TALKING 'BOUT A REVOLUTION:
AFRO-POLITICO WOMANISM AND THE IDEOLOGICAL
TRANSFORMATION OF
THE BLACK COMMUNITY, 1965-1980

DISSERTATION

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By

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ABSTRACT

This project examines how the ideological transformation of the Black community during the Black Power movement is represented in fiction written by Black female novelists during the post-Civil Rights period. I argue that by recognizing and often challenging prevailing paradigms within Black nationalist rhetoric, female activists/writers such as Toni Morrison, Alice Walker, Toni Cade Bambara, and Paule Marshall worked within and wrote about the black community in ways that would ensure a focus on continued progressive action after the "official" end to the Civil Rights and Black Power movements. Via fictional representations of Black female activists struggling to save the Black community, the authors question the usefulness of Black rhetorical warfare that serves as imaginary distractions to current issues and problems that face the Black community at the dawn of a new era.

The theoretical framework I employ for this project is what I call, "Afro-Politico Womanism." Afro-Politico Womanism is a theory based on a holistic method of understanding community building among the Black masses who are left behind, after a Black middle-class collective moves into the folds of mainstream American society. Afro-Politico Womanism is supported by the logic, endurance, passion, and attitudes of Black women. This agenda is committed to literary representations of Black female political activism, and often exists in 20th century literature written by black women, where the protagonist(s) have a strong desire to "disrupt the infrastructure." In the context

of this project, literary representations of Black female political activism includes a character's struggle, for justice within the Black community, and an understanding of how gender relationships can be used to heal relationships. As a method of theorizing the socio-political milieu during the time specified I incorporate readings of cognitive liberation theory; indigenous organizational structures, and gender politics as variables which effectively lead to the mass movement and political mobilization of the Black underclass.

Dedicated to:

Sellester (Lester) B. Eaton
For being my cheerleader and reminding me to always "get (my) lesson" Your living was not in vain…

And,

Linda D. Eaton-Young
For instilling your revolutionary spirit within me
I am, because you are
"…This mother's daughter will ride the wind…"

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CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

"LET ME KNOW WHEN YOU GET THROUGH":

THE AFRO-POLITICO WOMANIST AGENDA

> Don't you know? They're talkin' bout a revolution—it sounds like a whisper
> Don't you know? They're talkin' bout a revolution—it sounds like a whisper
> Finally the tables are starting to turn, (talkin' bout a revolution)
> 'Cause finally the tables are starting to turn, (talkin' bout a revolution)…

> -Tracy Chapman

Several Black feminist critics have examined female subjugation and the exclusion of the feminine voice during "Black Power," or the years between 1966-1976. Scholars including Patricia Hill Collins, Madhu Dubey, bell hooks, Angela Davis, Barbara Christian, and Joy James, are a few who represent a wide range of theoretical scholarship on the role of the Black woman in the variegated "community."[1] Significantly, these years represent the reclamation of the black community by virile, "masculine warriors" (i.e., black men), through organizational leadership and community organizing. As is commonly argued, during this period the Black political platform

became a predominately masculine one, and not surprisingly, the fight against racial oppression ignored simultaneous internal gender oppression within the black community.

In addition, this earlier Black feminist critique of black masculine ideologies noted that while increased male participation and persuasive rhetoric identifying the black man as "king" increased notoriety and garnered mass support for various organizations, the success was contingent upon female subjugation. Here Michelle Wallace's seminal *Black Macho and the Myth of the Superwoman (*1978) is key as she interrogates the role of black women in the folds of exclusively masculine rhetoric and misogynistic underpinnings. She identifies black women's initial reluctance to speak against the performance of "macho," as a fear of being deemed "counterrevolutionary"— which was assumed to ultimately lead to the destruction of the black family. Accordingly, the mythical "Strong Black Woman," who exists through a rejection of male domination and systematic gender oppression, is deemed a detriment to the progress of the Black community because of her overbearing demeanor and emasculating tendencies.

Though Wallace has been derided for statements that argue "rampant misogyny" exists within the community, and she has retracted her position somewhat in recent years, the premise behind *Black Macho* is equally important as the criticism it aroused. Among other topics, Wallace argues that unlike Black female abolitionists, Black clubwomen at the turn of the 20th century, or Black feminists who preceded the 1960s—women during the Black Power movement were not "allowed" to do anything important (Wallace 162). Because "there was more parading of Black macho than revolutionary planning" the silencing and subsequent absence of women meant the fall of the Movement (78-81). While the "popular" attention was on the rhetoric of the era and the prevalence of a Black

masculine discourse based on the reclamation of power, understanding these truths does not constitute a comprehensive portrait of Black women's activity during the era.

Like the *strong* Black woman, the mythic *silent* Black woman has often been misread and idealized. First-hand accounts of the movement note that Black women felt guilty for "contributing" to matriarchal domination and accepted their places "ten steps behind" the men who had been emasculated by white America and the Black woman for so long (APR). What most historical studies of the era do not acknowledge is the brevity of this passive position ("that got old, real fast"), and the diligent focused social and political activity led by women in grass-roots organizations as well as black women novelists. This activity existed as an undercurrent to the attention-grabbing boasts of contemporary Black political rhetoric that permeated national consciousness during the Black revolutionary movements of the 1960s and 1970s.

<u>Re-visions</u>

What this dissertation project brings to the table is a more inclusive analysis of the overall socio-political structure of the black community during the "revolutionary" years (1965-1980). Instead of focusing solely on gender oppression and gendered violence within the black community, I argue that Black female artists engaged in a more holistic fight for common communal goals, while at the same time acknowledging the power and necessity of "the feminine." The title of this dissertation is derived from Tracy Chapman's music single "Talkin' Bout a Revolution" from her self-titled debut album (1988). A reserved and soft-spoken woman in public herself, Chapman has been able to enter boldly into the alternative/folk/rock genre, an arena where Black women are not the

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mass audience or prevailing voices.[2] Her songwriting exposes a distinct humanistic understanding of the world as she composes songs about Mother Earth, war, injustice, crime, domestic violence, and similar societal ills. In the refrain of "Revolution" the speaker asks, "Don't you know, they're talkin' bout a revolution?" and later informs, "It sounds like a whisper." This dissertation project is driven by the understanding that "real revolution"[3] led by Black women has continued to exist within the community despite the popular belief that nation building exists only within a masculine sphere. Just as one person's "silence" is another's quiet whisper, the interpretation depends on the standpoint of the group or individuals making the claim. More specifically, the focus of this study is the core segment of Black women writers who dug at the root of a social and racial dilemma and attempted to shift the focus from personal vindication to community building, through imagined possibilities.

I limit the argument to the impact two prevailing ideologies during the Black Revolutionary movement—Revolutionary Nationalism and Cultural Nationalism—had on the way members of the Black community understood their role in the political process. According to Raymond Hall (as quoted in Sandra Hollin Flowers' Pens of Fire), "Cultural nationalism asserts that black people have distinctive culture, life-styles, values, philosophies, etc. which are essentially different from those of white people" (Flowers 31). Also, "Revolutionary black nationalism [contends] that only the overthrow of the existing political and economic system can bring about the liberation of black Americans" (31). While these nationalist philosophies existed within Black political consciousness prior to the time period specified in this project, the Black revolutionary movements of the late 20th century serve as a portal through which the representations of

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Black Nationalism entered into mainstream America. Thus, opening a Pandora's box of critique, review, copycat movements and organizations, as well as the acquisition of sound bytes and symbols to used for capitalistic gain ("Black Power" t-shirts, buttons, hair accessories) or admission into the new "cool" of popular culture.

As this "new," "young," and "militant" leg of the Civil Rights movement gained popularity; the collaborative community organizations that existed before "Black became beautiful" were ultimately pitted against each other in an attempt to initiate self-destruction. Those groups that considered themselves Revolutionary nationalists openly rejected the aims of Cultural nationalism claiming the latter to be "pork chop" nationalism, reactionary nationalism, and accused cultural nationalist leaders of conspiring with the despised "pig" (the "white" justice system and racist police officers). Likewise, cultural nationalists ridiculed "so-called revolutionaries" for hiding behind rhetorics of anarchy that did nothing to aid Black progress The most accessible example of escalating tensions resulting from ideological contention is the rift between Maulana "Ron" Karenga's US organization in Los Angeles, steeped in cultural nationalism, and the Black Panther Party for Self-Defense based in Oakland, California—a self-proclaimed revolutionary nationalist organization. The distrust and dislike between groups rested in more than ideological differences and Black macho, citing one "type" of nationalism and Black masculinity over another. Unfortunately, the war of words did not end between the pages of conscious-raising pamphlets or on stage during public rallies. The breaking point came in a government supported[4] public shootout in Los Angeles that left two members of the Black Panther Party dead, an act that was a component in the further breakdown of both organizations' structures. Ironically, this "war" paralleled the

escalating violent and oppressive realities of the Vietnam War, which both factions agreed was counterproductive because it ignored homegrown problems in America.

Adjacent to the rhetorical battleground, equally significant revolutionary activity was taking place. Black women activists were working within and writing about the black community in ways that they hoped would ensure progressive action after the signing of Civil Rights legislation and in the coming years. For example, Ella Baker's activism through organization-centered politics, Fannie Lou Hamer's local and national activism on behalf of the poor and working class, as well as the emergence of literature written by Black female novelists who made conscious decisions to tell the stories of those most affected by social upheaval and racial tensions in the American South. As a means of dealing with the pervasive problems within Black organizational leadership, these women employed what I call the "let me know when you get through" strategy. I take this from a sarcastic colloquial expression that exists in Black American vernacular, typically used at meetings or large gatherings where discussion of a subject "gets out of hand," and no progress is being made. For example, "Let me know when you get through arguing about [the issue]. I'll be over here."

The tone of the phrasing suggests that time is being wasted while individuals debate irrelevant and useless themes. When the person who initiates the statement moves to the side, her self-removal is not a sign of retreat, but a sign to those addressed that she is serious about the work at hand and that their actions are bordering on foolishness. This expression as strategy signifies on the Black revolutionary movement itself by showing an understanding that the distinction between the two types of nationalism (cultural and revolutionary) were imaginary distractions to the "real" issues and problems the black

community faced. While the "leaders" continued to argue over the correct philosophical path for Black progress, black women activists and writers were "over [t]here" working within their communities to ensure the progress would actually come.

Throughout this project, I contend that through the lenses of both cultural and revolutionary nationalism key Black women novelists understood that more humanistic and holistic methods (e.g. healing, cooperation, respect, self-criticism, love) become the real tools with which the "master's house" can be forever "dismantled"[5]. Instead of furthering the arguments by black leaders that one method was/is more successful than the other, select Black women writers address the endless possibilities for the black community if *both* Black cultural pride and political revolution were to merge harmoniously. They understand that the structures within the Black revolutionary movements needed to be considered organisms, not organizations. Whereas organizations often fail because they focus on a primary leader, an organism is dynamic, fluid, and evolves over time. Organisms are composed of elements that work together for continued strength and growth as a collective unit. The writers I discuss in this project posit that Black protest must exist as a communal activity, or it will ultimately fail.

Theoretical Framework: Afro-Politico Womanism

Community-based activism during the Civil Rights Movement and beyond laid the groundwork for several modes of theoretical scholarship regarding the "Black woman." Black Feminist Theory, Womanism, Africana Womanism, and Womanist Theology are examples of scholarship that received critical attention in the post-Civil Rights era. Each term argues for a specific theoretical framework. Examples of their

respective foci include: the enhancement of traditional "white feminism" to include the voices of women of color; an exclusive emphasis on race, class, and gender; understanding the experiences of Black women as part of the African Diaspora; the position of women within the Black church (and) as part of spiritual and religious movements.

