural difference and the mechanism of identification that produces subjective arrangements in a variegated social plane. It also structures difference categorically, grouping differences within the social and discursive categories of race, color, and class—i.e., white, “high yellow,” upper class—together on the same plane. The inherent asymmetry of recognition in such a scenario fails to produce the mutual fear that necessitates the accounting of selves by predetermining the constitution of subjects and de-contextualizing the “I” and “you” who address one another. The Bluest Eye contextualizes and, thus, historicizes the constitution of black subjectivity, illustrating how that process is curtailed by a transhistorical logic of racial and cultural difference and proving the pronouncement, “Black is beautiful” to be a variation on that logical changing same.
The novel gestures towards the transatlantic production of US American racial ideology when it describes the West Indian heritage of the town’s psychic advisor and dream interpreter Elihue Whitcomb, affectionately named Soaphead Church for his wave-textured hair processed with soap lather and his experience as a guest minister. The Whitcombs culturally retained their British ancestry by separating themselves “in body, mind, and spirit from all that suggested Africa.”

Soaphead Church studies Western psychiatry, sociology, and theology before he becomes a minister and adopts a vision of “cosmic neatness” from Dante’s *Divine Comedy*, characterized by “the orderly sectioning and segregating of all levels of evil and decay.” Disappointed by reality’s failure to conform to this vision, he writes a letter to the God of classical Christian theology, critiquing the imperfection of His natural order and recognizing Pecola as a figure of impossibility when she implores him to make her eyes blue. He plays the part of God by pretending to grant Pecola’s request and having her complete the task he was too repulsed to do: poison the mangy dog that naps at the entrance to his apartment.

Reviled by the dog’s filth, he mistakes his own suffering with that of Bob the dog who had adjusted to his condition and thinks his wish for Bob’s death to be humane. Pecola effectually completes this identification, which proves to have a hallucinogenic effect on her when she believes she sees blue eyes being reflected back to her in the mirror. She succumbs to madness at the end of the novel in the failure to gain recognition from any other source but her own reflection.

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73 *The Bluest Eye*, 167
74 Ibid., 173
75 Lydia R. Davidson’s 2007 play adaptation of *The Bluest Eye* stages Pecola’s sympathetic identification with the dog and figures Pecola’s hallucination as an ennobled sense of herself.
A moment of failed recognition that precedes the onset of Pecola’s madness most notably occurs when Pecola encounters Mr. Yacabowski, whose blue eyes

somewhere between retina and object, between vision and view […] draw back, hesitate, and hover. 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 […] his sensibilities blunted by a permanent sense of loss, see a black girl? Nothing in his life even suggested that the feat was possible, not to say desirable or necessary.\(^76\)

The blue-eyed gaze of the storekeeper, foreshortened by the fact of Pecola’s blackness, fails to register the presence of a subject. Shamed by a failed recognition and its accompanying “vacuum where curiosity ought to lodge” and a “glazed separateness” with an underlying distaste for her blackness, Pecola interprets the perceived distaste as an aesthetic judgment of her ugliness. Inheriting her mother’s self-contempt, Pecola senses that she has been assigned a dishonorable place on a scale of absolute beauty. Indeed, Pauline declares her to be ugly upon her birth.\(^77\) As her shame gives way to anger after her encounter with Mr. Yacabowski, Pecola foists her anger onto the dandelion weeds that line the sidewalk, declaring them to be ugly and subsequently consoling herself in an orgasmic experience of eating, loving, and becoming the blue-eyed Mary Jane pictured on the candy wrapper.

The ironically named Breedloves do not breed the kind of love for which Pecola yearns—a kind of aesthetic admiration that equates virtue with physical beauty. In a scene in the third section of the novel, where the novel telescopes back to Pauline’s first pregnancy and her trips to the cinema, the novel distinguishes between love as romantic involvement, admiration and physical valuation and love as “lust and simple caring for,”

\(^76\) The Bluest Eye, 48-49

\(^77\) Ibid., 126
defining the former as the product of envy, insecurity, and disillusionment.\textsuperscript{78} The latter constitutes a disinterested affection that the prostitutes who live above the Breedloves in their storefront apartment, offer to men who care to circumvent bourgeois codes of respectable sex. Pointedly named China, Poland, and The Maginot Line after the military fronts of World War II and recalling the circumvention of domestic concerns in the entrance of the United States into the global war scene and Poland’s strategic bypass of the Maginot Line in its invasion of France, the whores harbor a misanthropic cynicism for Lorain’s inhabitants akin to that of Soaphead Church’s distanced love of humanity. Soaphead develops an intolerance for disorder and filth that culminates in an inability to withstand human contact beyond a disinterested lechery towards adolescent girls and ownership of the inanimate objects humans have touched. Similarly, the prostitutes inflict a “disinterested wrath” on their male visitors and become whores for the sake of whoredom.\textsuperscript{79} Like Soaphead Church and the prostitutes, Cholly Breedlove bestows love as disinterested violence on Pecola when herapes her.

As the objective correlative for Pecola’s desire to be recognized and loved, the blue eyes symbolize an identificatory matrix gone awry. In its class-specific familial arrangements, \textit{The Bluest Eye} aligns itself with the logic of Moynihan’s \textit{The Negro Family} in its re-articulation of the democratic problem of economic inequity in terms of fatherly duty. The novel figures the poverty of the Breedloves as a symptom of their martyrdom and Cholly Breedlove’s excessive appetites. Characterizing Cholly as a “dangerously free” man who has mastered the majority of his childhood trials and turned to the solipsistic pleasure of his “perceptions and appetites,” the novel links Cholly’s

\textsuperscript{78} Ibid., 122

\textsuperscript{79} Ibid., 57
reputation as a social pariah whose habitual drunkenness and sexual wantonness disturbs familial and civic peace to the fact that he does not aspire to own property. In the novel’s opening season, we are told that Cholly is psychologically disturbed by an episode in his adolescence when he was humiliated by two white policeman who catch him engaging in the act of sex—an episode which the novel telescopes in its third section. Coupled with “myriad other humiliations, defeats, and emasculations,” the episode haunts him in adulthood and stirs him “into flights of depravity,” culminating in his incestuous rape of Pecola.\textsuperscript{80} Renting a dilapidated storefront, the Breedloves suffer a peripheral social existence, punctuated by the “darkly brutal formalism” of Pauline and Cholly’s bickering and lovemaking. Their son, Sammy, responds by involving himself in their battles or running away from home, and Pecola tortures herself with suicidal thoughts. Their living space is similarly characterized as minimally habitable, furnished by rented sofas to which the family has no memorable attachment and that poison the dwelling with a “joylessness” and “fretful malaise.”\textsuperscript{81}

A source of frustration to Pauline and the Breedlove children, Cholly’s lack of interest in owning property distinguishes the family from working and middle class blacks and likely produces what the novel describes as a martyred conviction of their ugliness. Unlike the majority of propertied blacks, who take comfort in “the firm possession of a yard, a porch, a grape arbor,” over-decorating their homes “like frenzied, desperate birds,” the Breedloves remained in the storefront because of their belief in the cultural association between poverty, blackness, and ugliness. This belief is so

\textsuperscript{80} \textit{The Bluest Eye}, 42-43.

\textsuperscript{81} Ibid., 36-37
overwhelming that each member of the family feels little attachment either to one another or the civic life of Lorain, existing instead “in his own cell of consciousness, each making his own patchwork quilt of reality” and “mak[ing] do with the way they found each other.”

The tenuous familial bonds produce what the prose classifies as an “unstable” connection (in the sociological sense) between Cholly and his children, which leads Cholly to rape his daughter. The novel explains,

[T]he aspect of married life that dumbfounded him and rendered him totally disfunctional [sic] was the appearance of children. Having no idea how to raise children, and having never watched any parent raise himself, he could not even comprehend what such a relationship should be […] As it was, he reacted to them, and his reactions were based on what he felt at the moment.”

In the moment when he rapes Pecola, Cholly’s lust is activated by the hunched back of his daughter as she washes dishes, which conjures the memory of his hatred for Darlene, the girl who witnesses his impotence in the gaze of the white policemen, and a pleasant memory of his acquaintance with Pauline in Kentucky. Feeling a sequence of emotions that run from revulsion, to guilt, pity, and love, he yields to his sexual appetite and a past scene of address he was powerless to master.

The rape and impregnation of Pecola is prefigured by a number of instances that link illicit sex with poverty and blackness and that sanction bourgeois codes of respectability regarding heterosexual coupling. Most notably, in the spring of 1941, the McTeer’s roomer, Mr. Henry, sexually molests Claudia’s older sister, Frieda, who then fears that she has been “ruined” for marriage. In its “winter” section, the novel describes plain “sugar-brown” women who have married and moved to Lorain from southern, middle-class black neighborhoods, created an “inviolable” domestic sphere, and

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82 Ibid., 34
83 Ibid., 160-161
developed a characteristic “order, precision, and consistency” that breed prudishness about sex.\textsuperscript{84}

In the novel’s opening autumn of 1940 section, the Breedloves are ousted from their home as a result of Cholly’s antics, Cholly has been sent to jail, and Pecola moves to the McTeer household temporarily until the Breedloves can be reunited. In a scene in which Pecola discovers that she has begun to menstruate, she becomes a pubescent spectacle for Frieda and Claudia, who educate her about the reproductive body and attempt to clean her in secret behind their house. Their neighbor and friend, Rosemary Villanucci, who spies on them from behind a bush, accuses them of “playing nasty” to Mrs. McTeer, and Pecola, having already been indirectly scolded for drinking too much milk, is almost punished with a whipping until Mrs. McTeer realizes the truth. A circumstance that would evoke shame in Pecola if it were not for her naïveté about her developing body indoctrinates her into bourgeois codes of corporeal privacy and evokes instead a desire to be the object of romantic feeling.

In a later scene, Pecola outs herself as having seen her father’s nakedness to Maureen Peal. Maureen, with the help of Frieda and Claudia, rescues Pecola from the boys in the schoolyard who taunt her about her blackness and the supposed improprieties of her father. In the midst of consoling Pecola, another discussion about reproduction ensues in which Maureen inadvertently embarrasses Pecola with a question about seeing a nude male body. Pecola interprets Maureen’s question as a reference to the suggestion the taunting boys make about her father and responds as if denying an accusation—one that is not easily disproved given the close quarters in which the Breedloves live. When

\textsuperscript{84} Ibid., 82-85
Claudia defends Pecola by insulting Maureen and denying her “cuteness,” Maureen brands them all “black and ugly,” insisting that she is cute. Unlike Pecola who desires the desire of Maureen—that is, the desire for bourgeois respectability—Claudia develops an envious desire for the beautiful “thing” that Maureen exteriorizes. That is, Claudia desires to become the admired object irrespectively of the desire of the other. It is this same unclassified “thing” that she seeks to destroy when she dismembers the Shirley Temple doll—a figure she envies for the “dance thing” that Bojangles shares with her in their cinematic performances. Identifying Bojangles’s blackness with the blackness of her familial patriarchs, she explains that Bojangles should be “soft-shoeing it and chuckling” with her instead of Shirley and develops an “unsullied hatred” for the Shirley Temple doll.\(^85\)

Claudia’s desire to be the object of admiration trumps codes of bourgeois respectability by cultivating cultural sameness between similarly raced others. Ironically expressing a curiosity and jealousy for the condemnable attention Mr. Henry bestows on Frieda, she desires the kind of love that the novel defines as “lust and simple caring for.” Indeed, the “thing” that makes Maureen the desired object does not compromise Claudia’s self-worth: She explains that she and her sister “enjoyed the news that our senses released to us, admired our dirt, cultivated our scars, and could not comprehend this unworthiness.”\(^86\) Nevertheless, when Claudia differentiates “jealousy” as a desire for something the other has from “envy” as the desire to be the desired object, she inserts

\(^{85}\) Ibid., 19

\(^{86}\) Ibid., 74
herself in a desiring matrix in which desire is relationally produced. In the conversion of Claudia’s jealousy for the “thing” that makes Maureen beautiful to envy for Maureen’s social position, Claudia disavows lust in its association with blackness and ugliness and adopts respectable feeling.

This scene, which Washington’s Black-Eyed Susans titles “The Coming of Maureen Peal,” affectively disciplines Frieda and Claudia to the race/sex/class ideology that conditions Pecola’s request for blue eyes. When Frieda and Claudia overhear adult gossip about Pecola’s impregnation, they feel a “defensive shame” in her stead, noting the town’s disgust, amusement, shock, and outrage at the taboo event as opposed to sorrow for the child victim. To redress the town’s crime against Pecola, Claudia and Frieda pray for Pecola’s baby to live “just to counteract the universal love of white baby dolls, Shirley Temples, and Maureen Peals.” Claudia names this crime in terms that nearly reverse Soaphead Church’s consciously crafted “art of self-deception.” In his letter to God, Soaphead describes his family’s conscious attempt to retain their white master’s characteristics as various modes of social domination: “[W]e were not royal but snobbish, not aristocratic but class-conscious; we believed authority was cruelty to our inferiors, and education was being at school. We mistook violence for passion, indolence for leisure, and thought recklessness was freedom […] Our manhood was defined by acquisitions. Our womanhood by acquiescence.” At the end of the novel, Claudia names these modes of domination, symptomatized in the town’s abuse of Pecola, as so many character flaws, explaining that the town’s aesthetic ideal was one derived by

87 Ibid.
88 Ibid., 190
89 Ibid., 177
comparison to Pecola: “[W]e were not strong, only aggressive; we were not free, merely licensed; we were not compassionate, we were polite; not good, but well behaved […] We substituted good grammar for intellect; we switched habits to simulate maturity; we rearranged lies and called it truth, seeing in the new pattern of an old idea the Revelation and the Word.”

Noting a flaw endemic to the social matrix installed by the Gospel of US American racial ideology, Claudia laments the pathology in the ethical production of desire—a proto-democratic desire, to be sure, for civic inclusion.

She speaks of this pathology as an ecological hostility to the town’s despised others. Continuing the metaphor of her opening line, Claudia points out that the “soil” of Lorain is “bad for certain kind 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 not right to live.”

Deciding that love has little to do with the beloved, Claudia discovers the danger that the other’s exteriorized desire poses to the subjective consciousness on the other side of the ethical scene of address. She despairs a social matrix that preordains its subjective impossibilities and a pathologized social consciousness that succumbs to its regime. She implicitly locates the cause of the death of Pecola’s baby in the racialist logic that conditions Cholly’s disinterested violence and Pecola’s request for blue eyes.

The wide-angled lens of black feminist historiography identifies the obstruction that this racialist logic poses to civic inclusion and democratic recognition. The question of why the other differs so vastly from the self indicates a pathology in the democratic desire of the other, and the response to this question, as Daniel Patrick Moynihan

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90 Ibid., 205-206

91 Ibid., 206
discovered and Toni Morrison embraced, is best expressed by historicizing the contemporary ethical scene of address.
CHAPTER FOUR

The Diasporic Bridge: Black Feminism and the Politics of Representation

“I like to think of my life and my work—especially my work—as a kind of bridge that joins the two great wings of the black diaspora in this part of the world.” –“An Interview with Paule Marshall,” June 1991

In literary studies of the black Atlantic, a number of scholars have turned to such West Indian American writers as Claude McKay and Paule Marshall as exemplars of double consciousness whose work defines blackness in terms of the mutually constitutive social categories of race, ethnicity, nationalism, and gender. For instance, in The Black Atlantic (1993) Paul Gilroy turned to the maritime associations of McKay, George Padmore, and African American writers like Langston Hughes to identify transnational and culturally variant constructions of blackness that stand opposed to exclusivist and essentialist notions of racial or national authenticity. In Black Women, Writing, and Identity (1994), Carole Boyce Davies examined the (mis)naming of “migratory” black subjects like Marshall whose transnational belonging would extend the geographic scope of black feminist criticism and theory, which Boyce Davies understood to be shortsightedly focused on the experiences of African American women in the US. In Making Men (1999), Belinda Edmondson examines the complex racialized, nationalized, and gendered regional identity of writers of West Indian heritage who have garnered literary acclaim, often under the aegis of a discourse of Victorian manhood and Englishness, in the case of male writers like C. L. R. James, or a US American literary canon, in the case of female writers like Marshall. Heather Hathaway in Caribbean Waves (1999) similarly dimensionalizes the context in which Afro-Caribbean immigrant writers are read by attending to the cultural distinctions between ethnicity and race in
literary history; and Brent Hayes Edwards in *The Practice of Diaspora* (2003) argues that the “vagabond internationalism” that McKay depicts in *Banjo* is characterized by the protagonist’s “defective nationalism.”

More recently, Michele Stephens has addressed the literary archive of the abovementioned scholars in *Black Empire* (2005) to examine how black Caribbean male intellectuals and literary artists reinterpreted the relationship between the symbolics of gender and national subjecthood in a diasporic context. While Stephens focuses specifically on a masculine global imaginary, her sense of black empire as the production of a gendered economy of transnational movement in resistance to imperial domination has as much to tell about the feminine as the masculine—perhaps more than she grants in her second chapter, where she discusses female characters in black empire romances like Martin Delany’s *Blake; or, The Huts of America* (1859). There Stephens concludes that the invocation of an Ethiopianist mythos in these texts re-genders an African *motherland* as an African *fatherland*, feminizes the desire for diasporic mobility, and leaves little place in the new black empire for the “symbolic woman of color.”

The possibilities for thinking the relationship between blackness and gender that the deterritorialized space of diaspora leave open are foreclosed by her deduction of an ideology of separate spheres from a gendered politics of representation: In her analysis, the feminized space of diaspora is characterized as passive and inert and is counterpoised with an active masculine principle embodied by a male character who acts singly in defining a modern black subjectivity. Stephens’s argument evinces the saturation of the

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1 Edwards, 239.

discourse of heterosexuality with normative ideologies of gender: It effectively adopts a model of masculine domination to describe the feminine Other from which a modern black masculine agent alienates himself by projecting it onto a black female body, à la Luce Irigaray, implying that in black transatlantic discourse, the agency of black female subjects is an imposed signification of the feminized desire for diasporic movement. This reading in turn implies a slippage between the agency of black female subjects and a feminized desire.

Even as Stephens’s argument characterizes diaspora in terms of compulsory heterosexuality, her work also identifies a means of defining agency in terms of dimorphic gender without infusing it with a power asymmetry. In seeming contradiction to her second chapter, Stephens earlier suggests that black diasporic empire does not so much map a hierarchical symbolics of gender onto black bodies or their national and transnational spatial projections as it genders political agency. In her introduction, she places discourses of nationhood and statehood, which suggest territorial boundedness and a limited purview of governance, on the same continuum with discourses of diaspora and empire, which have the potential to mobilize the transnational desire to belong to a modern global democracy beyond the limits of the nation-state. In other words, transnational desire, which pertains to what Stephens terms “a realm of longing and belonging,” is consummated by both affective consolidation in the nation-state and

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In her reading of anatomical science and psychoanalytic and Marxist theory, Irigaray argued that woman is rendered absent by the very masculinist economy of signification that produces her, in that she constitutes the “Other that has no Other,” a receptacle who receives the mark of the self Same, a commodity with exchange value in a sexual-market economy among men, an interlocutor to whom no symmetrical conversational relation is possible. See *Speculum of the Other Woman*, Trans. Gillian C. Gill. (Ithaca, New York: Cornell University Press, 1985) and *This Sex Which Is Not One*, Trans. Catherine Porter. (Ithaca, New York: Cornell University Press, 1985). See also Judith’s Butler’s synopsis in *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity* (New York and London: Routledge, 1999), 131-132.
extension beyond the nation-state’s boundaries through diaspora and empire. Interestingly, she reads the activity of consolidation (belonging) as masculine and the activity of mobilization (longing) as feminine, perhaps following Irigaray and Judith Butler’s sense that the univocality implied by subjectivation has been wholly co-opted by the masculine.

However much black female subjects failed to speak in black transatlantic discourse after World War I, that Stephens casts diasporic longing in feminine terms undercuts the symbolic limitations on the feminine presumed by an ideology of separate spheres. The feminine, as Stephens first poses it, is not passive, inert space but rather a deterritorialized desire that mobilizes the quest for belonging. This is to say that black transatlantic discourse re-works the gendered symbolics of imperialism with little trafficking in ideologies that advocate the social subordination of women. Indeed, in masculinizing the activity of nationalist consolidation and feminizing the activity of diasporic mobilization, it renders gendered agency disarticulable from gendered subjects.

This recasting the cultural symbolics of gender in terms of black transatlantic discourse is particularly apparent when the body of literary representations of the black Atlantic is extended to include Paule Marshall’s works. In chapter three, I discussed how a radical democratic schema establishes a political common ground in spite of cultural difference, particularly in the case of black subjects who demanded economic equality in 1965 and the cultural account for the condition of the economic underclass that Moynihan provided in his report. In this chapter, I extend my discussion of how a radical democratic schema establishes political equivalence among culturally distinct subjects

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4 Stephens, 15.

5 Ibid.
beyond the US American context. Following Boyce Davies’s sense that the US American context is too narrow to account for the complex geometry of black identity and Stephens’s sense that black male Caribbean writers neglected to account for the agency of black female subjects, this chapter addresses Marshall’s prose fiction to determine how black transnationalism accounts for black female subjectivity. In particular, I turn to her 1983 novel Praisesong for the Widow—the last of a trilogy of narratives that illustrates the relation of a black female protagonist of West Indian heritage to her Caribbean “home,” using a heterosexual libidinal economy as something of an ordering principle. In Marshall’s works, I identify a study of raced and gendered political agency in terms of a subjective relation to transnational desire.

For a contemporary queer time,⁶ the radical democratic framework I have deployed thus far allows us to conceive of heterosexuality in non-normative terms. As Michael Warner explained in his introduction to Fear of a Queer Planet (1993), queerness “gets a critical edge by defining itself against the normal rather than the heterosexual.”⁷ Queer Studies operates within the framework of social theory, which understands the social as a “cultural form, interwoven with the political form of the administrative state and the normalizing methodologies of modern social knowledge.”⁸ In its imbrication with cultural forms, the political—particularly in its broader, radical democratic sense as a strategic zone of embodiment, as I have deployed it thus far—intercepts the

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⁶ I presume, here, the pervasiveness of Judith Halberstam’s claim that queer subcultures and critical frameworks have allowed for alternative modes of relation to time and space and that these frameworks oppose not only the normative but the institutions of the family, heterosexuality, and reproduction. See her In a Queer Time and Place: Transgender Bodies, Subcultural Lives. (New York and London: New York University Press, 2005).


⁸ Ibid., xxvii
normalization of gender at the point of our presuming that gender materializes in the iterability of its corporeal performance and cultural expression. That is to say that in a radical democratic context, the normative is not transhistorical but provisionally hegemonic, and descriptive rather than prescriptive; embodiment is never complete, and the political is a queer space. The heterosexualized terms of diaspora describe the agent’s assumption of subjectivity—bifurcated, without regard to the anatomical sex of the body, into a masculinized agency and its constitutive feminine desire.

Black Transnationalism and the Invention of African American Subjects

Throughout the five novels and two collections of novellas and short stories that make up her oeuvre, Marshall features black Caribbean-American subjects who express some ambivalence towards their cultural and national allegiances. Hence Marshall’s contribution to the discourse of black transnationalism, which appears as a kind of politico-cultural translation between the constructs of blackness produced by different political economies, the vehicle of which is a heterosexual economy of gender. With the exception of her collection of novellas, Soul Clap Hands and Sing (1961), her short story, “Some Get Wasted” (1968), and her latest novel, The Fisher King (2000), Marshall’s protagonists are generally black women of hybrid cultural identifications. While in the cases of both her male and female protagonists, the principal crisis is the protagonist’s

9 Marshall’s novels are Brown Girl, Brownstones (1959), The Chosen Place, The Timeless People (1969), Praisesong for the Widow (1983), Daughters (1991), and The Fisher King (2000); her collection of novellas is Soul Clap Hands and Sing (1961); and Reena, and Other Stories (1983) includes a few of her short stories, two novellas from Soul Clap Hands and Sing, and a novella version of her second novel, entitled Merle.