While a positive argument can be made for the use of each term listed above, this project relies on what I call an "Afro-politico Womanist" agenda—an inclusive and progressive theoretical approach to literary activism as it relates to an ideological understanding of the Black community. The Afro-politico Womanist agenda exists as a mosaic of cultural and revolutionary nationalist ideologies, in their purest form. The agenda prioritizes the strength, survival, unity, and health (mental and physical) of the global black community, by first, addressing the needs and concerns of the existing poor and working class, as they define these needs. Afro-Politico Womanism resists the reliance on singular leadership as the method by which members of the Black community understand their roles in the political process. This philosophy rests on the concept that "the struggle is eternal," as professed by Civil Rights activist Ella Baker, and does not exist as a spurious reaction to specific "movements." As a theoretical platform it is community-based and is supported by the logic, endurance, passion, and attitude of black women. The concept supports portions of Alice Walker's definition of "Womanism,"[6] specifically, the line "committed to the survival and wholeness of an entire people, male and female." This agenda is committed to literary representations of Black female political activism, and often exists in 20th century literature written by black women, where the protagonist(s) have a strong desire to "disrupt the infrastructure." In the context

of this project, literary representations of Black female political activism includes a character's struggle for justice within the Black community, and an understanding of how gender relationships can be used to heal relationships within the Black community. Black authors whose work falls under this definition write within the socio-political context of insurgency or transformation in the "imagined" Black community. The female characters act as agents in an effort to expose inaction (or perilous action) of the American polity.

Literary examples of the Afro-politico Womanist agenda include works like Gloria Naylor's The Women of Brewster Place (1980), which is not included in this study. Though this novel is primarily read for its feminist underpinnings, Naylor also devotes significant space to the fight for justice and civil rights within a working class community ignored by the city. Each chapter in the novel recounts the experiences of women who come from varied backgrounds. Their stories of hurt, pain, loss, and escape merge in a small northern community of forgotten individuals trying to survive the odds. The dénouement of the novel is a collective decision by the women to channel their energies into bettering the community in which they live—for the strength and survival of all who reside.

Through her literary depiction of women who learn that the community is their strength, Naylor recognizes the impossibility of any "progressive" action taken by women who are not willing to live for anyone else, but themselves. In essence, the survival and protection of the Black community is the activist's purpose. By using literature as a means of activism, the black woman writer's insider position and stake in the eradication of injustice enables her to negotiate her multi-dimensional experience (i.e.

Black/woman/writer/activist). For women fighting against subalternity, writing and political activism are not mutually exclusive.

Popular Oppositions

An obvious question concerning Afro-Politico Womanism is "Can any Black woman be read according to the Afro-Politico Womanism paradigm?" "Or, "Haven't Black women been characterized this way for years? What makes Afro-Politico Womanism different?" The purpose of defining another model is not to identify difference, but to address the work of a specific type of organizer and activist who exists but is ignored in popular readings of the Black revolution. Likewise, in Black literature, not all works that have female protagonists central to the theme of the text follow the direction of the Afro-politico Womanist agenda. Under this paradigm, literary works otherwise popular for their "strong black female" or "Black feminist" protagonists who exist without community political activity or do not act on behalf of the community do not fulfill the agenda's goals.

Two examples of literary women working outside the goals of Afro-Politico Womanism are Lutie Johnson in Ann Petry's The Street, and Janie Sparks in Zora Neale Hurston's Their Eyes Were Watching God. While these works are major contributions to the Black female literary canon, the characters associate with others on a superficial and guarded level, and exist as their male counterparts—without vested interest in the Black community.

With Lutie Johnson, after battling the "streets" of Harlem and confronting the estrangement of her husband, she is sexually harassed and attacked by an unscrupulous

benefactor. Lutie decides that she can only reclaim herself and her personal strength through erasure. Contrary to the collective power of minority groups, as an individual, her race and gender leave her powerless, and after realizing she has no influence on the political structure, she risks everything, including her son, in an ultimate act of defiance—flight.

Curiously, as a fugitive from the law, Johnson also becomes a fugitive from her maternal "role(s)," which is also defined by the threat of legal sanctions. Ultimately, she is forced be alone. She remains disconnected from all ties to family and community, and becomes like the outlaw hero of the American western. According to Robert Ray, the outlaw hero regards the law "as a collective, impersonal ideology imposed on the individual from without…generat[ing] a rich tradition of legends celebrating legal defiance in the name of some "natural" standard…" (Ray 312). Lutie defies the restrictions placed on her as a woman and leaves her family in an act associated with male dominance and freedom.

Another useful example of the loner perspective is the "disruptive" figure of Janie Sparks (nee Crawford), the protagonist of Zora Neale Hurston's Their Eyes Were Watching God. Janie moves from dependency to autonomy in her refusal to accept social strictures. Janie is born into a perpetual cycle of peonage, which her grandmother intends to break first through hopes of education and ultimately through an arranged marriage. She states, "Somebody done spoke to me 'bout you a long time ago. Ah ain't said nothin' cause dat wasn't de way Ah placed you. Ah wanted yuh to school out and pick from a higher bush and a sweeter berry" (Hurston 13). As the reader learns, Janie's grandmother

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sees assimilation into the elite classes of African Americans as the only real solution to Janie's perilous position as "de mule uh de world."

Later in the novel, after two "failed" marriages to upwardly mobile black men (Joe Starks and Logan Killicks), Janie enters into a controversial relationship with Teacake, a young, "free spirit," belonging to the indigenous class of Southern blacks. Janie's subsequent decision to shoot Teacake (when he is stricken with rabies) and the trial that follows, places her in the heart of "one of the most controversial and hotly contested aspects of the novel: whether or not Janie is able to achieve her voice…" (Washington preface xi).

In actuality, Janie is on trial by the black community for being a member of the elite class, rather than the euthanasic death of Teacake. Reading both of her husbands (Logan Killicks and Joe Sparks) as the 'infrastructure,' allows for a more accurate reading of Janie's dubious position on the witness stand—as both speaker and silenced. When Janie rejects Killicks, whom her grandmother identifies as "a good man," she rejects complacency and traditional gender roles—Janie as cook, maid, and mother. She is initially attracted to Joe Starks' rhetoric and his ability to dream though "he did not represent sun-up and pollen blooming trees…" that she desires in a mate (Hurston 28). Later, Janie rejects Joe and his middle class values and accepts Teacake because he embodies all that Joe and Logan do not.

Because Janie refuses to acknowledge her position in the elite class, the black community in the courtroom views her with contempt. Janie immediately gains approval on the witness stand from the white all-male members of the jury and the group of upper class white women who "wore good clothes and had the pinky color that comes with

good food"(176). From the community's standpoint, they can easily understand Janie's "murderous" act, if she accepts her role as a bourgeois subject. This would allow the masses to condemn Janie for thinking she was "too good" for Teacake and not loving him at all. But because she identifies herself as one of the folk, though she is not, the members of the indigenous class shun her for apparent mockery. As a result, they read her as an agent of white oppression. She further supports this accusation by rejecting noninstitutionalized tactics[7] (e.g. outbursts in the courtroom) and abandons the environment once she is acquitted.

Both Lutie Johnson and Janie Crawford speak to the power of the black feminist when *separated* from the black collective. The women have dysfunctional family relationships, failed marriages, are physically attacked, ultimately murder their attackers, and escape legal ramifications. They serve as examples of those who are "radical," "revolutionary," and "political" in the context of shifting the focus from the greater good to personal gain and survival—transgressing traditional feminine roles. While this standpoint can be empowering—it has damaging and unhealthy effects in the scope of community/nation building.

Afro-Politico Womanism is created out of the existing needs of the community. Under this model, individualism and self-centered action is closely aligned with flaws in organizational leadership, and is viewed as counter-productive to attempts at collective growth and racial progress. Because literary representations of women like Janie and Lutie are peripheral to the community, they cannot exist under the Afro-Politico Womanism paradigm. As outlined above, the Afro-Politico Womanist agenda does not readily apply to all works traditionally viewed as instrumental to an understanding of

Black womanhood. Fictional female characters and real world activism analyzed according to this paradigm privilege a collective healing that shifts the focus from what literary scholar Valerie Lee terms a "solitary posture of the protagonist," to an extrinsic focus on the plight of the Black community.

Selection of Primary Works and Chapter Breakdown

The project is situated between 1965-1980, as a way of pinpointing a key era in the ongoing fight for racial and social justice and the emergence of Womanism and Black Feminist theory. The space between the Civil Rights Movement and the ultra-conservative Reagan era is not only regarded as the rise of postmodernism, but also a period of intra-national debate on gender politics and racial equality. Likewise, 1966 marks the year Stokely Carmichael ushered the term "Black Power" into American consciousness and the second wave of the mainstream feminist movement gained national recognition. Afro-Politico Womanism recognizes that gender and race as theoretical concepts have continually existed as platforms for action based strategy.

Primary Works[8]

In the fictional work of Toni Morrison, Alice Walker, Toni Cade Bambara, and Paule Marshall, the black community as a nation separate and culturally specific is naturally defined within the scope of black women's experiences. In a move toward inclusion and expression, a wide range of Black men and women's experiences are reified and made available for public consumption. The authors in this study employ the simultaneous ability to critique, love, destroy, and create representations of the Black

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family, Black love, Black thought, and Black experience that is used to preserve the principles of the Black Nationalism and community-based political action. What certain Black male critics later define as "airing dirty laundry"—is actually an act of liberation by these female artists.

Several texts contribute to the scope of this project. I draw on Doug McAdam's Political Process and the Development of Black Insurgency, 1930-1970 as the anchor text, which provides a platform from which I build the theoretical underpinnings of Afro-Politico Womanism agenda. Particularly useful is McAdam's outline of the Political Process Model (PPM), which provides a historical context for Black insurgent action and the analysis of political power among indigenous (grass roots) organizations. This model serves useful as a method for understanding the impact of Black political mobilization on the larger American political landscape.

In addition to McAdam, I employ Toni Morrison's Song of Solomon (1977) as a cautionary novel that warns of the impending destruction of the community if the ideological battle continues to shift the focus away from the pulse of the Black community. I read the characters, Milkman Dead and Guitar Baines, as symbolic of cultural and revolutionary nationalist ideology. Though both young men serve as a hopeful future within a community of older members, their oppositional politics (Milkman as lover of the Black Aesthetic and Guitar as proponent of Black militancy) threaten the sanctity of a community that needs the talents of both men to survive.

Alice Walker's Meridian (1976), often defined as a "Civil Rights Movement novel," serves as a portal through which the type of activism that privileges both cultural and revolutionary nationalism can emerge. Toni Cade Bambara's The Salt Eaters (1980)

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focuses on spiritual awakenings, the power of Black female relationships, organizational decline, and the necessity of a continued struggle after the Civil Rights and Black Power movements have allegedly "ended." Paule Marshall's <u>The Chosen Place, The Timeless People</u> (1969) set in a fictional Caribbean island, represents cross-cultural political action throughout the African Diaspora and the dangers of global consciousness from a notably Western subject–position. Though chronologically, this novel predates the others, it enters into a long-standing conversation about Black nationhood and shared sociopolitical history in the New World community.

<u>Chapter Breakdown</u>

The chapters that follow are presented as an ongoing discussion of the connections between history, politics, and literature in the context of the Afro-politico Womanist agenda. Chapter two provides the historical and theoretical foundation for the project. In this chapter, I explore the origins of the divide between art and politics in twentieth century Black literature and letters. I argue that the question of literature's contribution to the larger social position of the Black community has historically been a contentious issue. I restructure Doug McAdam's "Political Process Model" and use a modified model to explore literary activism and ways of reading contributions to "the political" in Black literature.

Chapter three explores the contemporary history of Black Nationalism, with specific attention to the manifestations of Revolutionary and Cultural Nationalism within Black culture. I use Afro-Politico Womanism to critique Black Nationalist rhetoric and ideology that excludes alternative ways of imagining community progress. This critique

identifies racial integration, organizational dissonance, and the emergence of a politically divided Black middle class as a precursor to structural demise of the Black community. Within this chapter I read Toni Morrison's Song of Solomon, as commentary on warring Black Nationalist ideologies and the possible destructive outcome of the Black community's future.