10 In Soul Clap Hands and Sing, each novella features a male protagonist whose ambivalent cultural allegiance is metaphorized by an ethical crisis in relation to a female counterpart. In “Some Get Wasted,” the brute masculinism of rival gangs in Brooklyn brings about the death of its teenaged male protagonist, and in The Fisher King, the male child protagonist attempts to resolve the cross-generational feud of his West Indian and African American great-grandmothers with their expatriate children.
troubled relationship to a national ethnos, Marshall’s female protagonists are exclusively instrumental in the rapprochement between a US American identity and a black West Indian one. This is to say that it is the characters’ relationship to a transnational desire that genders them. In Marshall’s novellas, the suffering of the male characters appears to stem from an infidelity to the constructions of blackness germane to their respective nations by participating in various modes of domination and capitalist exploitation. The masculine agency of these characters is re-worked in accordance with a diasporic framework when they are reconciled to the blackness of their nation—that is, their agency inheres in the consolidating force of nationalism. The agency of Marshall’s female characters, in contrast, inheres in a transnational project of constructing black cultural continuity.

The reason for the distinction between the kinds of agency that differently gendered subjects employ, I would argue, lies in the availability of masculinities: The diasporic framework resists the masculinities of colonialism, imperialism, and civilization, which leave little room for female agency. Moreover, in the discourse of black transnationalism, the desire for diasporic mobility has no predetermined object-cathexis—no body, territorial or otherwise, on which to import the desire. Rather, the masculine agent interiorizes the transnational longing that the black female agent projects of her own accord and thereby imagines national and global belonging. For instance, in Marshall’s first novel, the 1959 coming-of-age classic Brown Girl, Brownstones, the central character Selina Boyce strikes a balance between the opposing aims of her Barbadian immigrant parents, Deighton and Silla, who respectively represent a desire to return to Barbados as a member of the nouveau-riche and a desire to assimilate culturally
to the United States and the burgeoning middle-class Barbadian immigrant community of Fulton Park, Brooklyn via various means of social advancement, particularly home ownership.

Both desires materialize a memorialized Barbadian past: Silla moves to New York on the borrowed money of her mother in flight from a memory of a childhood spent working in cane fields. Deighton, in contrast, inherits the desire of his mother for social advancement through the acquisition of professional titles. In an effort to consummate his mother’s wish that he would practice medicine in England, he immigrates to the United States and pursues several lines of work without success. The impoverished family lives in a rented brownstone when Deighton learns that he has inherited property in Barbados. The second of the novel’s four books, entitled “The War,” referring to a feud between Deighton and Silla that ensues over whether to liquidate or settle on the land and to the historical backdrop of World War II. While both Silla and Deighton wish to escape poverty—Silla works as a domestic and Deighton a factory laborer—they disagree about the means to fulfill that desire. Whereas Deighton plans to return to Barbados to live opulently on his property, Silla urges him to sell the land to make a down payment on their rented brownstone. When she sells the land unbeknownst to her husband, she later wins Deighton’s smug approval, and entrusts the bank draft with Deighton to cash. Deighton spends the money frivolously, enjoys being addressed as a gentleman in imitation of white men, and later deserts the family to join a religious cult in Harlem following an accident at work that cripples him. In retaliation, Silla has Deighton deported. A cable arrives with news of Deighton’s death by jumping or falling overboard and drowning as the radio announces the end of World War II. In the final book, Selina
attempts to reconcile her father’s pleasant childhood memories in Barbados with her mother’s memories of suffering from the lash as a cane field laborer and selling mangoes in the most meager of times: Selina rejects the scholarship fund awarded her by the Barbadian Association that she joins with her mother and arranges to return to Barbados, renouncing the desire for social ascendancy and adopting wholeheartedly her father’s desire to return to their island homeland.

As Mary Helen Washington explains in the afterword to the 1981 edition of Brown Girl, the central problem that structures Marshall’s fiction is the DuBoisian dilemma of double-consciousness, which, she paraphrases, “yields no true self-consciousness but only lets one see the self through the revelation of the other world.”

In Marshall’s work, this “other world” is not a US black or black West Indian one but a black transnational one. Selina overcomes this dilemma by discovering what Marshall called in a 1994 lecture, “Language is the Only Homeland,” her “true true name.”

Describing how the “mother poets” in the kitchen to whom her first novel pays tribute taught her the principles of good fiction—nearly, such topical concerns as the relationship between the personal and local and global politics, complex characterization, and the poetic imagination of the Bajan vernacular—Marshall explains that central to all of her fiction is the theme of women seeking “visibility,” self-knowledge, and empowerment. In Brown Girl, Selina condemns the provincialism in the Barbadian Association’s exclusion of African Americans and the hypocrisy of its desire to imitate

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11 Ibid., 319


13 Ibid.
its members’ employers and rentiers by buying brownstones and renting them to those poorer than themselves in the spirit of self-help. As she explains in a meeting, the association constitutes a “band of small frightened people,” the “result of living by the most shameful codes possible—dog eat dog, exploitation, the strong over the weak, the end justifies the means—the whole kit and caboodle.”¹⁴ After a stint in college in Manhattan, Selina discovers that she would never be recognized as an equal to whites, experiencing first hand her parents’ frustrated attempts to assimilate, and she rejects the Association’s scholarship because “it means something [she doesn’t] want for [her]self.”¹⁵

Selina’s desire for a national home is an adaptation of the diasporic desire, gendered feminine in the discourse of black transnationalism, of her paternal grandmother and mother. For Selina’s foremothers, the desire for transnational mobility is filtered through the desire for social ascendancy. Selina recovers diasporic desire by aligning herself with the desires of her father. In this sense, the novel imagines Barbados as a kind of fatherland, much in the way Paul Gilroy differentiated between Robert Campbell’s emphasis on geographical location in his calling Africa a motherland and Martin Delany’s zionist proposal that African Americans acquire a racial fatherland, the paternal metaphor signifying the “(re)generation of modern nationality in the form of an autonomous, black nation state.”¹⁶ That is, the consolidating agency of diasporic

¹⁵ Ibid., 303
¹⁶ Gilroy, Paul. The Black Atlantic: Modernity and Double Consciousness. (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 1993), 23. Stephens similarly cites Gilroy’s explication of Delany and Campbell in drawing a distinction between gendered conceptions of nationalism but maligns the conception of black national fatherlands as a discourse of individualism and masculinism that can be contrasted with feminine,
masculinity delocalizes the geographic specificity implied by a black/Africanist nation state and unifies the black diasporic community in its wake. Brown Girl, Brownstones adopts the regenerative implications of a diasporic masculine agency in Selina’s transformation of transnational longing into national belonging. Selina assumes this masculine agency where her father cannot.

Insofar as Selina identifies with her father’s nostalgia for home, Marshall’s first novel inverses the characteristic relations to Barbados of Deighton and Silla Boyce from those of their autobiographical archetypes. Born in 1929 in Brooklyn, New York to her Barbadian immigrant parents, Samuel and Ada Burke, Marshall (née Valenza Pauline Burke) first visited Barbados at the age of nine. There she met her grandmother, whom she memorializes in the most autobiographical of her works, an early short story entitled “To Da-Duh, In Memorium” (1967). The story tells of this trip to Barbados, which, as Marshall explained in a 1991 interview with Joyce Pettis, was in part financed with money that Ada Burke inherited from a brother who died while working on the Panama Canal.17 Although Samuel Burke urged Ada to invest her inheritance in a brownstone, Ada entrusted it with a Barbadian travel agent who subsequently absconded with the funds, delaying the family’s trip. Samuel interpreted the misfortune as evidence of his better judgment and declined to accompany his family to Barbados. In the story, Marshall’s mother remarks and her Da-duh concurs that the oldest daughter most resembles their father, while the younger Marshall is deemed the less fortunate in her

———. Stephens also suggests that the metaphors “fatherland” and “community” invokes a masculine and feminine subjectivity, respectively, and that the former grants a privileged position to the masculine by its implied coherence. While I take Stephens’ implication that the masculine presumes the presence of a feminine, my reading of Marshall and Gilroy differs in that it does not assume that gendered agency invokes similarly gendered figures or (de)territorial(ized) bodies.

singularity—a characterization that Da-duh later implicitly attributes to her granddaughter’s African-Americanness and distance from colonialism in the West Indies. The young Marshall’s encounter with her grandmother in turn evokes a longing for the familiarity of Brooklyn and her father and inspires a conflict in her national allegiances, which the story dramatizes as a contest between Da-duh’s pride in the Barbadian landscape and Marshall’s embellished description of the New York cityscape. The story concludes with a dispirited Da-duh who dies in the Barbadian riots of 1937 while English planes destroy her orchard and cane fields.

A generation removed from the lived experience of colonialism, the young Marshall experienced a transnational double-consciousness that would figure prominently throughout her works as not only the black female protagonist’s accountability to the imperial and colonial legacies of the West Indies from a US American vantage but also the adoption of Caribbean nationalism via a male figure, and in the case of her fourth novel, *Daughters* (1991), that male figure was her father. As she remarked in a 1992 interview with Daryl Dance, *Daughters* constituted her own personal effort to reconcile herself to the memory of Samuel Burke, who, like Deighton Boyce, abandoned the family to join a quasi-religious cult in Harlem led by Father Divine. In *Daughters*, which Heather Hathaway reads as a sequel to *Brown Girl*, Primus MacKenzie is a politician in his native fictional island of Triunion, where he becomes the puppet of imperialist development experts. His daughter and central character of the novel, Ursa MacKenzie, formally condemns her father’s disaffection with the plight of his black constituents in

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the process of severing her own filial tie. Given to conciliatory gestures to appease her domineering father since childhood, Ursa sustains a relationship to Primus that metaphorizes Primus’s dependence on the Development Board, until she discovers that her limited autonomy poses a threat to her romantic relationship. The novel links Primus’s patriarchal domination over his wife and daughter to Ursa’s memory of a rejected senior thesis topic about the egalitarian relationship between enslaved men and women, symbolized by the memorial statues of the fabled slave revolutionaries Congo Jane and Will Cudjoe. Ursa resolves both her crippling dependence on her father and her father’s misguided politics by refusing to help Primus win re-election to parliament.

The model of egalitarianism represented by Congo Jane and Will Cudjoe in Daughters comes to inform Ursa’s relationship to her lover, Lowell, as well as her understanding of the imperial relation between the United States and the West Indies. This egalitarianism is described in somewhat radical democratic terms as an intersubjective constitution, a kind of intimacy whereby one could not “call her name without calling or at least thinking of his.”  

This quest to fulfill the self’s egalitarian longing in the pursuit of national belonging is developed similarly in Marshall’s second novel, The Chosen Place, The Timeless People (1969), in which the central character’s erotic encounters reflect her intimacy with the local history of Bourne Island—the fictional “chosen place” of the title—and her ultimate disentanglement from imperial exploitation.  

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21 Remarking upon the exceptional complexity and length of The Chosen Place for a second novel, Hortense Spillers similarly described its textual architectonics in terms of the erotic encounter between Merle and Saul Amron, a Jewish American field anthropologist, from which eradiates “a web of conflict between hostile cultures […] and we experience both characters against the background of entangling
Kenya through an estranged husband, and a colonial tie to the English metropole where she studied history and sustained an exploitative, romantic affair with an English benefactress,\(^2^2\) serves as native informant to visiting US American field anthropologists who work for a development agency. The black natives—the “timeless people”—are the descendants of participants in a slave revolt memorialized in the legend of Cuffee Ned—a slave who murdered his master and the victim of the last lynching on the island—but who are generally uninspired to continue the legacy of resistance post independence until they perceive the threat to their local customs posed by the anthropologists. Through an affair with one of the anthropologists and the return of repressed memories of her husband and child in Kenya and her clandestine relationship with the English benefactress, Merle commits herself more fully to preserving the local history of Bourne Island, inspiring her Jewish American lover to identify with its black inhabitants and serve the interests of the agricultural laboring class.

Marshall adapted the third chapter of *The Chosen Place, The Timeless People* into a short story under the title “Return of the Native” for Roseann P. Bell, Betty J. Parker (Smith), and Beverly Guy-Sheftall’s 1979 anthology *Sturdy Black Bridges: Visions of Black Women in Literature*. In the story, Vereson Walkes, a black native to Bournehills, social and political events.” “*Chosen Place, Timeless People: Some Figurations on the New World.*” In *Conjuring: Black Women, Fiction, and Literary Tradition*. Eds. Marjorie Pryse and Hortense J. Spillers. (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1985), 154.

\(^2^2\)Spillers notes that by some accounts, the fact that the affair between the wealthy English benefactress and the less privileged, culturally West Indian Merle is characterized as exploitative evinces the novel’s homophobia, especially considering that Marshall’s works privilege heterosexual relationships. However, Spillers argues that the exploitative nature of the relationship is more salient than the suggestion of same sex desire, particularly when Merle recalls the memory in an encounter with Saul’s wife, Harriet, who wields significant influence in the development agency and attempts to bribe Merle into leaving the island towards the end of the novel (*Conjuring*, 173). I would add that in the memory of the liaison and the encounter with Harriet, the novel is staging a transnational conflict and a contest between feminine subjectivities—one that constitutes the face of imperial forces and another that signifies diasporic desire—in the same language of intimacy as that used to describe the heterosexual relationships.
returns from the United States, where he immigrated for three years to escape scarce employment on the island. Finding the working conditions in the cane fields insufferable, Vere attempts to dodge his labor contract in Florida and seeks the protection of a wealthy uncle in Brooklyn who ultimately declines to help in fear that Vere’s unlawful breach would ruin him. When his work on the truck farm in New Jersey ends, Vere tires of the US and returns to Bourne Island to his mother, Leesy, who maintains the family’s small plot of land should any of her family members working abroad return home.

The story celebrates authentic blackness—characterized in the novel as a proximity to and familiarity with the local history of Bourne Island—in terms of Leesy’s devotion to her family’s financial autonomy, however tenuous, from the state and her denigration of Vere’s former girlfriend, a young prostitute and bakra, or an impoverished black West Indian of mixed race. Leesy accuses Vere’s girlfriend of murdering their infant son and having misused the money Vere sends for his care while working in the US. In the novel’s version of this narrative, Leesy explains, “Those red people from up Canterbury are all cross-bred and worthless. They might have little color and think themselves better than us because of it, but they ain’t got personality.”23 In the short story version, this absence of personality is described as an exteriorized identification with a superior racial caste evinced by excessive materialism in spite of her poor breeding.

Leesy explains that the woman “wasn’t no quality or class” for Vere; she “had a dirty style from small. Could curse nasty! And loved clothes. She would sell her soul for

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clothes.” Leesy implicitly cautions Vere not to renounce a raced and classed national allegiance. Vere, however, has already sensed that he has been changed by his sojourn abroad, touting his newly acquired love of car races, which leads to a fatal accident that befalls him later in the novel, and finding that his family’s house imposes a much more diminished presence than he remembers before leaving the island.

“Return of the Native” appears in the third part of Sturdy Black Bridges entitled “The Creative Vision,” wherein the editors sought to harmonize critical and pedagogical aims with aesthetic ones. The entire anthology is devoted to extending the analysis of black women’s experiences or cultural meaning from a multidisciplinary perspective and situating them in a diasporic context. As Bell, Parker, and Guy-Sheftall explain in the introduction, their “analytic vision,” which constitutes the focus of the first part of the anthology, expresses “the diasporic nexus of critical thought,” incorporating critical essays on the works of African, African American, and Caribbean writers and treating black women as both writers and characters. The anthology’s “conversational vision” of the second part, which features interviews between critics and writers, attempts to theorize black vernacular culture by ascribing critical terms to the “folk element” of art forms—that is, the aesthetic object unadulterated by the “educated concepts” of the literary critic.


25 Ibid., xxix

26 Ibid., xxx

27 Bell et al., xxx
The diasporic critical framework of the anthology extends its multidisciplinary framework in providing a pluralistic sense of black women’s experience. *Sturdy Black Bridges*, then, in part responds to the project outlined in Mary Helen Washington’s study of the literary “images” of black women in *Black-Eyed Susans*, except that its diasporic vision localizes the cultural meaning of black women in terms of the political economies of the US American, Caribbean, and African contexts. This is to say that the anthology deploys a politics of representation whereby the disciplinary imperatives of any one discipline and the social imperatives of any one context are calibrated against the imperatives of another. Much in the way Barbara Smith conceptualized black women’s cultural meaning in *Home Girls: A Black Feminist Anthology* as the “simultaneity of oppression,” *Sturdy Black Bridges* pursues, as Gloria Wade-Gayles suggests in her preface, a multidisciplinary and transnational “synchronicity” of accounts for the aesthetic depiction and cultural legibility of black women who emerge from “well-wrought frames.”

Whereas Washington’s anthologies constructed a historical trajectory of black women’s oppression and cultural meaning in the US, *Sturdy Black Bridges* accounts for the way that cultural images of black women are produced contextually and, moreover, disentangles cultural signifiers circulating in one context from signifiers of another. For instance, Andrea Benton Rushing’s essay “Images of Black Women in Modern African Poetry: An Overview” from the anthology’s first part calls attention to the economic, political, and cultural imperatives that account for the prevalence of a matriarchal image in African poetry. Rushing historicizes this image, which the essay’s headnote suggests has circulated in the US as an essentialist stereotype but also emerged

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28 *Ibid.*, xvi
from the “mythic” cultural grammar of the African diaspora, by explaining how it circulated in a context of the post-independence revival of traditionalist practices mainly by African male cultural nationalist poets. In twentieth-century African poetry, Rushing explains, the African matriarch stands as the nostalgic symbol for the preservation of traditionalist customs. Hence the selection of “Return of the Native” for the “creative vision” of the anthology, given the story’s focus on the sustenance of the agricultural laboring class, vulnerable to imperial exploitation, and the novel’s central concern with the preservation of local history.

Indeed, one of the anthology’s critical underpinnings is Afrocentricity—a discourse coined by Molefi Kete Asante in The Afrocentric Idea (1987)—in that it uses a Pan-Africanist mode of analysis to derive an essentialist notion of African blackness. In the introduction to the “analytical vision,” the editors describe the African diaspora as a conceptual vehicle for “shaping viable images of Black women in literature” and understand African history to “provide seminal, largely unexploited literary material.”

This conception of an unexploited, precolonial Africa gains critical traction from the fact of African history and philosophy—at least in French colonial Africa—having to be reconstructed in the era of decolonization. In Africa: The Politics of Independence (1961), Immanuel Wallerstein situated the work of such African intellectuals as Cheik Anta Diop in the context of cultural revival and anticolonial struggle. Diop theorized a totalizing and racialized global division of social formations—a kind of white/black

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29 Rushing in Sturdy Black Bridges, 19.

30 Bell et al., 4

dialectic—that characterized the whole of the pre-colonial African continent as traditionally matriarchal. In Afrocentric discourse, the pre-colonial matriarch was the answer to the postcolonial patriarch and constituted the primary subject position through which African women gained social ascendancy. The African matriarch, in other words, is not a mere Afrocentric archetype but rather a symbol for a set of discursive practices and historical processes.

By invoking reconstructionist African histories to examine contemporary African literature, the critics whose essays are compiled in Sturdy Black Bridges avoid the difficulty of rendering black experience as monolithic by transporting these histories to a US context—a problem about which Ann duCille warned in “Postcolonialism and Afrocentricity: Discourse and Dat Course.” Although duCille focused mainly on the institutional validation of disciplines, describing African American Studies as a politicized discourse that “falls somewhere in between the hyperlocalization and nativism of Afrocentricity and the global or universal delocalization of postcoloniality,” she interestingly suggested that it is Afrocentricity that makes African American Studies postcolonial. In the opening of the essay, she explained that insofar as Afrocentric cultural practices ritualized in the US context attempt to reclaim an African home and nation, they “often only reinscribe our cultural dislocation […] What we seek is a precolonial connection; what we theorize is a postcolonial condition; what we’re stuck with is a perennial colonial contradiction.”

What is at stake in DuCille’s distinction between the strategic essentialism of African American Studies and the “therapeutic


33 Ibid., 29
essentialism” of Afrocentricity is the way these studies conceive of the ethnicization of African American subjects. When Afrocentric discourse is used to describe Afro-diasporic culture as opposed to reviving otherwise suppressed African histories, it presumes to reify and stabilize the ethnicization of black subjects whereas African American Studies conceives of that process in more provisional terms.

Whereas the invention of ethnicity, as Werner Sollors argued, entails drawing cultural boundaries and grants the power to sustain cultural dominance,\(^\text{34}\) race and, particularly, blackness describes an economic, political, and cultural situation.\(^\text{35}\) As I suggested in chapter three in reference to the Moynihan Report, blackness in the US describes a tenuous political inclusion and ethno-national exclusion. In the discursive interarticulation between national and political “body ideas” or “camps” with the more organic implications of the raced soma, as Paul Gilroy explains in Against Race, racial identity in the US American context attempts to call forth the legacy of the territorial, hierarchical, and militaristic identity of the imperial nation, which largely suppressed internal divisions, in terms of a carefully calculated sameness derived from relationships

\(^{34}\) See Sollors, Werner. Beyond Ethnicity: Consent and Descent in American Culture. (New York, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1986), wherein Sollors argued that ethnicity in the US American context, particularly after the advent of black nationalism, is a construction of symbolic pre-American hereditary lines of descent in a culture of consent, characterized by Americans’ “unsystematic desire to identify with intermediary groups—larger than the family, smaller than the nation” where “symbolic boundaries are constructed in a perplexing variety of continuously shifting forms” (175-6). See also Steinberg, Stephen. The Ethnic Myth: Race, Ethnicity, and Class in America. 3rd Ed. (Boston: Becon Press, 2001), wherein Steinberg narrates the spread of the “contagion” of ethnicity after the rise of black nationalism in an increasingly pluralist US American framework.

\(^{35}\) I draw, here, upon Michael Omi and Howard Winant’s study of the discursive “paradigms” of race, ethnicity, class, and nation in Racial Formations in the United States (London and New York: Routledge, 1986), Omi and Winant distinguish between race and ethnicity in terms of their social stakes. Whereas ethnicity is based on the dynamics of national incorporation and the preservation of group identity (48), race pertains to racist racial projects that create structures of essentialist domination (71).
to exteriority, conflict, and exclusion.\footnote{\(36\) The idea of diaspora, Gilroy goes on to explain, “problematises the cultural and historical mechanics of belonging. It disrupts the fundamental power of territory to determine identity by breaking the simple sequence of explanatory links among place, location, and consciousness.”\footnote{\(37\) Identity pertains to a logic that takes sameness for granted and suggests that difference must be created. Diaspora disrupts the logic of identity formation to produce transnational subjects in what Gilroy understands to be a more “ecologically sophisticated” framework.}

What this means for the Pan-African ethos of Sturdy Black Bridges is that the conceptual framework of the African diaspora can be used to identify local differences from an implied transnational sameness as much as it can be used to create sameness across local differences. While Pan-Africanism finds its limits in the attempt at transnational cultural translation, I posit that it grants Marshall creative license in the invention of African American subjectivity. Her work not only genders subjects through the mechanisms of black transnationalism but also ethnicizes them by imagining an African diasporic community.