Chapters four and five examine fictional representations of female activists working within the Black community in the post-Civil Rights era. These chapters define what I call the "3C's" of Afro-Politico Womanism: Continuation, Consciousness, and Collaboration. In chapter four, I read Meridian Hill and Truman Held (Meridian) as contrasting figures who understand the imperative of relationship building as connected to the pursuit of a sanctified and whole Black community—whether or not the community is willing to act on its own behalf. Meridian continues grass roots political mobilization in small Southern communities that serve as the basis for her life of activism and growth, while Truman wanders as a prodigal son of the South, until realizing that the key to his future is the return of the distant Black middle-class to the masses. I also examine Walker's suggestion that a Black male "awakening" and sharing of responsibility must be a factor in the continued struggle if the community is going to progress. In chapter five, I read Velma Henry (The Salt Eaters) as a freedom fighter who has vigilantly responded to the absence of insurgent action within her fragmented Southern community with a spirit of rebellion. Through Bambara's representations of organizational decline, fragmented gender politics, and the division of community-based coalitions, she provides a space to read Velma's attempted suicide as the impending destruction of the community. Velma's subsequent spiritual awakening and own

consciousness-raising experience renews her strength and determination to fight for her community, signaling the possibility of hope reclaimed.

The concluding chapter expands the focus of Black American activism to incorporate global consciousness. Within chapter six, I address the shift to attempts at Third World coalition building during the Black revolutionary period, and examine how social uprisings like the Black Consciousness movement in South Africa brought attention to injustice in all parts of the Diaspora. Here <u>The Chosen Place, The Timeless People</u>, by Paule Marshall is applied as the primary text to discuss collaboration between American political history and Diasporic grassroots activism. I examine the role of the central Black female character, Merle, the resistance of political collaboration within her island community, and how within the context of Black American political ideology the Diaspora has not only been a relevant point of comparison but also a point of contention.

CHAPTER 2

"DISRUPTIVE FIGURES: POLITICS, BLACK WOMEN, ACTIVISM

AND THE POLITICS OF BLACK WOMEN'S ACTIVISM"

> Black literature should not depict black life devoid of wider social connotations, devoid of nationalist tendencies…[T]he rendering of Negro life does not have to limit itself to social injustice—but the Negro life (whole and deep) must be represented. If this is done correctly then the social, political, and economic forms will inevitably be embraced.
>
> -Richard Wright

This statement made by Richard Wright in his politically charged "Blueprint for Negro Writing" refers to the challenge many Black writers of the 20th and 21st century face when writing narratives that address aspects of 'black' experience. Wright speaks to an inherent duty of communally conscious writers to infuse their work with politicized themes, while simultaneously representing all of "Negro" life—suggesting an inevitable marriage of politics and culture. Wright may seem an obvious beacon for the connection between art and politics because of his extensive résumé of essays and writings that address the responsibility of Black writers to educate and liberate Black masses. Several other Black writers of the 20th century have expressed similar concerns about the ways in

which their work is categorized and/or read within the public sphere. A more recent example is Toni Morrison's oft-quoted response to the question of an inherent political agenda in her work. In <u>Rootedness: The Ancestor as Foundation</u>, she states, "I am not interested in indulging myself in some private, closed exercise of my imagination that fulfils only the obligation of my personal dreams--which is to say yes, the work must be political...It seems to me that the best art is political and you ought to be able to make it unquestionably political and irrevocably beautiful at the same time" (Morrison 497). Both Morrison and Wright enter into a longstanding discussion about the true import of art created by Black artists, one in which artists have often been frustrated by the notion of "Art" vs. "Black Art" that eventually becomes the focus of their creative ability.

Equally frustrating, are white readers and critics attempts to "understand" and easily categorize the complex Black text. Questions of authenticity arise when Black scholars and artists actively write against a politicized blackness and eschew what some could call political scarification. This type of tribal marking denotes the black artists' readiness and eventual acceptance into the public sphere, and becomes a social (w)rite of passage into white America's mainstream literary circles. The questions become: what does is mean to be political? What are the various ways of reading the Black text? Can words be used as a weapon? By whom? Is not *all* Black art political? Why not? The bottom line being, the Black writer is *expected* to confront racially and sexually charged issues so that he/she may be "understood" and accepted by white readership. This assumes a standardized Black experience and overlooks the reality of diversity within the Black community. For artists working against various categorizations of Black art, the challenge is not about being *too* political; it is about not being "political" enough.

Historically, internal debates regarding authorial representation and mainstream acceptance have been "performed" on the pages of literary journals and anthologies. For example, during the era now known as the Harlem Renaissance, Black artists and political figures were often at odds over the "proper" representation of the Black underclass for a white audience. Anna Julia Cooper, Langston Hughes, Alain Locke, George Schuyler, and W.E.B. Dubois are a few key figures that spoke out for and against an *accurate* and *authentic* artistic portrayal of the Black experience.

George Schuyler's Harlem Renaissance-esque "debate"[9] with Langston Hughes on the im/possibility of a distinctive Black art is one of many examples where the artist's political agenda and loyalty to an assumed collective Black consciousness is considered. In "The Negro Art Hokum" (1926), Schuyler criticizes proclamations defining an authentic Black text. He argues that Black art is no more "Black" than white art is American. He contends, "As for the literature, painting, and sculpture of Aframericans— such as there is—it is identical in kind with the literature, painting and sculpture of white Americans: that is, it shows more or less evidence of European influence." "…This of course is easily understood if one stops to realize that the Aframerican is merely a lampblacked Anglo-Saxon" (Schuyler 1172).

Not surprisingly, what Schuyler wants from the white audience is the benefit of the doubt. His agenda reflects the growing need in the early 20th century to de-marginalize Blackness and prove equality among all artists, which in turn would prove the basic humanity and nationality of the Black American. However, Langston Hughes has a different response to claims of a colorless and culturally non-specific universal art form. He argues that Black art (which does exist for Hughes) should be fully incorporated

into mainstream categories *and* should represent all aspects of Black life, not only those aspects which are favorable or socially acceptable within the upper echelon of the Black community. He contends,

> Certainly there is, for the American Negro artist who can escape the restrictions the more advanced among his own group would put upon him, a great field of unused material ready for his art. Without going outside his race, and even among the better classes, with their "white" culture and conscious American manners, but still Negro enough to be different…And when he chooses to touch on the relations between Negroes and whites in this country with their innumerable overtones and undertones surely, and especially for literature and the drama, there is an inexhaustible supply of themes at hand. To these the Negro artist can give his racial individuality, his heritage of rhythm and warmth, and his incongruous humor that so often, as in the Blues becomes ironic laughter mixed with tears (Hughes 1269).

The irony lays in the fact that Schuyler, Hughes and others who engage in the boundless debate over the political responsibility of the artist all sought similar outcomes—freedom of creative production. Schuyler argues for the de-stratification of Black experience and the ability to be included in the American mainstream without an emphasis on race, while Hughes acknowledges diverse experiences within the Black race are equally viable artistic materials.

Given the unique traditions and diverse experiences that comprise Black America, it would be impossible to argue that serious critical studies of Black literature *do not* benefit from understanding the relationship between art and politics. Whether that context is "real" (the social milieu in which the text was created) or "imagined" (the creative space in which the text exists), any work in question fails to exist outside of its socio-political context—regardless of authorial intent. As the critic Addison Gayle is quoted as saying, even if "…blacks are being shipped to die in Grenada and the [black author chooses] to write poems and novels about sunsets and trees, you are being responsible. You are just being responsible to the status quo" (Gilyard 248). In essence, even though the author makes a conscious choice to channel her creativity away from issues important to her own survival, there is a political agenda within the act.

When thinking about fictive literature produced by Black women/activists during the immediate post-Civil Rights era the marriage between art and politics is ubiquitous. For the writers in project, specifically, it is difficult to imagine a world outside of the war protests, riots, Black Nationalism/rhetoric, and civil unrest of the late 1960s and 1970s. Accordingly, this historical and social theoretical context informs the texts studied in this project and my own approach to selected works. Focusing on the socio-historical context during the "turbulent" 1960s and the various movements of the 1970s may seem like an obvious approach when analyzing literature written during this period, but it has remained a largely neglected topic in recent years for various reasons. Existing examinations of literature written by Black female writers during the 1960s and 1970s include Melissa Walker's Down from the Mountaintop (1991), Madhu Dubey's Black Women Writers and the Nationalist Aesthetic (1994), and the more recent, revised

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scholarship of Sandra Hollin Flowers, <u>African American Nationalist Literature of the 1960s: Pens of Fire</u> (1996). Each study examines the way writers (male and female) represent the Civil Rights Movement, The Black Aesthetic Movement, and/or Black Nationalism, respectively.

Largely, the arguments made by the authors mentioned above incorporate a Black feminist understanding of the era. At least two of the works focus on the social, political, economic, and personal standpoint of the female marginalized subject within a masculinist and misogynistic space. The authors note how the emergence of a critically defined "Black Feminist Theory" during the 1970s created a space for the merger of social and political ills, as well as feminine reconstructions of power. As Joy James argues in "Radicalizing Feminism," this black feminist approach identifies racism and sexism as challenges to black female power, but is also able to exclusively criticize a "white masculinist state" (which can include white women), <u>or</u> sexism committed by white and black men. Not surprisingly, contemporary Anglo scholars note the correlation between literature and political history in differing ways. For example, in <u>The Poetics of Postmodernism</u>, Linda Hutcheon identifies this relationship as "historiographic metafiction." She aptly situates the postmodern novel within an ongoing debate about the place of interdisciplinarity and critical discourse. She states:

… And, in addition, if elitist culture has indeed been fragmented into specialist disciplines, as many have argued, then hybrid novels [like these] work both to address and to subvert that fragmentation through their pluralizing recourse to the discourses of history, sociology, theology,

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political science, economics, philosophy, semiotics, literature, literary

criticism, and so on. Historiographic metafiction clearly acknowledges

that it is a complex institutional and discursive network of elite, official,

mass, popular cultures that postmodernism operates in (Hutcheon 20-1).

What Hutcheon alludes to in her argument, and what the Black writer of the postmodern

narrative[10] inevitably understands is that: the literate subject is as political for the Black

writer as the personal (is/was) for the emerging feminist scholar in the 1970's. Within the

constructs of this understanding, the ultimate disconnection between the writer and the

equally "charismatic lumpen"[11] that we see in the latter half of the twentieth century

prompts a reflective look on the critical spaces which divide scholarly understandings of

applied political theory (i.e., "real") and spaces of literary activism (i.e., creative

interpretations of the "real").

Likewise, in Fighting Words, black feminist scholar Patricia Hill Collins adds the

dimension of gender to conversations about socio-political theory when she argues that

work written and produced by African American women cannot be understood outside of

what she terms "critical social theory," which she defines as:

…Bodies of knowledge and sets of institutional practices that actively

grapple with the central questions facing groups of people differently

placed in specific political, social, and historic contexts characterized by

injustice. What makes critical social theory "critical" is its commitment to

justice for one's own group and/or for other groups (Collins xiv).

The methods through which theories of "injustice," for example, are discussed are keys to understanding reflective analyses of literary social contexts. Ultimately, it is the necessary ability of the scholar to discuss literature as a product *of* its era and not as a product *within* its era. In other words, something is lost when literary criticism of texts that reflect political and social struggle is viewed in purely individual and aesthetic terms and not equally aligned with similar theoretical concerns within sociology and politics; which also employ practical models and critical methods that affect the black community.

An example of this "loss" manifests in critical pieces like The Signifyin' Monkey and Figures in Black: Words, Signs, and the "Racial" Self*;* two of Henry Louis Gates, Jr.'s attempts to read outside of "the political" and focus on the liminal thresholds within the text. Gates argues that the black text suffers because critics are hesitant to read for aesthetic value and symbolism. He argues against race as the sole criterion for understanding a text and states: "It is merely a mode of critical masturbation to praise a black text simply because it is somehow 'black'… (Gates, *Figures* 347). Therefore, it is no surprise that in the mid-1980s Henry Louis Gates, Jr. and other (notably male) scholars who participated in acts of cultural reclamation via "close" aesthetic readings of the black text, were taken to task for their mis/uses of theory and the apparent distance between the Black literary critic and the political nucleus of the "masses."[12]

For the purposes of this project I will not reengage the endless debate on what types of theoretical readings are more effective or deconstruct Gates' arguments about the power of the signifier and/or folk discourses. But it is important to note that in the late 1980s there was a dangerous shift from the (arguably) "predictable" arguments (e.g.