In a 1982 interview, Marshall reflected on her involvement in the Civil Rights Movement and The Association of Artists for Freedom with Lorraine Hansberry and James Baldwin, explaining that when she began her writing career while in college, “it wasn’t enough to try to get the story of my community told, but that it also had to have

\footnote{\(36\) Gilroy, Paul. \textit{Against Race: Imagining Political Culture beyond the Color Line}. (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 2000), 68, 108-109.}

\footnote{\(37\) Ibid., 123}
this larger [political] meaning.” This political register was also inflected by the largely unsuccessful emigrationist agenda of Marcus Garvey, the memory of which circulated in Marshall’s home in the talk of her mother and her Barbadian associates. As Marshall recalled in “The Making of a Writer: From the Poets in the Kitchen” (1983), a tribute to the “mother poets” who helped shaped her as a writer in her formative years:

If F.D.R. was their hero, Marcus Garvey was their God. The name of the fiery, Jamaican-born black nationalist of the ’20s was constantly invoked around the table. For he had been their leader when they first came to the United States from the West Indies shortly after World War I. They had contributed to his organization, the United Negro Improvement Association (UNIA), out of their meager salaries, bought shares in his ill-fated Black Star Shipping Line, and at the height of the movement they had marched as members of his “nurses’ brigade” in their white uniforms up Seventh Avenue in Harlem during the great Garvey Day parades. Garvey: He lived on through their memories.

Although Garvey resided in England in obscurity by the time of Marshall’s birth, through her mother’s constant reference to him, he served as an icon for the black nationalist thinking that inspired the political content of her work. The mother poets particularly rallied around the ethos of economic self-sufficiency and the prospect of a black nation. Marshall’s account of their contribution to Garvey’s campaigns recalls the visual spectacle Garvey made of himself during his parades in Harlem dressed as a field marshal, emblematizing a future black state. Notwithstanding C.L.R. James’s and Gilroy’s characterization of Garvey as a fascist on the order of Hitler and Mussolini, dangerously concerned, as his nationalist rhetoric suggested, with racial purity and

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“standardization,” Garvey’s ceremonial extravagance begs a broader interpretation of his black nationalism given the imperial context in which it circulated, one that likely informs the transnational movements of Marshall’s protagonists. Michelle Stephens emphasizes Garvey’s global political imaginary, suggesting that his spectacular self-presentation as a race leader—which such Garvey scholars as Robert A. Hill have understood as a burlesque of European imperialism—was nothing less than the performance of a black race as a “transnation” that cut across traditional geopolitical formations. For Stephens, Garvey’s transatlantic maritime movements and his Black Star Line held the promise of a “politically united black diaspora, one in which free movement was also the imagined racial community’s central goal.” While the political thought of Garveyism in Brown Girl, Brownstones appears as a desire for social ascendancy, it also encompasses the significance of Garvey in a transatlantic context. When the black female protagonists of Brown Girl and Marshall’s later novels, specifically The Chosen Place, The Timeless People, Praisesong for the Widow, and Daughters, inherits the desire for economic self-sufficiency and social advancement and reinterprets it as a desire for a home in the West Indies, that desire is fulfilled through transnational movement. These protagonists do not renounce their home in the United States or the English metropole. Rather the desire for national belonging is fulfilled when these protagonists locate a transnational belonging within diasporic longing.

41 Gilroy, Against Race, 231-233.
43 Stephens, 99-100
44 Ibid., 109
Given Marshall’s own ethno-national double-consciousness, the autobiographical subtext of *Brown Girl, Brownstones* incorporates Marshall as writer into the political project of African American subject formation that accures across the trajectory of her works. Referring to Ralph Ellison’s *Shadow and Act* as her “literary bible,” she borrows from his sense of the writer’s craft as the “completion of personality,”

believing that “the writer, without being conscious of it, often injects into the work deep-seated and oftentimes troubling aspects of the self.”

In a 1988 interview with Sandi Russell, Marshall described this self-completion as a quest that she instantiates as a writer by serving “as a kind of bridge. I do bring together in my person, and hopefully in my work, these two cultures [Afro-Caribbean and African American]. Because to my mind, aside from certain small differences and variations on themes, I see them as one. I see them as the African-American response—and when I say African-American, I’m talking about blacks from Brazil to Brooklyn.”

In contrast to African Americanness, Marshall defines blackness in more philosophical terms as an “existential situation” from which to create or realize a self and employs the promise of a multinational diasporic community of Garveyism to understand the relationship between individual African American subjects and collective liberation struggle. The individual quest for self-creation, she

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48 Russell, Sandi. “Interview with Paule Marshall.” *Wasafari*, 4 (1988): 15. When Marshall graduated from Brooklyn College in 1953, she found work in New York as a researcher for *Our World Magazine* (later *Black World*). She was later assigned to write for the food and fashion sections and then her own feature stories, which allowed her to travel to Latin America and the West Indies. Hence the titles of the novellas in *Soul Clap Hands and Sing*: “Barbados,” “Brooklyn,” “British Guiana,” and “Brazil.”
suggested in a 1996 interview with Angela Elam, must “be matched with the struggle of communities to realize themselves […] It has to be done within the context of the community that shapes you, to which you belong.”49 The formation of African American subjectivity, then, adheres to a kind of logic of content inasmuch as it presumes a diasporic context, or a black racial transnation, out of which subjects are ethnicized and gendered through national consolidation and transnational movement.

_Praisesong for the Widow_ (1983), the third novel of a trilogy formed by _Brown Girl, Brownstones_ and _The Chosen Place, The Timeless People_, I would argue, most pointedly illustrates this process of forming an African American subjectivity: the emergence of a black female protagonist from an economic underclass, her subsequent discovery of diasporic longing in the midst of transnational movement to the West Indies, and the adoption of an African ethnos. The novel begins with a middle-aged, middle class African American widow by the name of Avey Johnson abruptly deciding to abandon a Caribbean cruise when memories of the early years of her marriage and a recurring dream of her great Aunt Cuney—who calls her back to Tatum, South Carolina—intrude so forcefully on her consciousness that she takes ill. Leaving the cruise ship, aptly named the _Bianca Pride_ as an implicit nod to the imperial legacy in the Caribbean, at Grenada, we learn that her illness is a psychosomatic response to her middle class pretensions. In Grenada, she is acquainted with the cultural life of its inhabitants apart from the tourist attractions. There she meets an elderly man, Lebert Joseph, who invites her on a ritual excursion to Carriacou, the island of the Caribbean archipelago closest to West Africa, a

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fact on which the geographic strategy of the novel capitalizes. From the moment Lebert Joseph asks Avey—short for Avatara, the Sanskrit word for “deity” and a name she recovers in the midst of her convalescence—“What is your nation?”, Avatara’s therapeutic recovery of an African ethos ensues.

What most interests me here is not the Afrocentric ethos of the novel but the decidedly African American subjectivity of Avey Johnson whose memories of her life during the sixties in Brooklyn figure so prominently in the second part of Praisesong. To some extent, it is the memory of her intimate life with her husband, Jay Johnson, that precipitates the recovery of what the novel designates as her more authentic self. At the end of the novel, Avey returns to New York with an African ethn tourism fully integrated into her self-concept, such that her Africanization is transportable to the United States. The novel thus enacts a kind of strategic essentialism that ethnicizes black subjects, which begs the question of what the politics of intimacy—particularly, heterosexual intimacy—has to do with African diasporic subjectivity.

**Black Feminism and the Politics of Intimacy**

Marshall has garnered attention from black feminist scholars like Mary Helen Washington and Beverly Guy-Sheftall for her fiction’s thematic focus on black women’s empowerment, though Marshall herself was not explicitly engaged in a black feminist politics. To some extent, her work proleptically elaborated a black feminist cultural analysis, extending her observation in “From the Poets in the Kitchen,” where she

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50 See Busia, Abena P. A. “What Is Your Nation?: Reconnecting Africa and Her Diaspora through Paule Marshall’s Praisesong for the Widow.” In Changing Our Own Words: Essays on Criticism, Theory, and Writing by Black By Black Women. Ed. Cheryl A. Wall. (New Brunswick and London: Rutgers University Press), where she suggests that Carriacou, an “out island” to the inhabitants of Grenada, the most easterly of the Caribbean Islands and closest to the “home continent of Africa,” represents in its physical closeness to Africa the “spiritual proximity that the widow is to see manifest” (201).
describes her mother poets as “the female counterpart to Ralph Ellison’s invisible man,” triply invisible by the fact of their blackness, femaleness, and working class immigrant status and alleviating psychic duress through the spoken word.\textsuperscript{51} Marshall’s collection \textit{Reena and Other Stories} contains the titular short story, an earlier short story entitled “The Valley Between” (1954), and the novella “Brooklyn” from \textit{Soul Clap Hands and Sing}, all of which pertain thematically to women’s rights and social liberation. “The Valley Between,” written while Marshall worked as a fashion writer for \textit{Our World}, tells the story of a young wife and mother whose husband’s expectations about the duties of housewifery thwart her efforts to pursue an education. As Marshall explains in the headnote, it was received as a “‘50’s story twenty years ahead of its time.”\textsuperscript{52} The story was inspired in part by Marshall’s experience at Hunter College, where she pondered the fate of her classmates who enrolled merely to “raise their stock in the marriage market.”\textsuperscript{53} Marshall herself was married to psychologist Kenneth Marshall at the time and camouflaged the subtext by identifying the characters as white.

“Brooklyn” similarly had an autobiographical subtext, based as it was on Marshall’s experience with sexual harassment before it was legally recognized as such. She wrote the story to purge her anguish after being propositioned by a professor in college. Like “Brooklyn” and “The Valley Between,” “Reena” (1962) was deemed ahead of its time and was later reprinted in Toni Cade Bambara’s \textit{The Black Woman} (1970). Commissioned by \textit{Harper’s Magazine} for a special supplement on “The American Female,” it is an essayistic story that situates the black woman in the context of Civil

\textsuperscript{51} Marshall, \textit{Reena and Other Stories}, 7.

\textsuperscript{52} Ibid., 15

\textsuperscript{53} Ibid.
Rights. The titular character recounts her life events to a childhood friend whom she meets after so many years at the funeral wake of her Aunt Vi. In the process, Reena voices what Marshall understood to typify the concerns of black women in the fifties—particularly, employment and romantic prospects, intellectual freedom, and integration.

Interestingly, the illustration of women’s experience in these stories, as in Marshall’s novels, hinge on heterosexual relationships, a characteristic that is of course incidental to the period in which the stories were written but that also instrumentalizes a politics of relation that conveniently reveals what Hortense Spillers would call a “cultural grammar.”

In *Sturdy Black Bridges*, Spillers’s essay entitled “The Politics of Intimacy” details the cultural grammar expressed by 1970s popular feminism. An essay that suggests a “working model for a literary analysis of issues specifically related to the intimate life of Afro-American women” through an analysis of James Baldwin’s novels, it elaborates one of the explicit concerns of the anthology, particularly in its “conversational vision” that includes interviews with Addison Gayle, George Kent, and C.L.R. James, that would later be taken up in black feminist theory. That concern was the instance of black male critics engaging in black feminist critical praxis in their readings of black women writers. In the anthology, the (heterosexual) intimate life of African American women serves as a metaphor for this theoretical concern: The politics of intimacy stood for the politics of critical engagement and aesthetic representation.

Although *Sturdy Black Bridges* did not market itself as a black feminist anthology,

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insofar as it was concerned with the textual image of black women, it engaged in a black feminist cultural analysis. Spillers’ essay addresses not only the image of black women but also how the representation of their intimate lives reveals a relational structure. The representation of heterosexuality, that is, was presumed to reveal the gendered subjectivity of black women as it was expressed in “myth,” or “ways of saying.”

Spillers defined the “politics of intimacy” in reference to literary criticism as “the intricate fabric of feeling drawn out in fictional situations between men and woman” that, as an analytical lens, would reveal the grammar of “woman-freedom” or its negation. She chose Baldwin’s works for their characteristic histrionic tone and religious subtext and their tendency to rehearse a “rhetoric of ‘received opinion.’” His characters are allegories for black subjects like themselves. A historicized cultural grammar could then be examined through characterization, since characters are constructed according to “certain formalistic and thematic strategies aligned in final ways.” The relationships between the characters are represented according to an implicit power arrangement in which the principal agents either share power or hierarchize their interests, which Spillers understood to reflect historically based terms of relation. Masculinity and femininity as cultural expressions of dimorphic gender are, then, projections of the grammar of male/female relationships. Spillers understood this grammar to constitute the “attitude” of the characters, and insofar as the characters “pursue a locking of male and female destiny” in a fictive situation, they demonstrate “how everyday language and its situation

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56 Ibid., 88
57 Ibid.
58 Ibid.
create an attitude of containment or liberation.” Women’s liberation, then, was a matter of refashioning an affective relation, or attitude, to subjectivation by reconfiguring the grammar of power that underwrites gender relations.

The hyperbolic, melodramatic quality of Baldwin’s works issues from a pointedly outmoded and ahistorical cultural grammar of gender. Spillers argued that Baldwin’s Go Tell It On the Mountain, Blues for Mister Charlie, and If Beale Street Could Talk staged a “battle of the sexes” where long-suffering black women constitute the exotic other to black male “strangers” who prescribe their desires. Spillers identified the genesis of this exoticization in African American literature in poetry, naming Countee Cullen’s “Heritage” as exemplary of the symbolic resonance of Africa as an Elysian reward achieved by the subject’s submission to the essentialist logic that runs, “feminine mystique,” “feminine intuition,” “male logic,” “strong black woman.”

Baldwin’s female characters are exoticized and victimized by their having no available language to articulate resistance. They pledge a blind loyalty to their romantic counterparts to their own detriment, in part because their resistance to a racial hierarchy is prioritized over a resistance to a gender hierarchy. For instance, in If Beale Street Could Talk, an African American male by the name of Fonny Hunt is framed by a racist white police officer for the rape of a Puerto Rican woman when, in fact, Fonny has defended his girlfriend, Tish, from a sexual advance. Although Fonny is defended by a witness, Officer Bell wants to avenge US American virtues by making an example of Fonny, and the novel thereby figures the unspeakable cruelty leveled against black men as Fonny’s cause célèbre on which all instances of an affective bond—between father

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59 Ibid., 89
60 Ibid.
and son, sisters, and men and women—are based. Spillers took issue with a line that Baldwin puts in Tish’s mouth, where she remarks that Fonny is a “stranger” to her and that the egalitarian bond she witnesses in the reconciliation of Fonny to his father constitutes a “threat” to women, who, by implication, are incapable of duplicating it among themselves. For Spillers, Tish’s expectations about the politics of intimacy that govern relationships across gender, characterized by women’s obedience to a male stranger, in comparison to homosocial equality among men symptomatized an outmoded logic of antagonism. The novel plays out an “accretion of mythical belief” in Tish’s consciousness about the exclusion of women from the masculine “hieroglyph of experience” that Tish is complicit in sustaining.61

Spillers questioned what black women are apart from normative racial and gender hierarchies and, in so doing, she identified a more apropos “democratic order” to describe gender relations in contemporary Harlem. This is to say that she understood the political stakes of gender relations to be most amplified in an amorous scenario and heterosexual intimacy to indicate the threshold of affective egalitarianism. She defined this democratic order as an agonistic logic by which “the principals work through the substance and formality of problems.”62 If such an order were to be applied to the patriarchal logic of obedience and possession in Baldwin’s novels, it would invite the male characters to recognize themselves as free and the women to “risk aloneness or a self-imposed

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61 Ibid., 100
62 Ibid., 101
silence,”63 which implies a feminized woman who signifies a desire and forges a relation that accords with it.

Applying an existential philosophy to the patriarchal logic of the novel, Spillers concluded that the female characters were inauthentically represented in that they exist for others in the Sartrean sense, that they constitute extensions of their male lover’s integrity.64 The affective bond between Tish and Fonny is “noumenal” as opposed to “dialectical,” and if Baldwin’s fictive worlds were to consider contemporary strides in Women’s Liberation, their patriarchal logic would necessarily fall away. The politics of intimacy, Spillers concluded, describes a dynamic “dialectical encounter rather than an antagonism of opposites—in other words, the situation requires conversation, the act of living among others, in all the dignity and concentration that the term implies. It is this tension in our dynamic experience which shocks mythic expectations.”65 Intimacy implies a strategic zone where a political subject is created, an ethical relation formed by two selves who each constitute their “own historical subject in pursuit of its proper object, its proper and specific expression in time.”66 Spillers applies the relational mode of conversation to the heterosexual intimate situation to describe an intensely radical democratic politics, one in which a mode of conduct is not prescribed but rather is ethically forged through agonistic struggle.

At the end of her essay, Spillers named Toni Morrison’s Sula, in her “strangeness,” “naivete,” and “craving for the other half of her equation,” as the

63 Ibid.
64 Ibid., 99, 102
65 Ibid., 104
66 Ibid., 105
exemplary black woman in pursuit of democratic intimate relation, which means, I would argue, that Spillers advanced a black feminist analysis. By using the representation of black women to theorize a democratic logic, Spillers’ essay responded to the implicit black feminist agenda of *Sturdy Black Bridges*, even metaphorizing the anthology’s conversational vision as the strategic politics of gendered subject formation.

An interview between Toni Cade Bambara and Beverly Guy-Sheftall included in the anthology’s conversational vision renders the set of analogies among the politics of intimacy, the politics of representation, and the politics of critical engagement all the more acute. The interview stages how the critical and pedagogical aims of the black feminist critic might stray from the representational objectives of the black woman writer, which is to say that the black feminism of the critic may differ from the black feminism of the writer. In the interview with Bambara, Guy-Sheftall asked about a possible black feminist ethos that informed Bambara’s creative inspiration—i.e., the critical reception of black women writers and the aesthetic representation of the black woman. In response, Bambara distinguished between the critical response and the literary production itself. Explaining that she writes in order to “do justice to a point of view, to a sense of self,” and that the textual image of the black woman has the potential to illustrate a “usable truth” about the life or experience of black women, Bambara clarified,

writing for me is an act of language first and foremost. […] As an act of language, literature is a spirit informer—an energizer. A lot of energy is exchanged in the reading and writing of books and that gets into the debate of whether it is more important to offer a usable truth or to try to document the many truths or realisms that make up the black woman’s experience.  

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Ibid., 236-37
Bambara was responding specifically to Guy-Sheftall’s question about Mary Helen Washington’s call for narratives that represent “the entire range and spectrum of the experiences of black women” in order to break the tendency to treat the cultural image of black women as “a sacred cow,” as she writes toward the end of her introduction to Black-Eyed Susans. Bambara essentially suggested that the usability of the textual image cannot be determined in advance of critical engagement, that the black woman writer cannot frontload her work with a black feminist ethos, and that black feminist critical praxis describes the engagement of the critic with the literary text. The black woman writer does, however, engage a black feminist cultural analysis by what Bambara described towards the end of the interview as a process of “conversion.” Were the writer to undertake the task of representing the “entire spectrum of the experiences of black women,” she would most likely record experience in autobiographical fashion, which Bambara understood to be abusive to the writer’s acquaintances and injurious to the writer’s craft. The process of fictive conversion, in contrast, animates the metaphorical coherence of the text and lends itself to the analogic relation between the fictional ordering principle and the political logic and cultural grammar of the context to which the text refers.

I turned to Spillers’s essay to account for how literary analysis can determine the link between fictive characterization and political subjectivity. Black feminism is not an ethos but a mode of analysis, just as radical democracy is not an ethos but rather describes a state of being. Black feminism begins with the identification of the cultural grammar and creative logic that subtends characterization, which, in its cultural projection and transhistorical iterability, is analogous to those principles that order the
formation of subjects. The anthology is a particularly apt genre and vehicle for the revelatory agency of black feminism. In the case of Home Girls, that agency inheres in the democratic logic of the simultaneity of oppressions. In Bambara’s The Black Woman, a black feminist consciousness and mode of cultural analysis emerged in the simultaneity of social movements. In Mary Helen Washington’s anthologies, black feminism inhered in the historiographic counter-image; and Sturdy Black Bridges staged the synthesis of two kinds of relation to the politics of representation—critical and aesthetic—which, in turn, metaphorized the ethical scenario from which black women’s political subjectivity emerges. That synthesis also resulted in a dialectically constituted critical lens—a sturdy black bridge, to be sure—that identified the common cultural grammar between text and context and among nationally distinct local histories.

What Spillers called the politics of intimacy orders not only the formation of African American subjects in the US context but also that of black diasporic subjects, as Marshall’s works suggest. In Praisesong for the Widow, the memory of conjugal intimacy instantiates Avey Johnson’s recovery of a former subjectivity in terms of a former intersubjective relation. Motivating her transnational movement is a constitutive diasporic longing—a feminine desire—that she integrates when she adopts an African ethnos.

**Memorial Africa and Diasporic Desire**

Praisesong for the Widow represents Avey’s ethnicization in four parts—“Runagate,” “Sleeper’s Wake,” “Lave Tete,” and “The Beg Pardon.” “Runagate” alludes to Robert Hayden’s 1962 poem of the same title, and a line from the first stanza serves as an epigraph to the first part of the novel. The poem memorializes the history of
abolitionism in the US, and as Barbara Christian noted in her 1983 essay on *Praisesong*, its image of a fugitive slave who “runs, falls, rises, stumbles on from darkness to darkness” symbolizes Avey’s “unconscious run for freedom” that “takes her south, physically south to the Caribbean, psychically south to Tatem, South Carolina, while consciously she believes her promised land to be the North, her safe, comfortable home in North White Plains.”

“Sleepers Wake” presents the repressed memories of the early years of Avey’s marriage to her husband, whom she realizes had been transformed by her desires for a middle class lifestyle from the suave, politically radical Jay Johnson into the snobbish, upwardly mobile Jerome Johnson. Acknowledging the transformation, Avey mourns the death of Jay whose animus died long before Jerome. In “Lave Tete,” Avey meets a family traveling on the excursion to Carriacou, and upon the invitation to join the Carriacou natives, she begins connecting her disparate repressed memories along with the locales they tell—Brooklyn and Tatem—through the rites performed during the annual excursion. In “The Beg Pardon,” the title naming the final ritual song of the novel bearing African cultural retentions, Avey discovers her African ethnos and nation, embraces her African Americanness, and returns to New York, vowing to claim ownership of the house she inherited from her great Aunt Cuney and share her memories with her grandchildren.

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69 In the interview with Joyce Pettis, Marshall explained that the West Indies figure so prominently in her work because they constituted a “manageable landscape” and because she sensed that they were part of the South (119), which might account for the connection she draws between Brooklyn, Tatem, South Carolina, and the West Indies in *Praisesong for the Widow*. 
In addition to the *Bianca Pride*, two other ships appear in the novel: the *Robert Fulton* on which she travels during her childhood vacations to Bear Mountain, and the *Emmanuel C*, which she boards for the Carriacou excursion. Avey recalls her trips to Bear Mountain while boarding the *Emmanuel C*, where she meets elderly women who remind her of the elders of her mother’s church. Avey remembers that while waiting on the pier for the *Robert Fulton* as a child, she felt “what seemed to be hundreds of slender threads streaming out from her navel and from the place where her heart was to enter those around her,”70 a kind of “confraternity” that she again experiences as a collective striving during the Big Drum ritual in Carriacou. This feeling of diasporic confraternity conjured in the midst of transatlantic movement encapsulates the recurring motif in Marshall’s works of Africa as a “spiritual homeland,” as she called it in a 1986 interview with Maryse Condé. She recalls that when she traveled to Nigeria in 1977 for the Festac Black Arts Festival, the Yorubas and Ibos received her as a “native daughter.”71 In other words, she experienced the romanticized affective fulfillment characteristic of the “return” to the African motherland, by some accounts. Marshall explained that she departed from her literary forebear, Ralph Ellison, in situating Africa as central to the invention of a black diasporic image. Whereas Ellison focused on blacks in a specifically US American context, Marshall understands social liberation movements on the part of communities of African descent to stand in interlocutory relation transnationally, in spite of the inequities of the global economy. This transnational common ground is secured by


the idea of a “memorial Africa,” which Edward Braithwaite, in a review of The Chosen Place, The Timeless People, understood to subtend the meaning of West Indian identity.72

This idea of a memorial Africa first appears in the novel in reference to Avey’s recurring dream of her great Aunt Cuney, beckoning her to join a Ring Shout. The significance of this dream is a legend about Ibo Landing, so called by the maps of the county, lying just beyond a tract of land that was once the largest plantation of sea island cotton. At the Landing, Aunt Cuney would recite the legend of exceptionally gifted “pure-born Africans” who projected the oppression of African Americans into the future and re-crossed the Atlantic, walking on water. Aunt Cuney’s grandmother, who narrated the story as an eye-witness account, said that she followed the Ibos in her psyche: “Her body she always usta say might be in Tatem but her mind, her mind was long gone with the Ibos…”73 Christian argued that Avey’s process of self-creation through recollection is organized according to this split between mind and body.74

In addition to the recurring dream about her great Aunt Cuney, Avey is nauseated by the parfait she eats in the dining hall of the cruise ship, notably called the “Versailles Room” and decorated with chandeliers and gilt-frame mirrors to mimic the Hall of Mirrors, the setting of the 1918 signing of the Versailles Treaty. The parfait Avey begins to eat, in fact, has been named “Peach Parfait à la Versailles.” Once in the dining hall, Avey recalls one of the warnings that her second-oldest daughter, Marion, issues about the cruise: “Versailles [...] Do you know how many treaties were signed there, in that


73 Marshall, Praisesong, 39.

74 Christian, 151
infamous Hall of Mirrors, divvying up India, the West Indies, the world?” The only one of Avey’s three daughters to discourage her mother from vacationing by cruise, Marion is a sophisticated activist-educator whose advice recurs throughout Avey’s recollections. The parfait, the novel appears to suggest, symbolizes an otherwise unsavory colonial history rendered palatable by a dish that caters to bourgeois tastes.