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politics, gender, race, class) surrounding the black revolutionary aesthetic, to a fresher, yet more obscure, critical eye. The difference relegated the study of Black revolutionary narratives to the annals of Black consciousness, either because they were riddled with misogynist overtones and therefore too exclusive, or because they became irrelevant because they focused too heavily on "past" racial problems.

This project privileges the Black revolutionary narrative written between 1965-1980 for the very reason that past scholars have deemed a close examination of this era outmoded. Fictional narratives written during this period were able to capture the rhetorical styling, collective frustrations, political mobilization, and American cultural awakening in ways that parallel contemporary (1960s and 1970s era) speeches, writings, and autobiographies written by national political activists. Through various modes including poetry, short fiction, and the novel, Black writers astutely recorded Black experience as it was experienced. This political act not only functioned as a time capsule, but also created a cultural oeuvre that is crucial to a full understanding of the connection between Black art and Black political action. For these writers, Black artistic production was not only political, but was regarded as the key to Black survival within uncertain political times. For example, in Sam Greenlee's widely read and highly controversial The Spook who Sat By the Door (1969), one of the young members of a local gang being trained to fight the oppressive justice system in his community comes alive through creative writing. The power of the pen becomes his salvation as he records daily frustrations that affect himself and his community in an attempt to incite consciousness-raising. Also, supporters of the "Black Aesthetic" movement that existed in tandem with

"Black Power," founded the movement based on an undeniable interweaving of political power and Black expression.

Though the contributions of Black Feminist scholarship to analyses of Black female experience past and present are undeniable, it is equally useful to employ inclusive examinations of Black experience—where collective action includes a focus on individual rights, but the individual is not privileged. Black feminism divorced from an emphasis on community goals and a focus on Black political progress is useless. Within the social and political movements of the postmodern era, true political "process" begins with a revaluation of female participation *as part of* Black community activism and political mobilization.

Reading Political Process[13] and the Foundations of a Movement

For one to understand how Black women writers included their voices in the political conversations of the era, one must first understand the organizational platform and ideological foundation upon which the Black revolutionary movement was based. A useful and viable template for this study is Doug McAdam's analysis of the "Political Process Model" (PPM). The PPM method of analyzing social movements and political insurgency is one of the foremost responses to the goals, action, and organization of "protest" groups in America. Whereas historically, political scientists and sociologists further very distinct singular methods of discussing political movement theory, McAdam "argue[s] that the emergence of widespread protest activity is the result of a combination of expanding political opportunities and indigenous organization as mediated through a

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crucial process of collective attributions" (McAdam 20). The significance of this examination lies in the creation of a theoretical model for expansive critiques of Black political gains in the American justice system and the collective activism and strategic organizing within Black communities. Within this system, initially members of both elite and indigenous groups within the Black community seek a justly democratic process, as was evidenced in the Civil Rights Movement.

The model is relevant to this study because it provides a method for understanding how reactions to injustices within the Black community exist on a continuum and manifest in collective organizing and mass political activism. McAdam thoroughly addresses tenets of organizational strength, political opportunity, and the consciousness of the insurgent body as it connects to the acquisition of power and the collective fight for civil rights. As a Humanist, I consider McAdam's model to provide a sufficient theoretical base for understanding historical and political moments within the Black community as they are tied to the endless quest for collective national identity. Likewise, the fictional female protagonists examined in this project under the Afro-Politico Womanist agenda exist as members of the Black community who also work within a continuum of political progress. The women refuse to abandon the community because they recognize the daily challenges that exist within and outside of an externally defined "movement"—often choosing to "stay behind" while others search for self-fulfillment in another cause.

The PPM is comprised of several variables available for close study. This project considers two of the original variables, *cognitive liberation* and *organizational strength*, and then expands the paradigmatic scope to include a third variable—*gender politics*—as

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a viable component not included in the original model. The variables are defined as follows:

- Cognitive liberation. The understanding that "mediating between opportunity and action are *people* and the subjective meanings they attach to their situations" (McAdam 48). For example, the belief that racial identity in America predicts the outcome of justice; or that embracing one's culture results in a greater understanding of self. Cognitive liberation is a key variable, which exists at the core of Cultural and Revolutionary Nationalism.

- Organizational strength. Organizational strength includes, "the presence of an indigenous 'infrastructure' that can be used to link members of the aggrieved population into an organized campaign of mass political action" (McAdam 44). One example would be the creation of community –based organizations like the Black Panther Party for Self-Defense and the Maulana Karenga's US organization.

- Gender politics. Gender Politics includes, an understanding of the socio-political position of the Black woman during the Black Revolutionary movement; an analysis of exclusively masculinist rhetoric within revolutionary nationalism, which rejected equal collaboration with Black women, and historical contributions of Black female activists.

I.) Cognitive Liberation

"Cognitive liberation is "the set of circumstances most likely to facilitate the transformation from hopeless submission to oppressive conditions to an aroused

readiness to challenge those conditions" (McAdam 34). While the awareness of ones' political situation does not *guarantee* active political participation, exposure to inequalities in the political process is a significant precursor to insurgent action. In America during the late 1960s, re-ignited racial pride was one element of self-awareness that existed in the literature and culture of Black America. To be "black" was an empowering reference to a race of otherwise persecuted and demonized Americans.

Desegregation made it possible for more urban black youth to infiltrate college campuses and neighborhood high schools; and a liberal, more "accepting" young white population longed to participate in the Black cultural practices which had negatively branded Black Americans in the white mainstream. For members of the Black community during this period, uninhibited "blackness" became an essential element in the restructuring of a "new" Black America. A prime example is James Brown's empowering anthem "Say it Loud, I'm Black and I'm Proud."[14] This song (and others with similar proclamations) became a mantra for urban black youth and helped the radicalism of black "soul" trump the longstanding passive suffering of the "Negro." In order to understand the importance of Black America's psychological and teleological acceptance of its own "Blackness," the historical associations and early connotations associated with the term must be addressed, if only briefly.

As late as the 18th century, the widely accepted theory of blackness being an inferior mark of shame, error, and/or defilement, found its justification from the biblical personage, Ham[15]. Therefore, the African was believed to be a direct descendant of a cursed people and only worthy of eternal servitude. Later this association was transferred into the categorization of darker-skinned peoples as beastly, savage, and uncivilized. In

reference to the first contact between English traders and Africans, historian Winthrop Jordan states that the "Englishmen had an unquenchable thirst for the details of savage life" (Jordan 25). Similar conjectures of other philosophers, writers, and scholars became part of an international sensibility used to further American colonization. The supposed "truths" about the African support the psychosocial argument that for the trans-Atlantic slave trade to be successful certain "ideas" about the enslaved Blacks had to be categorically accepted. As long as the believed savagery, inhumanity, and bestiality of the African people was imbedded in the minds of their captors then there would be no argument for Christian brotherhood, equality, and/or any pangs of guilt that would naturally surface when dealing with the suppression of an entire race of people.

While it has been repeatedly argued that the initial perception of Black people in America and abroad is attributed to greed and ignorance, the fact remains that negative associations that accompany "black" or "blackness" historically, had an impact on the gradual psychological destruction of the African American community. As Black inferiority was consciously supported, various consciousness and liberation movements in America existed as well. As early as the 19th century, former slaves, Black abolitionists, and authors forced their peers to view the race as a mark of beauty, self-love, pride, and self-respect.

Africa was a frequent referent in the rhetoric of black leaders. By extolling Africa's greatness and educating Black Americans in the existence of an African intellectual tradition, many 19th century Black leaders clearly understood the urgency of counteracting an established "inferiority complex"[16] that stemmed from the demonization of Africa. For example, in the attempts to eliminate self-effacing rhetoric in 1829, David

Walker, a staunch abolitionist and speaker on the anti-slavery circuit charges his

readership to rise up and overthrow their oppressors not only through violence, but also

by knowledge and education. In his <u>Appeal in Four Articles; Together with a Preamble,</u>

<u>to the Coloured Citizens of the World,</u> Walker acknowledges the existence of a superior

African intellectual history. In the second preamble, he contends,

> When we take a retrospective view of the arts and sciences – the wise
>
> legislators -- the Pyramids, and other magnificent buildings -- the turning
>
> of the channel of the river Nile, by the sons of Africa or of Ham, among
>
> whom learning originated, and was carried thence into Greece, where it
>
> was improved upon and refined…I am indeed cheered (Walker).

Likewise, 19th century African American authors tackled African superiority in

their fiction as a means of addressing a wider audience and enlightening an entire race.

Pauline Hopkins remains a prime example of early acceptance of a positive African

heritage and boldly attributes all races to an African genesis. As writer and editor of the

<u>Colored American Magazine</u>, Pauline Hopkins published her own serial fiction. In the

magazine novel <u>Of One Blood, Or the Hidden Self</u> (1900-03)**,** Hopkins projects a future

that directly reflects the African origins of man. The novel draws from African history,

American slavery, and the plight of the African American. In the creation of the main

character, Reuel, Hopkins heightens the psychological turmoil usually associated with the

"tragic mulatto" by surpassing the question of what it means to have "mixed" racial

heritage in America and instead asks what it means to be a direct descendant of Africans.

She uses the 19th century reality of miscegenation to trace Reuel's beginnings to an African kingdom in the same way that many used Christianity as a connection to their kingdom in heaven. For Hopkins there is no dividing line between Africa and "the promised land." In the novel, one of Hopkins characters, Professor Stone, asserts 'it is a *fact* that Egypt drew from Ethiopia all the arts, sciences, and knowledge of which she was a mistress. The very soil of Egypt was pilfered by the Nile from the foundations of Meroe...all records of history, sacred and profane, unite in placing the Ethiopian as the primal race' (Hopkins 521).

Like David Walker, Hopkins parallels the paradisiacal rewards of understanding and accepting one's African ancestry and traces the cradle of civilization to ancient Africa—implicitly arguing that Blacks, not whites, are made in God's image. She also predates W.E.B. DuBois' Pan-Africanism. Noted literary historian, Hazel Carby, attests "Of One Blood is an early fictional response to the philosophy of Pan-Africanism in the United States, a philosophy that was always thought to have lain dormant until [DuBois] revived it and organized the First Pan-African Congress to address the Peace Conference at Versailles after World War I" (Carby *Introduction p. xlv*).

The turn of the 20th century marked the rise of a black intelligentsia who argued for the affirmation and understanding of the essential glory of the black race. For example, in *The Souls of Black Folk* Dubois understands that the true import of the "Negro" into American polity lies in self-affirmation and reading the black experience as a wholly American experience. Hence, his musings on the psyche of the "Negro" in America exist as something ill-theorized because of White America's inability to understand the dual-self inherent to black experience. Likewise, poetry and prose with an

emphasis on the politics of "blackness" and the role of a rising black middle class reflected a cognitive understanding of the real implications of white racism.

However, it would be irresponsible to posit a homogenous black experience at the turn of the century or even in the period in which this project is situated. Merely *accepting* one's blackness does not equate to the reality of "being black." One must understand the various meanings of his/her position as a black subject within the political system—unrestricted to race. In *Black Liberation in Conservative America,* Manning Marable comments on the usefulness of understanding these "kinds of blackness." He writes,

> Blackness in purely racial terms just means belonging to a group whose
> members have in common a certain skin color and other physical
> features…this racial identity today doesn't tell us anything about a
> person's political beliefs, voting behavior, or cultural values…[Blackness]
> is also the traditions, rituals, values, and belief systems of African-
> American people. It is our culture, history, music, art and literature.
> Blackness is our sense of ethnic consciousness and pride in our heritage of
> resistance against racism (Marable 195)

Marable rejects the notion of an essential black experience based on race. He extends the term to include acceptance of cultural practices, beliefs, and productions. This participatory aspect of the black experience is what the PPM references as it details the protest activity of the Black community in the 20th century. The history of collective participation in social movements and the existence of political unrest is largely

connected to an agreed upon understanding of the responsibility members of the Black community have to each other. This collective consciousness is based on shared tragic histories and experiences, which in turn, produces a metaphysical response to the American hegemonic power structure.

II.) Organizational Strength and Gender Politics

Two integral components of the political process model (PPM) are: the assumption that social movements are primarily political; and those movements are incessant processes. In other words, the model rejects arguments by other movement scholars that psychological imbalances and spontaneous emotional reactions serve as the main instruments in the formation of social movement. Social movements are "collective" and vary according to form. In actuality, movement action is not limited to a spurious event as some scholars argue. For example, in <u>Poor People's Movements: Why They Succeed, How They Fail</u>, Frances Piven and Richard Cloward argue against the pre-existing social organizations within the Civil Rights Movement. They contend that race-based "uprisings" consist of short-term goals that result from the lack of formalized organization within the structure of the indigenous social movement (Piven, Cloward xiii-xiv). This leads to the larger argument that the goals of the participants are not only short-term and short-lived, but also disappear after no significant change has occurred. Therefore, protest movements are born out of "extraordinary disturbances" that cause the poor to act in a defiant manner.

Though Piven and Cloward are proponents of a vastly "different" political model,[17] their collective academic response to Black political participation is an example of what sociologist Joseph E. Davis calls "an overlay of interpretation" on the Civil Rights Movement at large (Davis 9). For example, in his analysis of the practices of New Social Movement (NSM) scholars Davis posits, "…Among [NSM scholars] there has been a tendency to overlay their own interpretations on those of activists, instead of seeking to understand how activists themselves make and modify meaning in specific settings (9). This faulty logic prevents many scholars from fully acknowledging (or understanding) the historicity of political action in the black community. The lack of attention paid to specific narrative voices is an unfortunate practice that is also evident in the analyses of activist literature written by women of color.

In the PPM, McAdam suggests that the goals of the participants originate and remain within a permanent scope. He relies on the perspective that, "a movement represents a continuous process from generation to decline, rather than a discrete series of developmental stages (McAdam 36). The PPM recognizes "major" events (e.g. the decline of the cotton monopoly, the Great migration, etc.) as integral to black insurgency, and views these events as portions of the larger pie representing black involvement in the political process. One of the more relevant and critical distinctions related to this project is that unlike similar political models (e.g. resource mobilization), the political process model assumes that people are organized whether physically or immediately insurgent.[18] In his examination of the model, McAdam juxtaposes the long-range political goals of the model with the short-term social changes that link to other models. He writes:

…Insurgency is shaped by broad social processes that usually operate over

a longer period of time. As a consequence, the processes shaping

insurgency are expected to be of a more cumulative, less dramatic nature

than those identified by proponents of (the classical model) (41).

The PPM recognizes the preexisting organizations that interact with each other

and continuously work toward social change. The appearance of change causes social

movements to occur, but that change is not limited to incidents in the community.

McAdam posits, "Among the events and processes likely to prove disruptive of the

political status quo are wars, industrialization, international political realignments,

prolonged unemployment, and widespread demographic changes" (41). To the list I add

feminist/consciousness raising, exposed illegality of government agents (police,

lawmakers, etc.), and disenfranchisement—felony or otherwise. Various shifts in the

political system are equally responsible for an increase in movement activity, while the

conditions of the American political macrocosm have a major impact on the indigenous

milieu.

Accordingly, the model recognizes that "the insurgent potential of excluded

groups comes from the 'structural power' that their location in various politico-economic

structures affords them" (McAdam 37). In other words, the elite do not control all aspects

of power while the minority groups remain vulnerable and powerless. Technically, the

mere fact that minority groups have the ability to disrupt the infrastructure by

participating (or refusing to participate) affords them a greater amount of influence in

political and legal processes.

When applying the above theoretical approach to organizational leadership, one can argue that even though Black women have inarguably existed as the bedrock of Black progress and revolutionary acts within the Black community, "politics" (and/or "politicking") remains an impenetrable male public sphere. During the "Black Revolution," social movement practices, the political process, protests, and literary revolutions, are openly regarded as "men's work" though, as is noted by Trinh T. Minh-ha in the feminist documentary "A Place of Rage," "the black power movement made its mark largely because of women" (APR). Likewise, many women worked within social and political movements on ad-hoc committees, or chose to work within the community divorced from membership within a sustained organization.

Both the Civil Rights Movement and the Black Power Movement provided public space for black male leaders. For many, it made practical sense to place a man at the helm of the movements and various organizations that were a part of the movements. For example, during the Civil Rights Movement, the role of the minister, as charismatic leader, was key. Traditionally, within the Black church, many denominations refused to allow women to preach and/or speak from the pulpit. Therefore, for many the religious-based movement *had* to be represented by male leadership, as man was the head of the Black church. The 60's era Black Power movement, that began as reaction and response to white American violence during the Civil Rights Movement also employed the services and leadership of men. The militant, aggressive, and defiant standpoint that became associated with the movement, is aligned, socially, with masculinity and brawn; characteristics not traditionally associated with women.

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Though scholars and former members of Civil Rights and Black Power movement organizations note that women made up the majority of the membership[19] and "ran the organizations" from the inside; the outward, public face was male. In many cases, female internal leadership and ideological input was excluded. Examples of a traditionally exclusive approach to women's involvement in the public face of the black community are found in black women's literature (*The Salt Eaters* by Toni Cade Bambara), Black Arts Movement drama (see *Madheart* by Amiri Baraka), scholarship, theory, and lore[20].

Historically, a great disparity exists within the black community as it relates to gender(ed) relations and the ability to obtain legal rights and political representation for *all* members of the community. Whereas, in matters of political representation during the "revolutionary" period that emerged after the death of Martin Luther King, Jr., black *men* attempted to "disrupt the infrastructure" in traditional ways (oratory, organizing, mobilizing the masses, protests, rejecting the "system," etc.). Because of exclusion, alienation, and blame, black women found alternative ways to use their stories, experiences, and voices for the political progress of the black community. In short, the Black female revolutionary "text" (physical, written, verbal) between 1965-1980 is born out of a largely male-dominated political sphere and becomes a tool for both the exoneration and vilification of the Black race.

To understand the actual and subversive work by women during the latter half of the 20th century, 19th century activists such as Anna Julia Cooper[21], Ida B. Wells-Barnett, Maria Stewart, and Mary Church Terrell (among others), need to be uncovered. These women worked within the black community to expose the injustice of racism, slavery, unequal rights, and the position of the subaltern female. To use Anna Julia Cooper as an

example, though she was a leading black scholar and the fourth American black woman to receive a Ph.D., her mentor W.E.B. Dubois shunned her. Both Cooper and DuBois had differing opinions about the roles of women and the leadership of the black community. Cooper believed that her womanhood should not be an obstacle to full participation in the black intelligentsia, but Dubois felt differently. According to Mary Helen Washington, "when leading black intellectuals such as Francis Grimké, Alexander Crummell, and W.E.B. Dubois founded the American Negro Academy…they limited their membership to men of African descent" (Washington xl). However, Dubois was not Cooper's only obstacle. Cooper is widely known as the author of titles such as <u>A Voice from the South</u> (1892) which contains the groundbreaking and libratory statement, "Only the Black woman can say 'When and where I enter, in the quiet, undisputed dignity of my womanhood, without violence and without suing or special patronage, then and there the whole Negro race enters with me." But major black political figures, Frederick Douglass for instance, stated the year Anna Julia Cooper's book was published, "[I have] thus far seen no book of importance written by a Negro woman and I know of no one among us who can appropriately be called famous" (Washington xl).

Other black female activists in the late 19th century understood that the plight of the black woman was not her own, but the plight of the black community. According to historian Paula Giddings, "…they understood that their fate was bound with that of the masses. As Mary Church Terrell, one of the wealthiest and best educated Black women of the time declared, 'Self-preservation demands that [Black women] go among the lowly, illiterate and even the vicious, to whom they are bound by ties of race and sex…to reclaim them" (Giddings 97).[22]

Later in her life, Cooper was widely respected in major circles in Washington D.C. for her tenure as principal of the M Street School and her refusal to only teach black children a trade instead of sending them to the university, as was mandated by her white supervisor. As her biographer notes "her role as a scholar limited her public profile," and I add, posed a threat to the largely male black public sphere (xxvii).

Fast forwarding to the 1950s and 1960s, during the earlier years of the burgeoning Civil Rights Movement, pioneers such as Septima Clark experienced severe sexism at the hands of the male ministers and "activists" within the movement. Clark calls sexism "one of the weaknesses of the civil rights movement" (Allen-Taylor). In the documentary "A Place of Rage," poet and activist June Jordan recounts her experiences with Civil Rights activist Fannie Lou Hamer, and laments the tragedy of her invisibility in the history of the movement at the time the documentary was filmed. The exclusion of Hamer's work, life, and sacrifice is not only the fault of mainstream biographers, researchers, and historians, but her omission is also the product of a movement that did not champion the individual woman unless her gender could be used as a strategic political tool in the fight for Civil Rights--such as the infamous Rosa Parks squat or the attention paid to Hamer once she was beaten and nearly murdered while in jail. The continuous 'behind-the-scenes' work of black female activists would go largely unnoticed even in studies of citizen participation in the Civil Rights Movement.

The circumstances surrounding gender politics and social progress of the black community in the 1960s is the bastard child of systematic oppression, legacies of slavery, and misguided bravado. In March of 1965, Patrick Moynihan published the controversial study "The Negro Family: The Case for National Action," which was issued by the

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Department of Labor. In this "call to action", Moynihan observed the pathologies within

the Black family as the weaknesses of a matriarchal structure and the "deprivation" of the

black male. Moynihan's "report" brought to the forefront the question of black vitality

and the ability to preserve the black family under a "new" degenerate family structure.

This structure included the black woman as the more educated head of the household and

the black male as the less educated, primarily absent victim. According to the report,

>…The Negro community has been forced into a matriarchal
>
>structure which, because it is so out of line with the rest of America,
>
>seriously retards the progress of the group as a whole, and imposes a
>
>crushing burden on the Negro male. . . Ours is a society which presumes
>
>male leadership in private and public affairs. The arrangements of society
>
>facilitate such leadership and reward it. A subculture, such as that of the
>
>Negro American, in which this is not the pattern, is placed at a distinct
>
>disadvantage…

>…A fundamental fact of Negro American family life is the often
>
>reversed roles of husband and wife. . . In 44 percent of the Negro families
>
>studied, the wife was dominant, as against 20 percent of the white wives.
>
>Whereas the majority of white families are equalitarian, the largest
>
>percentage of Negro families are dominated by the wife…

>…Negro females have established a strong position for themselves
>
>in white collar and professional employment. . . Where special efforts

have been made to insure equal employment opportunity for Negroes, . . .

it may well be that these efforts have redounded mostly to the benefit of

Negro women[23]…

As a result of the findings in the report, Patrick Moynihan was successful in bringing national attention to the structure of the black community in the latter half of the 1960s. The black family was placed under a microscope and the male leaders within the black community took exception. Black women were blamed for their emasculating nature and their ability to secure employment in arenas where men were unable. At last, there was an answer to the problems black men faced. The perpetrator of the offenses against black masculinity was the black woman.

Instead of locating the root of the "problem" within racism, decades of segregation, employment discrimination, and lack of educational opportunities, the detrimental effects of domineering Black women on Black men was repeatedly debated on a contemporary platform. As a result, Black "revolutionary" leaders proclaimed that the only way the Black people would be liberated was if the Black *man* took his rightful place as head of the Black family, and led his people in the "revolution." In retrospect, numerous Black feminist scholars have pointed to the "Moynihan Report" as the crux of the problem as it relates to a rejection of female participation in the fight for Civil Rights and Black Power. As we can see from the historical examples above, this "new" revelation was not novel. Because of the adoption of socially defined gender roles public participation by Black women in Black politics has always been a tenuous issue in the community.[24]

<u>Revolution</u>

Representations of the Black political figure "whole and deep," by artists and writers are integral to a full understanding of Black American experience. At the heart of the Afro-politico Womanist agenda is the writer's ability to use an examination of Black experience as a tool for restructuring collective Black consciousness and inciting political activity. The importance lies in the ability of the artist to fully examine how the historical connection to an American past (and present) riddled with injustice, social limitations, and political exclusion can be used to promote healing within the Black community. Cognitive liberation is important not only in defining a theoretical analysis, but it also aids in the community's healing processes. As a tool for social uprising it supports the theory that self-assertion typically occurs when individuals on the lower strata of a given society become aware of their disadvantaged situation and demand change. In 1971 writer Pearl Cleage echoed the importance of cultural reaffirmation and spoke to the importance of a consciousness-raising movement in her hopes that "the reflection of positive Black images will help us see ourselves and eliminate the psychological sickness that we have been infected with after so many years of slavery and oppression."