On the ship deck the following morning, Avey recalls a memory from the early years of her marriage to Jay Johnson who died of a stroke in 1973, a year before Avey takes the cruise: From their brownstone apartment window on Halsey Street in Brooklyn, they witnessed the brutal clubbing of a black man by a police officer. Prior to the cruise, Avey had not been able to recall her dreams vividly since the mid-sixties, when she suffered frequent nightmares about the carnages of Civil Rights. The return of the repressed memory of the beating brings about a hallucinatory state. She settles her account with the purser and leaves the ship at Grenada, the next port of call.

The memory from the sixties summons more memories of her marriage to Jay wherein she recognizes his transformation into Jerome. This change is described partially in terms of masculine self-presentation. As Jay Johnson, industrious but underpaid for his labor at a department store, he sported a full, broad-winged mustache, inspired by a photograph of his father. The mustache “was his one show of vanity, his sole indulgence. It was also, Avey sensed, a shield as well, because planted in a thick bush above his mouth, it subtly drew attention away from the intelligence of his gaze and the assertive, even somewhat arrogant arch to his nostrils, thus protecting him. And it

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75 Marshall, Praisesong, 47.
also served to screen his private self: the man he was away from his job.”

This private self listened to blues music and was passionate towards Avey. During Avey’s third pregnancy, she suspected that the white saleswomen at the department store “spied the lover in him,” which led her to suspect him of infidelity. Although he was, in fact, unfaithful, Avey knew “that it wasn’t really a question of some woman, real or imagined. Even if she did exist, she was merely the stand-in for the real villain whom they couldn’t talk about, who stood coolly waiting for them amid the spreading blight of Halsey Street below”—the haunting figure of the police officer. Masking her fear for their physical safety, she complained about living in Brooklyn, at which point Jay took a correspondence course, attended Long Island University, became a certified public accountant, and eventually moved his family to North White Plains where he worked in an attorney’s office.

In North White Plains, Jay shaved his mustache and adopted a corresponding “harsh and joyless ethic,” speaking condescendingly of African Americans about their supposedly lacking work ethic and absent desire for economic self-sufficiency, whereas before, in the persona of Jay, he struggled along with African Americans for economic self-sufficiency. After Jay’s death, Avey would mourn him, recalling their conjugal intimacy: “He would lie within her like a man who has suddenly found himself inside a temple of some kind, and hangs back, overcome by the magnificence of the place, and sensing around him the invisible forms of the deities who reside there […] Jay might have felt himself surrounded by a pantheon of the most ancient deities of his wife’s

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76 Ibid., 93
77 Ibid., 97
Shortly after the family moved to North White Plains, Avey realized that she had betrayed her desire for Jay, and while mourning his death, describes their intimacy as an invocation of African deities. She decides that in their former “rituals and pleasures,” “something in those small rites, an ethos they held in common, had reached back beyond her life and beyond Jay’s to join them to the vast unknown lineage that had made their being possible. And this link, these connections, heard in the music and in the praise songs of a Sunday […] had both protected them and put them in possession of a kind of power.”

This “ethos they held in common” is an African ethnos that she recovers in Carriacou, and the “praisesongs” are the African American musical and poetic traditions—such as Langston Hughes’s “The Negro Speaks of Rivers,” Jay’s favorite poem to recite—that the novel suggests carry the sonic trace of that ethnos.

In this sense, the novel fancies an African ethnos as a kind of diasporic desire that links the aesthetic traditions of the US and Caribbean contexts and that mutually constitutes Avey and Jay. This diasporic desire is implicitly understood as a democratic desire, in that it ensures the autonomy of two subjects in intimacy. After moving away from Halsey Street and de-habituating their “ritual pleasures,” Avey began referring to herself as Avey Johnson—that is, as an extension of the integrity of Jerome Johnson: “The names ‘Avey’ and ‘Avatara,’ were those of someone who was no longer present, and she had become Avey Johnson even in her thoughts, a woman whose face, reflected in a window or mirror, she sometimes failed to recognize.”

Her own transformation, she comes to admit, reflects the sentiments about African Americans she shared in

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78 Ibid., 127
79 Ibid., 137
80 Ibid., 141
common with Jerome—that African Americans constitute a “race apart.” Distancing herself even from Marion, who participated in the Poor People’s March in Washington, and “the great hungry roar of the thousands encamped in the mud near the Lincoln Memorial, the sound reaching to draw her into its angry vortex, to make her part of their petition,” she refuses to identify with Black Liberation struggle despite bearing witness to the movement’s violence. While Jerome (Jay) Johnson was a Leona, Kansas native and Avey was born in Harlem, that Avey sustains an ambivalent identification with African Americans might also signal the novel’s implicit attribution of the mixed heritage of Marshall’s other black female protagonists to her. The novel, then, indict Avey not for her ethnic difference from US blacks but rather for her refusal to identify with their radicalism, which a diasporic desire would prevail upon her to do.

In the midst of muting diasporic desire in the face of racial antagonism, Avey and Jerome began to resemble one another: “the same little mannerisms, the same facial expression almost, the rather formal way they held themselves. They could almost pass for twins!” The novel suggests that Avey and Jerome had been evacuated of a personality and de-gendered. Avey’s memory of their transformation, particularly “the formal way they held themselves,” recalls the unnamed woman seated with Avey and her traveling companions in the Versailles Room aboard the Bianca Pride. This woman typifies black middle class women whom Avey notices shopping in department stores:

The well-cut suit, coat or ensemble depending on the season. The carefully coordinated accessories. The muted colors. Everything in good taste and appropriate to her age. Another glance […] took in the composed face with its folded-in lip and carefully barred gaze. She was clearly someone who kept her thoughts and feelings to herself. But more than the woman’s face was her bearing

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81 Ibid., 140
82 Ibid. 141
as she made her way along the aisle. Her Marian Anderson poise and reserve. The look of acceptability about her.\textsuperscript{83} In the desire for bourgeois respectability, the black middle class women adopt the accoutrement of commodified bourgeois tastes, signifying them in their self-presentation and bearing—a kind of prescribed racial authenticity of repression that corresponds to the obsession with material culture and the signification of social ascendancy that the diasporic ethos of Marshall’s novels generally opposes. Earlier in the novel, this idea of bourgeois respectability appears in the characterization of middle class blacks as “crabs in a barrel,” by which is meant a disinclination to cooperative ventures. When Avey arrives in Grenada, her taxi driver explains that the Carriacou excursionists standing on the wharf are “serious people. Hardworking. […] And they looks out for one another just like white people. No crab antics with them.”\textsuperscript{84} In opposing bourgeois respectability to the memory of the ritual pleasures of Avey and Jay’s marriage, described as an erotic spontaneity, the novel suggests that diasporic desire is the necessary precondition for the emergence of a diasporic collective consciousness.

Diasporic desire is not the desire for a community. Rather it is an ethical, democratic desire that arises from intimacy and that produces gendered subject formation, and by extension, a collectivity composed of similarly constituted subjects. The gendered subject in this schema corresponds to the mechanisms of diaspora—a feminized longing and a masculinized belonging that anticipates the consolidation of diasporic longing in a nation. In the case of Avey and Jay, Jay signified the consolidation of diaporic longing—the “common ethos” between them—that disappears when he

\textsuperscript{83} Ibid., 49

\textsuperscript{84} Ibid., 78
adopts the codes of bourgeois respectability. Avey, then, is widowed by her betrayal of
the diasporic desire that initially animated her intimacy with Jay.

At least two other widows appear in the novel—one of her traveling companions,
Thomasina Moore, and the owner of Avey and Jay’s brownstone apartment on Halsey
Street. The significance of the widows, I would argue, is the idea of a de-gendered
subject. Avey recovers gender along with an African ethnos. When she meets Lebert
Joseph at a bar and learns about the rituals performed during the excursion, she recounts
the events leading up to her hallucinatory state, finding herself incapable of responding to
his question, “What is your nation?”

For Avey, Lebert Joseph represents both the
prospective consolidation of diasporic longing in an African fatherland and diasporic
longing itself. Gifted with the paranormal capacity of the Ibos, Lebert sees “her inner
workings […] Those events of the past three days which she withheld or overlooked, the
feelings she sought to mask, the meanings that were beyond her—he saw and understood
them all from the look he bent on her.” Avey achieves full recovery through a ritual
bathing by Lebert’s daughter, Rosalie Parvay, who is as psychically adept as her father,
and by participating in the Big Drum, likened to the Ring Shout that she once danced
with her Aunt Cuney. Interestingly, prior to the excursion, when Lebert sings the songs
that correspond to the ritual dances of the Big Drum, his voice “sounded more youthful.
Moreover, it had taken on a noticeably feminine tone. The same was true of his gestures.
The hand snapping the invisible skirt back and forth, the thrusting shoulders, the elbow
flicking out—all were movements of a woman.”

85 Ibid., 167
86 Ibid., 171
87 Ibid., 179
the Big Drum, Lebert is femininized while singing a song that corresponds specifically to
the dancing of the Juba, typically performed by women, but the novel suggests that all of
the rituals have a feminizing effect. In Carriacou, while he sings and dances to the Beg
Pardon, Avey notices a change in his usually diminutive stature and crippled legs as he
assumes the appearance of another of his “endless array of personas.” During his
performance, he radiates “the illusion of height, femininity, and power.”88 When Avey
later dances the Carriacou Tramp, he stands alongside her, watching her dance “with the
smile that was at once triumphant and fatherly, and dancing himself, the slow measured
tramp.”89 While drumming, he strikes a note that “sounds like the distillation of a
thousand sorrow songs […] The theme of separation of loss the note embodies, the
unacknowledged longing it conveyed summed up feelings that were beyond words,
feelings and a host of subliminal memories.”90 The novel suggests that the ritual dances
of the Big Drum call forth diasporic longing and that the effect of this longing on
embodiment is feminizing and transformative, regardless of the gender of the dancer.
When Avey assumes the position of the dancer and Lebert stands aside, triumphant and
fatherly, he effectually assumes the role of masculine consolidation. Their positions
relative to diasporic longing in the dance, I would argue, is analogous to the masculine
and feminine subjectivities produced by Avey and Jay’s intimacy. The novel imagines
diasporic longing as a sonic “distillation” that links the aesthetic traditions of blacks in
the US and the West Indies, the source of which Avey identifies as the “collective heart.”