Likewise, the process of self-actualization produces a desire to organize and combat the source of oppression en masse. What has happened in certain segments of the Black political community reflects the trend worldwide. As a result of education, economic advancement, and access to external resources, the elite members of the

community stand as representatives, while the masses remain in the wings waiting for direction. To compound matters within the context of organizational strength, gender disparities permeate the political arena and women's activism and community organizing alongside other members of the community is deemed invalid. In the end, the question remains: What happens when Black political action is defined from the standpoint of the masses instead of from the elite? Afro-Politico Womanism privileges the voices and progress of the "people" and in addition to criticizing the dangerous outcomes of warring ideologies, the model criticizes leadership based agendas that speak *for* the masses without connecting *with* indigenous groups, formed or unformed. Though social theory with a focus on indigenous groups exists,[25] often the groups examined practice their own forms of intra-racial discrimination and have histories of exclusion on the basis of skin color, gender, and/or class. This does not render the existing organizations invalid, but it does speak to the problematic of an emphasis on organizations as the sole means of liberating the community. Therefore, the focus must shift from individual political action to one that is community-based—on all levels.

CHAPTER 3

"I WOULD OF LOVED 'EM ALL": NATIONALIST IDENTITIES

AND TONI MORRISON'S *SONG OF SOLOMON*

1964 will see the Negro revolt evolve and merge into the worldwide black revolution that has been taking place on this earth since 1945…Revolutions are based upon bloodshed. Revolutions are never compromising. Revolutions are never based upon negotiations. Revolutions are never based upon any kind of tokenism whatsoever. Revolutions are never even based upon that which is begging a corrupt society or a corrupt system to accept us into it. Revolutions overturn systems. And there is no system on this earth which has proven itself more corrupt, more criminal, than this system that in 1964 still colonizes 22 million African-Americans, still enslaves 22 million Afro-Americans.

-Malcolm X (1964)[26]

……………….

[W]e must recapture our heritage and our identity if we are ever to liberate ourselves from the bonds of White supremacy. We must launch a cultural revolution to unbrainwash an entire people.

……………….

We Afro-American people will launch a cultural revolution which will provide the means for restoring our identity that we might rejoin our brothers and sisters on the African continent, culturally, psychologically, economically and share with them the sweet fruits of freedom from oppression and independence of racist governments.

-Malcolm X (1965)[27]

Within mainstream theory and scholarship, nationalism is often discussed in terms of national identity, ethnic background, and/or land occupation. The popular definition being a separatist group's desire to become politically independent from the larger national polity. Relevant general examples include recent scholarship on the Quebecois in Canada, and their fight to be recognized as a separate governing nation within Quebec. Also, Native American communities in North America have fought for centuries to establish themselves as self-governing indigenous "nations" within the United States. The Cherokee Nation is one example of several communities that comprise a larger Cherokee body that exists within the confines, laws, and limitations of the American borders. The primary connection between the two examples listed above is the (in)ability separate nations or sub-nations of people have to exist within a larger governing body that considers itself and the inhabitants of its nation as "one" people, legally, but limits the full political participation of citizens with "a separate identity, and culture but no state of their own."

When discussing nationalism within the Black community[28], one also has to understand the various forms, strands, and ideologies associated with the multi-layered concept. Due to the peculiar situation of Africans in America, the political standpoint of the community cannot be easily categorized, and/or understood as homogenous. For example, modes of what is termed "Black" Nationalism include (but are not limited to): Separatist, Integrationist, Anglo-Saxon, Anglo-African, Christian, Modern, Third World, Traditional, Radical, Post-colonial, Territorial, Cultural, Revolutionary, Afrocentric, and Post-nationalist.[29] Each mode represents the needs and/or demands of the community at varied historical junctures. This fact does not make one "type" of nationalism more

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effective than the other, but provides space for understanding the continuum of which the

Black experience in America is a part. As I stated in the introduction, this project

explores the contemporary history of revolutionary and cultural nationalism as

understood in the context of fourth wave[30] Black political revolution (1966-1976).

There exists a multitude of articles, books, and case studies that address the role

of Black Nationalism and/or Black Nationalist discourse in the forming of Black political

identity. Recent scholarship has sought a reflective examination of historical precedents

that inform "post-nationalist politics,"[31] while earlier works identify nationalism as the

"Black man's" response to economic inequality and the "largely disadvantaged lower-

class position," due to "racially based oppression" (Blair 4-5).

Historically, "New World" Black communities have responded to the need for a

Black national unity through liberation from a colonial regime. Because of the fractured

connection to a common homeland (Africa) through the dispersal of Black peoples during

the Trans-Atlantic Slave Trade, the quest for nationhood outside the African continent

has been integral to the survival of New World black culture. Likewise, Black Nationalist

organizations and movements in the Americas have maintained both cultural and political

standpoints. In this chapter, I read the advancement of cultural and revolutionary

nationalist agendas as continuous processes,[32] integral to African American survival.

Through an understanding of Afro-Politico Womanism, I analyze the flaws inherent in

top-down leadership and a focus on individual gains. Finally, I apply an Afro-Politico

Womanism reading of Toni Morrison's Song of Solomon as a text that addresses the

dangers of warring ideologies during a period of national social unrest.

New World Foundations

During the antebellum period, nationalist ideology manifested in protest activity that ranged from the Latin American and Caribbean slave insurrections to the subsequent founding of maroon colonies. These "colonies" existed as subversive responses to the mass colonization of African slaves and the attempts to completely destroy communal ties to African ancestral nations and culture. Of the maroon colonies, it is said, "Regardless of the maroon society, community members established identities and spirituality apart from the social structure of the slaveholders household. Maroon societies helped endure cultural survival"(NPS). Often, African fugitives sought shelter and aid from indigenous Indian or Native American tribes because they recognized similar cultural traits, practices, and family structures that made integration more acceptable.

Later, as an abolitionist strategy, Black church groups and social organizations mobilized in efforts to bring national attention to slavery's injustices. Though mainstream abolitionist rhetoric derided the immorality and inhumanity of American political institutions, speeches given by Black leaders and fugitive slaves to anti-slavery advocates drew the connections between a political standpoint built upon a shared fate due to color, culture, and heritage. For example, in the speech "Our Heads Are in the Lion's Mouth" given by John S. Rock at the Annual Meeting of the Massachusetts Anti-Slavery Society in 1862, he condemns the American economy that benefits from the subjugation of Negro people, simply because they are Black. He writes,

Had it not been for slavery, we should have had no war! Through 240

years of indescribable tortures, slavery has wrung out the blood, bones,

and muscles of the Negro hundreds of millions of dollars, and helped

much to make this nation rich…You are the only people, claiming to be

civilized, who take away the rights of those whose color differs from your

own… (Wagstaff 10,12-13)

In the post-reconstruction period, the violent social climate in the South and the

desperate urgings of "Exodusters" convinced hundreds of Black families (and individual

women) to go West, then North, then West again, in an effort to create and rebuild the

healthy, thriving black communities that rarely existed outside of Jim Crow's grasp. On

the surface, the list of Black nationalist efforts during the 20th century appears endless:

from individual Black settler communities working together to secure rights and justice

under the restrictions of the American legal system in the West; the formation of national

organizations (e.g. NAACP, NACW, Urban League) in an attempt to maintain a cohesive

and subaltern Black national consciousness distinct, yet always a part of, the "American

Experience;" the birth of the New *Bourgeois* Negro; the emergence of women's clubs

and the "salvation" of young and uneducated black girls; Garveyism and the Back to

Africa Movement; the formation of separate labor unions; Black support of socialism;

Black Power, and so forth. The Black experience in America is composite of numerous

social and political battles organized by black activists and intellectuals to achieve and

maintain rights, progress, structure, pride, and stability within Black communities across

the nation.

While the later move toward racial inclusiveness within political action was an important step in securing wider support for the Civil Rights Movement and the Black Power Movement,[33] historically, the black community's ability to organize and mobilize members for social change within a framework of separatism and segregation (albeit forced) has typically been its political strength. As the organizational structure of Black grass roots civil rights organizations of the 1960s transformed from ad-hoc to fully strategic bases of command after 1965, membership was "closed" to those groups with illegitimate interests and/or those who racially represented the opposition. For several leaders during the era, the importance of separation from outside groups was expressed through literature, speeches, and pamphlets used as tools for recruitment and education. In a 1966 essay titled, "Power and Racism," Stokely Carmichael (then still affiliated with SNCC) admonishes the reaction of white liberals who desire acceptance within the Black movements in the American South. He writes,

> White America will not face the problem of color, the reality of it. The well-intended say: 'We're all human, everybody is really decent, we must forget color.' But color cannot be 'forgotten' until its weight is recognized and dealt with. White America will not acknowledge that the ways in which this country sees itself are contradicted by being black— and always have been...
>
> Whites will not see that I, for example as a person oppressed because of my blackness, have common cause with other blacks who are oppressed because of blackness. This is not to say that there are no white

people who see things as I do, but that it is black people I must speak to

first. It must be the oppressed to whom SNCC addresses itself primarily,

not to friends from the oppressing group (Carmichael 67-68).

Carmichael echoes earlier statements made by Black leaders, like Malcolm X, who

claimed that white America(ns) cannot do anything for the Black community as long as

whites are the only people in positions of power in America. The idea that a separate but

equal Black nation was *needed* within the Black Revolutionary[34] movement directly

contradicted earlier integrationist efforts by Civil Rights leaders. Subsequently, the idea

that the American justice system could solve inequality by merging cultures and races

within the classroom was also challenged within nationalist rhetoric. For many, the black

community simply could not survive within the confines and/or limitations of a white

American infrastructure.

The debate over separatism versus assimilation into the American mainstream (or

accommodation versus revolution) reappears frequently as organizations with similar

goals (Black liberation) contest the correct process for Black progress. The rifts that

existed between the leadership of the Nation of Islam (NOI), the Southern Christian

Leadership Conference (SCLC), the Student Non-Violent Coordinating Committee

(SNCC), The Black Panther Party for Self-Defense, and the US organization, were

representative of a longer history of dissention among Black organizations.

While the continued support of a Black Nationalist agenda appeared to be a viable

solution to American social ills in the 1960s, what the new, younger leaders of the Black

Revolutionary movement did not fully anticipate was the enemy within. In 1969, Thomas

Wagstaff notes,

> Other minority groups, preserving the sense of a common and
> respected heritage, have been able to draw closer together in the face of
> adversity and mount concerted countermeasures. The Negroes' frustration
> and anger at their continued exploitation and rejection has generally been
> directed not at their oppressors, but turned inward upon themselves
> (Wagstaff 2).

In an effort to distance the *new* revolutionary agenda from the conciliatory and

"submissive" Civil Rights Movement, black activist-revolutionaries rejected and ignored

the lessons that could be taught from past errors. What was not publicly televised or

apparent during the Civil Rights Movement was the infighting, sexism, power plays,

exclusion and self-destruction that moved the focus away from the specific goals of the

"movement," to the inadequacies of leadership within cadre organizations. These same

organizational issues challenged the success of the burgeoning Black Power movement,

and also led to an unfortunate rift among membership. In addition, Black Nationalism as

a separatist ideology became further striated to include arguably distinctive "cultural" and

"revolutionary" veins. Though culture and revolution as ways of situating the political

position of the Black American have existed for decades, between 1965-1971 Black

organizations, which comprised those veins, embarked on an ironic quest—fighting

against each other to achieve the same goal.

Black Revolutionary Nationalism

The presence of the revolutionary in the New World Black community is constant. Without question, African Americans have existed within an antagonistic and toxic national environment from the year 1619 to the present. Given these circumstances the natural reaction of the oppressed has been to engage in what is deemed "revolutionary" activity in an effort to achieve total liberation, be it physical or psychological. For example, in the Caribbean and Americas during the eighteenth century, abhorrent conditions and torturous treatment coupled with African cultural survivals provided an environment ripe for rebellion. In Jamaica alone "frequent slave revolts averaged 400 participants and laid the foundation for a powerful revolutionary tradition by the nineteenth century" (Confessions 15). In 1804, Touissant L'Ouverture led a Haitian slave army that defeated Napoleon and the formidable French army, which made Haiti the first Black republic in the Western Hemisphere. While in 1831, Nat Turner's rebellion, one of the largest of its kind in America, surprised the residents of Southampton County, Virginia and reawakened fears among the white population. Both L'Ouverture and Turner based their insurgency on a divine mission to deliver Black people from the hands of white imperialism, which was a threat to the progress and survival of the chosen Black race. While voices like those of David Walker (mentioned in an earlier chapter), reasoned that the American "Negro" could only progress when his character and strength was taken seriously by White America.

From the era of the abolitionist through the rise of American communism in the early 20th century, organized groups and individual African American leaders have taken

a revolutionary standpoint and spoken against America's racist social climate. This standpoint included the threat of arms, retaliation, and "justice" for (white) America in the name of the enslaved and oppressed African that toiled her land. It is important to note that the recurrent threat of a Black uprising similar to slave rebellions and insurgency seen in years past, was employed as a rhetorical wake-up call for a sleeping America. In terms of a *true* nationalist agenda, outspoken members of the Black community were <u>not</u> willing or prepared to overthrow the American government or exist as a separate nation-state, as is evident in later years. Much of the writing from this period serves as a rallying cry for members of the Black community to act, rather than pontificate, and demand rather than ask for equality and political rights *within* America. For example, in 1833, orator and activist Maria Stewart admonishes her silent male counterparts,

> I am sensible that there are many highly intelligent men of color in these
> United States, in the force of whose arguments, doubtless, I should
> discover my inferiority; but of they are blessed with wit and talent, friends
> and fortune, whey have they not made themselves men of eminence, by
> striving to take all the reproach that is cast upon the people of color, and in
> endeavoring to alleviate the woes of their brethren in bondage?

Stewart later addresses the Colonization Society's attempts to create a separate nation for American Blacks in Africa,

But many powerful sons and daughters of Africa will shortly arise, who

will put down vice and immorality among us, and…I am afraid they will

spread horror and devastation around…They [whites] would drive us to a

strange land. But before I go, the bayonet shall pierce me through. African

rights and liberty is a subject that ought to fire the breast of every free man

of color in the United States.[35]

Stewart's simultaneous acceptance and refusal of an inherent connection to her African

heritage comes to signify the position of later Black revolutionary organizations. The

Black revolutionary nationalist understands his/her position as an *American* oppressed

person of color within the throngs of white-inflicted injustice. Therefore, any change that

results from a Black revolution is part of white America's responsibility to Blacks as

American citizens, first. Stewart supports nation building as a strategy to ensure Black

American survival and progress—in America.

At the turn of the twentieth century, "Negro" organizations like the National

Association for the Advancement of Colored People openly refuted the attempts by

emerging Black Nationalist groups who felt the only solution of the "Negro" problem

was repatriation to Africa. For many, this would be a move that would ensure the

progress and stability of the Black race. Like Stewart, NAACP leaders appreciated their

heritage, but rejected the removal to an African homeland. They placed the onus on the

American government and demanded equality, representation and freedom in America.

In contemporary years, Black revolutionary nationalism saw a slight shift in

ideology from the earlier attempts to collapse all types of nationalism into one term.

Black nationalists of the 60s have been regarded as the more "militant" branch of Black nationalism compared to what was deemed as "accomodationist"[36] principles of the Civil Rights Movement. Though, according to scholar William Van Deburg, revolutionary nationalists tended to distance themselves from the "black militant" whose anger was a result of being "left out of the system" (Van Deburg 154). On the contrary, 60's-era revolutionary nationalism was an anti-capitalist movement based in the teachings of Malcolm X, Mao Tsetung, Karl Marx, Robert F. Williams[37], and Frantz Fanon, among others. This form of nationalism is viewed as a standpoint based on activism, rhetoric, community organization, and self-defense. The prevailing belief among revolutionary nationalists is that the oppressed cannot be completely free until the entire "system" is overthrown (Van Deburg 153). Therefore, working within the system is not an option as long as there remains a white power elite that oppresses and enslaves the lower classes. The revolutionary nationalist understands that the effects of colonization, subordination, and world domination affect all people of color who are subjected to economic depravity and social injustice.

The evolution of revolutionary nationalism during this period saw an increased emphasis on connecting with Third World peoples, and even poor and liberal whites. Though proponents of the revolutionary aims argued for a complete overthrow and restructuring of the American system, the theoretical basis for revolutionary ideology supported a coalition of victims—regardless of race—who sought to acquire their share of power. This acceptance of a shared class struggle that superceded racism and/or racial exclusion proved to be a tenuous topic within many revolutionary organizations that viewed the "struggle," as specific to Black people. Groups like the Black Panther Party

for Self-Defense "endorsed Malcolm's acceptance of alliance with whites once the black community was united and after white radicals had closed ranks in the struggle on the side of the oppressed" (Blair 93). The opposing argument was that there was "no excuse" for whites to be poor given the history of power and wealth they are automatically a part of due to the hue of their skin. Though the experiences of other minority groups were understood and supported, many "friends from the oppressing group," as is described in the earlier Carmichael quote, were not welcome within the "colored" sphere.

Black Cultural Nationalism

Black cultural nationalism serves as the vanguard model for all types of Black Nationalist ideology[38]. Incorporated in cultural nationalism is the belief that Black people cannot survive and/or progress within the limitations of an American superstructure, if they (Black people) do not first know and accept their African identities; and the visceral connection to their ancestral roots. The cultural nationalist understands the function and necessity of revolution, as the revolution is internal to the Black community, with economic, social, and cultural advancement at the helm of a psychological racial transformation. This type of nationalism is based on the premise of cognitive liberation[39], or the belief that the ideological transformation of the Black community rests on an initial cognitive understanding of "Blackness, " an appreciation of ancestral origins, and self-pride. In Fighting Words, Patricia Hill Collins synthesizes prior definitions of Black cultural nationalism constructed by Molefi Asante, Franz Fanon, and Maulana Karenga—all scholars of Black culture. She writes,

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Black cultural nationalism aims to reconstruct Black consciousness by

replacing prevailing ideas about race with analyses that place the interests

and needs of African people at the center of any

discussion…Reconstructing Black history by locating the mythic past and

the origins of the nation or the people is intended to build pride and

commitment to the nation. These elements allegedly can be used to

organize the Black consciousness of people of African descent [and]

ideally enables members of the group to fight for the nation (Collins 160).

According to the concept, a group's cultural awareness is closely connected to political

participation, the ability to uplift the masses, and nation building. Under this model, the

masses must be informed, educated, and made aware of their political position within

society for movement activity to occur. In short, Black political and social movements

are only as powerful as the masses allow, through their own understanding of their needs.

Black Cultural nationalist ideology has manifested in various ways throughout African

American history. From the first uprising on a slave ship to the mythical tale of the Igbo

people who walked into the ocean off the coast of South Carolina and "flew" back

home,[40] the cultural and ancestral connections to an African homeland remain evident.

During the 19th century many blacks were being recognized as intellectuals

within the Black community. This was the first time in American history that there

existed a sizable amount of recognized genius and a literate audience made up of their

peers. (Lively 207). Because of this "phenomenon," this was a crucial time for unity and

self-empowerment. Many intellectuals looked towards the Bible as a source of

redemption and interpreted passages as prophetic warnings of the changes to come. Out of this tradition, the biblical verse, "Envoys (princes) will come out of Egypt; Ethiopia will quickly stretch out her hands to God"[41] was the impetus for a movement of cultural awareness and change among the Black intellectual.

Many African Americans believed "Ethiopia" was a direct reference to Black people and racial challenges in American society. One of the themes of Black Nationalism was African repatriation, "a goal that dramatized opposition to the mainstream liberal and integrationist agenda" (Fitzgerald 294). Ethiopianism was a mobilization effort to establish a common Black identity. As with other ideologies, American civil religion was a main influence on Black Nationalism (Moses 28). In the late 19th to early 20th century the belief that the Ethiopia reference in the Bible was a direct representation of the oppressed American people gave hope to the thousands that felt there was no end to their mental and physical bondage. Many felt that when Ethiopia did "stretch out her hands to God" the black community was going to rise up and take its rightful place in society. Black Nationalism and what was later termed "Ethiopianism," worked together to create a call for active change.

One of the most widely studied leaders in the movement is Marcus Garvey.[42] As a leader, he was probably the most misunderstood and wrongly categorized Black cultural nationalist in the 20th century. Typically, scholars place Garvey, the Back to Africa Movement, and Garveyism, under the heading "Revolutionary Nationalism,"[43] but in actuality, his platform was more in line with a cultural nationalist agenda. In "Revolutionary Nationalism and the Afro-American," Harold Cruse remarks on Garvey's impact on the Black community. He writes,

Garvey mobilized large sections of the discontented urban petit-bourgeois

and working-class elements from the West Indies and the South into the

greatest mass movement yet achieved in Negro history. The Garvey

movement was *revolutionary nationalism* being expressed in the very

heart of Western capitalism (Cruse 43).

Though Cruse contends that the "Garvey movement was *revolutionary nationalism,*"

what he terms "revolutionary" is not only a desire and drive to return to an African

homeland, but several tenets closely associated with cultural nationalism. The most

significant impact of the Garvey movement on the African Diaspora was the focus on

economic development within Black communities, the construction of a Black nation

apart from the limitations of America, an affirmation of African pride, and cultural

nationalist markers—uniforms, songs, flags, prose—which united movement participants.

These same characteristics shape and define cultural nationalism after 1965 and become

the platform upon which the US organization, led by Maulana Ron Karenga, built its

reputation.

Afro-Politico Womanist Critique

By tracing the Black intellectual traditions of revolutionary and cultural

nationalism, one can attest to the considerable impact both ideologies have made to

understanding Black political participation. In earlier years, both types of nationalism

played a significant role in restructuring Black values as they relate to class and gender.

Revolutionary nationalism, the will to fight for freedom and the use of self-defense tactics, can be traced to the vigilantism of Harriet Tubman, David Walker, Nat Turner, and many others. In recent years, the Black "revolution" is closely aligned with Robert Williams, Malcolm X, The Black Panther Party for Self-Defense, among other individuals and organizations identified as anarchists and Black loyalists.

Cultural nationalism's quest was an initial awakening that would equal more than ruminations on the status of the "Negro" in America and abroad, but a movement that understood internal change imagines external change. From Alexander Crummell, Maria Stewart, and Marcus Garvey through the Harlem Renaissance, Black Power and Black Studies, the cognitive liberation of Black people worldwide is the impetus for a closer examination of the possibilities for social advancement and economic parity. Unfortunately, in the 21st century, what historian Robin Kelley terms "Freedom Dreams," or the utopist imaginings of a liberated Black America—have yet to be realized. Within Afro-Politico Womanism lay an inherent critique of Black Nationalism. This critique serves as an examination of racial integration and organizational dissonance as a precursor to structural demise of the Black community. While analysis of the various chasms within Black organizational structures throughout history could serve as a separate project unto itself, it is important to identify a few key examples as a means of justifying the need for a more harmonious method of imagining Black progress in the latter half of the 20th century.