88 Ibid., 243
89 Ibid., 250
90 Ibid., 244-45
Lebert subsequently declares her to belong to the nation of the Arada, and she vows to tell of her excursion to the “token few” African Americans in Manhattan who benefited from her generation’s struggle during the era of the Civil Rights Movement. We might deduce, then, that *Praisesong for the Widow* locates the prospective consolidation of a diasporic African American community in the US American context, though diaspora leaves open the possibility of relocation.

Of all of Marshall’s fictional works, *Praisesong for the Widow* represents most pointedly the relationship between a memorial Africa, cultural assimilation and class mobility in the US, and the Caribbean context to define a diasporic community. The ethnicized, diasporic blackness produced by the widow’s journey back to a memorial African nation revives what Marshall referred to, speaking of the appearance of Africa in her novels, as a “historical self” in “Shaping the World of My Art.” That historical self, as she suggests in the interview with Condé, is one that must be invented in fiction. It constitutes not so much a strategic essence, in the Afrocentric sense, but an imagined subjectivity in a community forged through the democratic logic of diaspora. The diasporic context that Marshall imagines across the trajectory of her fictional works, is one in which diasporic longing converges with a black feminist politics of intimacy to produce gendered and ethnicized subjects. In that convergence, the gendered mechanisms of diaspora suspend the consolidation of the community in a national territory, producing a perpetual, deterritorialized intimacy.

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At the risk of following my critical forebear’s example too formulaically, I mark the end of my genealogical study with a similar gesture to that of The Practice of Diaspora, where in his Coda, Brent Hayes Edwards identifies the “last anthology” as Nancy Cunard’s Negro (1934). Edwards argues that the materiality of the black internationalist anthology “produces blackness as an inescapable presence,” attempting to live up to its claim to anthologize the Negro by sheer force of its document-gathering. Indeed, the anthology constitutes a miniature archive, documenting an articulation (in both senses, as an expression and jointed link across gaps) of diaspora. Concurring with such critics as Michael North who have remarked on the incongruities in Negro’s constellation of documents, Edwards concludes that the disjointedness of its compilation evinces a “dissociative effect” and represents “the impossibility of anthologizing blackness,” by which he means that the anthology’s project of producing blackness as the product of an archive of documents is ultimately undermined by the very materiality of the text. The anthology is a “practice” of diaspora in the sense that it demonstrates that impossibility—it demonstrates, that is, its own status as the “last,” or impossible, anthology.

Such an observation might comment on the genre of the anthology itself. Speaking of the relationship of anthologies to academic culture and the public sphere, Jeffrey R. DiLeo notes that anthologies generally sustain a “second-class status” among

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1 Edwards, 122
2 Ibid., 316
an academic readership as a “repackaging of primary sources.”\textsuperscript{3} The dissociative effect of\textit{Negro} that North and Edwards observe, I would argue, arises from this repackaging of formerly published texts.

The publishing industry distinguishes between anthologies and collections. William Germano, vice president and publishing director at Routledge, distinguishes between these two types on the basis of the editing activities these publications require, defining a\textit{collection} as “a gathering of new or mostly new writing” that draws upon the editor’s pre-existing network of contributors.\textsuperscript{4} An\textit{anthology}, in contrast, is a “gathering of previously published, or mostly previously published, work” that “aims to present the best of what has been thought and said—and already published.”\textsuperscript{5} My selection of anthologies for this study reflects my taking seriously their generic constraints and possibilities. As publications that enact a black feminist analysis, the anthologies in this study either collect solicited essays and stories, as in the case of\textit{Home Girls}, \textit{The Black Woman}, and \textit{Sturdy Black Bridges}, or republish them to tell another story, as in the case of the original 1975 and 1980 publications of\textit{Black-Eyed Susans} and \textit{Midnight Birds}, which arrange the contributions to tell a thematized narrative of black women’s experience and literary history. In fact, in her introduction to \textit{Black-Eyed Susans}, Mary Helen Washington alternates between the designation “collection” and “anthology,” pronouncing the stories of her volume to be “classics” because of the relationship they


\textsuperscript{5} Ibid.
sustain to her posited sociological project. Their textual images of black women, she argued, represent the complexity of black women’s experiences.⁶

I would argue, then, that the volumes in this study behave more as collections than as anthologies in the sense that they comment on themselves in the process of creating a tradition. These volumes do not necessarily aim to present the best of what has been thought and said about black women’s writing and subjectivity but rather those writings that suit the black feminist analytical aims of the editor. The volumes gathered the works of literature by black women writers that black feminist educators had begun teaching but had not found widely available because of a limited market and readership. Indeed, all of the volumes in this study have at one point gone out of print and been reissued. For me, these volumes do not radiate a dissociative effect but rather produce a black feminist analytical enactment by its constellation of texts. That production is not a demonstration of an impossibility but a possibility for a political analysis of black women’s subjectivity. The volumes invite a critical engagement similar to that of literary productions, disciplining the reader to enact its posited mode, implicit and explicit, of black feminist critical analysis. The pedagogical aim of the editors serves as an aesthetic organizing principle for the work. Particularly in the case of Home Girls, The Black Woman, and Sturdy Black Bridges, the volumes reflect the editors’ network of associates, making an entirely new aesthetic production from the multi-generic assemblage of writings—from poems and excerpts of novels to critical essays.

⁶ Washington, Black-Eyed Susans, xxxi. In her 1990 publication of Black-Eyed Susans/Midnight Birds, she remarked that when she taught the writers in her volume in the early 1970s, she taught them from Xeroxed copies. The fact of these writers having been reprinted by the mid- to late 1980s suggested for Washington that these writers are benefiting from a mass commercial appeal (5).
It could be said, then, that the distinctive marker of the black feminist anthology is the proximity of its contributions to the process of building a tradition. I find these volumes particularly useful for isolating the pedagogical priorities of the editors, understanding those priorities to reflect distinct conceptualizations of black feminist analytical praxes. Each anthology advocates a way of reading democracy as the condition for the emergence of black women’s subjectivity.

By 1990, the anthologies of black women’s writing presumed that the tradition had already been created. This is particularly true not only of Beverly Guy-Sheftall’s *Words of Fire* but also Mary Helen Washington’s 1990 publication of *Black-Eyed Susans* and *Midnight Birds*, which collapses the two anthologies, adds headnotes with the introduction of each writer, and dislodges the contributions from the former anthologies’ thematic narrative arrangement of the texts. Henry Louis Gates, Jr.’s *Reading Black, Reading Feminist: A Critical Anthology* (1990) similarly assumes the posture of a post-black feminist critical tradition. Gates’s anthology documents the tradition of black feminist criticism in three parts: It first “constructs a tradition,” compiling the essays of notable black feminist critics like Barbara Christian and Deborah E. McDowell who prescribed the critical practice. Its second part “reads black and feminist” by compiling the essays of African Americanist critics, male and female, who have deduced a black feminist ethos from the slave narratives, autobiographies, poetry, and twentieth-century novels of black women writers. The third part comprises interviews with Rita Dove and Jamaica Kincaid that Gates calls “conversations” in his introduction, borrowing the term used to describe an ethic of critical engagement from *Sturdy Black Bridges* and *Home Girls*. Quoting Mary Helen Washington, Gates concludes that the tradition of black
feminist criticism is one in which “women talk to other women,” by which he means that a tradition emerges in the intertextual relation of black women’s literary works. Channelling Mae G. Henderson, whose 1989 essay “Speaking in Tongues” theorizes the discursive unity of black women’s writing in terms of the “heteroglossic” voices of black female characters and appears in the first part of the volume, Gates argues, “Literary works are in dialogue not because of some mystical collective unconscious determined by the biology of race and gender, but because writers read other writers and ground their representations of experience in models of language provided largely by other writers to whom they feel akin.”

Gates goes on to paraphrase Hazel V. Carby’s introduction to Reconstructing Womanhood, explaining that a literary history emerges when sexuality, race, and gender are understood to be “both the condition and the basis of personal identity” and to “shape the very possibility of expressive culture.” Recapitulating the conclusions of black feminist criticism garnered over the course of its development, Gates presents the legacy of black feminist criticism as a literary history of the material conditions of black women’s heterogeneous experiences. That literary history enacts a cultural politics of inclusion, where black women as critics and creative writers assume an identity through their respective relationships to expressive culture.

This history also encompasses a womanist ethos, coined by Alice Walker in her collection In Search of Our Mother’s Gardens (1983). Desiring to prescribe and assume a feminist posture without a racial qualifier, Walker employed “womanism” to invoke a celebratory sense of women’s culture—an idea that bell hooks, in her essay “Writing the

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8 Ibid., 7
Subject,” included in her reading of the “vision of inclusion” in *The Color Purple* (1982). Hooks explained that the novel’s womanist ethos uncritically assumes that women’s sexuality has emancipatory potential, neglecting its saturation by patriarchal domination. Walker attributed the term womanist to “a women who loves other women, sexually and/or nonsexually,” “appreciates and prefers women’s culture, women’s emotional flexibility […] and women’s strength” and who is “committed to [the] survival and wholeness of [an] entire people, male and female.” Reading Black, Reading Feminist implicitly adopts this ethos in order to resolve a presumed canonical split along lines of gender in the formation of the tradition of black women’s writing within a black aesthetic tradition dominated by black male writers. Implicitly referencing the bitterly uncharitable critical reception of Walker’s *The Color Purple* and Michelle Wallace’s *Black Macho and the Myth of the Superwoman* (1979), Gates laments, “Much has been made—too much—of the supposed social animosities between black men and women and the relation between the commercial success of the black women’s literary movement and the depiction of black male sexism.” Crediting black women writers with having “generated a resoundingly new voice, one that is at once black and female,” Gates suggests that the legacy of black feminist criticism is the reconciliation between a black (male) tradition and a black feminist one. Hence the practice the anthology advocates, “reading black, reading feminist.” Certainly the implication of such a womanist theory, as Sherley Anne Williams suggested in her 1986 essay, is the critique of the implied homology between black

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10 Gates, 2
feminism and black women’s aesthetic representation: Williams proposed that womanist inquiry would reveal the material conditions of gendered subjectivity, not solely black women’s subjectivity. Nevertheless, the principle of reading black, reading feminist presumes a social divisiveness to be resolved by a womanist ethos, which means that “reading black, reading feminist” does not name a political practice but rather a critical gender politics, sustaining the acerbic sentiment of Walker’s and Wallace’s critical reception.

This gender politics masks the historically contingent instantiations of black feminist criticism, the second part of the volume constituting a kind of presentist flattening of the critical tradition assembled in the first part of the anthology. Gates’s volume demonstrates the impossibility of anthologizing the political legacy of black feminist criticism since doing so necessarily evacuates the tradition of the contextualized enactment of a political praxis. Reading Black, Reading Feminist, then, might be understood as the last black feminist anthology in the sense that it de-politicizes black feminist analysis even as it prescribes its practice. Beginning with Smith’s 1977 essay and 1984 anthology, my study has shifted back to 1970 and forward again to 1979, beginning and ending at the point where black feminist anthologies stop behaving as collections and understanding black feminist criticism as a discursive practice that began before it was explicitly named. Each anthology presents an organizing principle that they do not render explicit but that my enactment of its analytical mode reveals. These organizing principles encapsulate a democratic desire that, in turn, animates fictions of black women’s subjectivity. In these cultural accounts by black women writers, I have identified depictions of black women subjects who emerge from strategic zones of
embodiment, across various axes of difference and political postures, where subjects agonistically coexist.
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Aisha Peay was born in Evanston, Illinois on June 10, 1981. She received her Bachelor of Arts in English from Purdue University in 2003 and has received several academic honors, including inductions into the Phi Beta Kappa Honor Society and the National Society of Collegiate Scholars. At Duke University, she received a Presidential Fellowship, a Duke Endowment Fellowship, a John Hope Franklin Humanities Institute Fellowship, and summer research and academic year fellowships from the Graduate School. A specialist in nineteenth- and twentieth-century African American literature, Peay currently focuses on African American women writers and their intellectual traditions as well as questions pertaining to nationalism, race, gender, feminist and political theories. She will begin an appointment as Assistant Professor of English Language and Literature at Southern Illinois University, Edwardsville in the fall of 2009.