Between 1900-1906, W.E.B. Dubois and Booker T. Washington embarked on a notorious quest to solve the "Negro" problem in America. What resulted was an ideological battle. Washington, a former slave and educator believed that the most

effective way to integrate the southern "Negro" into American society was by making his skills useful to whites, and later to his community. Unlike Washington, DuBois argued that the only way Blacks could possess power (and advance) in America was if they had the proper liberal education that would ensure integration into politics. The only hope for the "Negro" was to acquire the right to vote and enter into the political process that governs American life. In "Revolutionary Nationalism and the Afro-American" Harold Cruse notes, "There was much frustrated bickering and internal conflict within this new class over strategy and tactics. Finally the issues boiled down to that of *politics vs. economics*, and emerged in the Washington-Dubois controversy" (Cruse 48)

In addition to Washington, Dubois (as head of the NAACP and "leader" of the Black race) openly admonished Marcus Garvey's "Back to Africa" campaign. Dubois believed that an educated Black elite, or the "talented ten percent" of the Black community were destined to lead the Black race out of the valley of economic despair and social ostracism. In Garvey, he saw a zealot whose solution to the problems facing Blacks in America was to leave the country of their birth, for a mythical African homeland. For Garvey, the plan was not merely to send blacks back "home," but to send a select few with intellectual backgrounds in order that the preparation would not run the risk of corruption on the grounds of incompetence. Ironically, this aspect of the plan was similar to the "talented tenth" of W.E.B. Dubois, a leader whom Garvey also disliked. Not only did the two clash on the idea of repatriation, but also Garvey felt Dubois was not driven to incorporate the masses in his plan for upward mobility.

Likewise, during the Black Power movement, Black revolutionary nationalists despised cultural nationalists for an allegedly absent political agenda, and pacifist

policies. The most notorious organizational feud is the fatal discord between members of the Black Panther Party for Self-Defense and the US organization.[44] The Black Panthers claimed to support a more radical agenda as they identified themselves as "revolutionaries" who put "theory into practice" when it came to overthrowing the racist American government. US believed as most cultural nationalists, that the *real* revolution begins in the mind. As stated earlier, the organization championed a psychological return to Africa, the adoption of African names and clothing, and an emphasis on building Black wealth.

Members of the Panthers accused the cultural nationalists of being reactionary and bourgeois without a definite function or organizational agenda. In a 1969 speech, Fred Hampton, chairman of the Illinois Panther Party "instructed" his audience on the shortcomings of cultural nationalism, specifically as it was manifested as part of the US organization:

> Ron Karenga and US ain't never shot nothing but dope until they shot them brothers. Been an organization longer than the Black Panther Party been an organization. And when the Black Panther Party stood up and said 'we ain't gone fight racism with racism,' US said 'naw, we can't do that because we know it's a race question, and if you make it a class question [sic] then the revolution might come sooner, and we and US ain't prepared for no revolution, because we thought, we think that political power grows from the sleeve of our dashiki.
>
> And we in the war and we armed with rhetoric and rhetoric alone. And we found that when you armed with rhetoric and rhetoric alone then a

lot of times you get yourself hurt…Cleaver said, 'we ain't going to fight

racism with racism, we gone fight racism with solidarity.' Even though

you think you need to fight capitalism with Black capitalism, we gon'

fight capitalism with socialism (Hampton, FICS Audio Archive).

In response to the negative press and vindictive statements made about his organizational

practices, Maulana "Ron" Karenga contended that the forced separation between the two

ideologies was useless. In <u>African American Nationalist Literature of the 1960s</u>, Sandra

Hollin Flowers writes in response to the similarity between rhetorical stances,

Karenga's assertion that it is erroneous to divorce cultural from

revolutionary nationalism is not without support in nationalist history and

theory. Nor, for that matter, was it without support in 1960s African

American nationalist thinking, although it was more common for

nationalists to array themselves in opposing camps (Flowers 35).

Of course, the divide between nationalisms followed other historic disagreements on the

correct direction of the Black community that were not mentioned in full here. A few

being non-violence vs. self-defense (or violence) as was represented in the leadership of

Martin Luther King, Jr. and Malcolm X; and accordingly the Black Christian church vs.

other Black religious organizations like the Nation of Islam. The Afro-Politico Womanist

critique recognizes the fault of leadership within the organizations as well as the

"erroneous" nature of the discord. The real issue at hand is not how one particular group

imagines the quest for Black liberation, but who is allowed on the journey. With each of

the examples listed above, the focus shifted from the fate and progress of the Black

masses to the maintenance of leadership and/or an organizational base that neglects to

consult the poor and working classes regarding their fate. Afro-Politico Womanism asks,

in short, can self-appointed leaders and externally defined organizations really represent

the masses?

In a FOCUS magazine article on the impact female participation in the Civil

Rights Movement had on movement politics, Britta Nelson quotes activist and organizer

Ella Baker on the "issues" surrounding the Southern Christian Leadership Council's

(SCLC) leader-focused agenda. She writes,

> In her view, the degree of adulation and dependence which the SCLC
>
> showed regarding King could not be healthy for the movement. [Baker
>
> speaks], "Instead of trying to develop people around a leader, the thrust
>
> should be to develop leadership out of the group, and to spread the
>
> leadership roles so you're organizing people to be self-sufficient rather
>
> than to be dependent on…a charismatic leader…My theory is: strong
>
> people don't need strong leaders" (Nelson 4).

What Baker recognizes is the lack of progress and unhealthy atmosphere that exists when

leaders and/or organizations exist as sovereign over the "masses" of people they are

supposed to represent. What is evident in the historical and intellectual tradition of Black

leadership in community activism is the emphasis on male-driven philosophies of

struggle and a void as it relates to the "unity of interests…between middle and working classes" (Cruse 56). Class hierarchy remains a significant topic as the Black community moved from a pattern of non-violence to violence, as rhetorical responses to the political climate.

Leaders within select revolutionary nationalist organizations frequently derided followers of Black cultural nationalism for being "pork-chop" nationalists, or bourgeois nationalists, and therefore detrimental to the fate of the proletariat within the Black community. In Black Nationalism in American Politics and Thought, Dean Robinson defines "Bourgeois Nationalism" as "mild cultural pluralism with a politics that seeks expanded opportunities in American society" (Robinson 52). Later, Robinson quotes Robert Allen on Blacks who represented Bourgeois Nationalist goals in part by stating, "mostly middle-class blacks benefited from Black Nationalist proposals and that many of these welded 'black communities more firmly into the structure of American corporate capitalism'"(Robinson 89-90). Therefore, when the revolutionary nationalists deemed it appropriate to identify Bourgeois nationalism as the political ideology from which the cultural nationalists theorized; they accused cultural nationalism of a fraud. The argument was that cultural nationalists were removed from the working class and vested in the support of capitalism. Ironically, in the end revolutionary nationalists were also implicating themselves.

Though Huey Newton and Bobby Seale, (the founding members of the Black Panther Party for Self-Defense), were geographically from the "streets" of Oakland, California, the knowledge they acquired from Merritt College (Oakland City College) was more than "a bleak redoubt of urban education" (Blair 88). Both men were pivotal to

the Black Power movement's emphasis on "theoretical underpinnings" and political participation. As leaders and students they had access to higher education and readily employed the teachings of Frantz Fanon, Karl Marx, Mao Tsetung, Fidel Castro, Amil Cabral and others when theorizing on the current status of the Black community. Likewise, the organization attracted like-minded educated Black revolutionaries from middle-class families. What resulted was a movement based on rhetoric, theory, the access to higher education and the implementation of Black Nationalist goals. Though the emphasis on knowledge and political rhetoric was integral to the survival of the movement, the focus eventually shifted from the immediate needs of the poor and working classes. Whereas in the beginning the Breakfast for Children programs and Liberation Schools that fed and educated city children were pivotal, by the decline of the Bay Area based organization, members were steeped in "bureaucratic machinery," and the Black Panther Party had divided into "right wing" and "left wing" factions.

In "Poor Black Women's Study Papers: Letter to a North Vietnamese Sister from an Afro-American Woman—Sept. 1968," Patricia Robinson employs a Marxist understanding of bourgeois socialism.[45] In the Communist Manifesto, Marx and Engels define bourgeois socialism as existing for the benefit of the working class without disrupting the privileges and immediate needs of the bourgeois. Robinson critiques the complicit nature of the middle class black community and accuses capitalists of fostering an illusory atmosphere. She restates the logic of the power structure by stating, "Let the small middle class integrate, school them well in the role of puppets, and they will make excellent overseers—hence the Supreme Court decision of 1954 to integrate schools" (Robinson 190). Robinson identifies similar black bourgeois socialists as "the **Black**

radicals who had analyzed the system as the enemy but had not the resources or followers to unite with the **poor Blacks**" (Robinson 190)(emphasis mine). What Robinson argues for is a close examination of the divisions within the Black community that result from high theory and low expectations for the masses upon which the leaders theorize.

The ideologies professed by Cultural and Revolutionary Nationalists denounce the overarching racism of the American government, and the psychological effects racial segregation has on discriminated masses. Both camps understand that the Black community will always be at a disadvantage if it does not rally around "Black Power." The problematic lay in the unfortunate varying approaches in achieving this power and what can be classified as immaturity in organizational leadership. In the end, the war of words eclipses the successes of Black activism, and the movements eventually dissipate.

Case Study: *Song of Solomon*

The Afro-politico Womanist agenda identifies the root of the struggle with the poor and working class, and Black female activism as continuously connected to the needs and desires of the root—or the community—with or without an externally defined movement. As this project continues to examine the fictional representations of Black women's community activism and the merger between cultural and revolutionary nationalism as a framework for Black political progress, one needs to understand the full implications of Black women's visions for a whole society. As was examined in this chapter, the political ideologies that comprise the debates between leaders on the "correct" path for Black progress overshadow the plight of the Black community. Black

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women activists and novelists that fit under the Afro-politico Womanist model address the needs of the masses and embark on a practical journey, one that criticizes organizational discord and failed leadership.

An example of a literary text that incorporates Black political history as well as a critique of ideological battles is Toni Morrison's <u>Song of Solomon</u> (*SOS*). Though *SOS* was published in 1977, (after two of the other works represented in this project) the characters exist in a continuum of Black political discourse from the opening sequence in 1931 to the novel's culmination in the mid 1960s. Admittedly, *SOS* does not move the distinctions between activism, community, and political power in the same way as <u>Meridian</u>, <u>The Salt Eaters</u>, or <u>The Chosen Place, The Timeless People</u>. The strength of the novel is its ability to lay the groundwork for a discussion of continued activism and the future of Black political progress. Unlike the other fictional texts in this project, *SOS* serves as a cautionary tale, one that warns of the dangers of a shattered future if the Black community continues to privilege political rhetoric over the preservation of cultural traditions.

In the novel, the debate between cultural nationalism and revolutionary nationalism as pathways to Black liberation is represented in Morrison's characterization of Milkman Dead, Guitar Baines, and an ancillary character, Pilate Dead. Milkman and Guitar come of age in the post-migration North but learn they are not divorced from the cultural and political history that relegates poor, rural Black Southern communities to second-class status. The two young men are friends divided by privilege and economic class—Milkman born into a comfortable Black middle-class family and Guitar, a member of the Black proletariat who reside on the "Southside." The third character, Milkman's

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aunt Pilate, is a symbol of the folk as she exhibits "African" ways and thought. As a spiritual figure, her presence in the novel warns the present generation of a dangerous future if the focus does not shift from individualism to communal growth and responsibility.

As each male character struggles to understand his position within the larger socio-political landscape, Guitar chooses a militant revolutionary standpoint that envisions the revolution as a series of retaliatory acts—black against white—as the ultimate panacea for the injustices of white America. He joins the "Seven Days" society, a group of older Black men who decide that the only way frequent killings of innocent Black people by white racism will end is if innocent whites are killed also. Each member of the society is assigned a day of the week (Guitar's being Sunday) to carry out their mission for the love of Black people. Guitar explains,

There is a society. It's made up of a few men who are willing to take some risks. They don't initiate anything; they don't even choose. They are as indifferent as rain. But when a Negro child, Negro woman, or Negro man is killed by whites and nothing is done about it by their law and their courts, this society selects a similar victim at random, and they execute him or her in a similar manner if they can…It got started in 1920, when that private from Georgia was killed after his balls were cut off and after that veteran was blinded when he came home from France in World War I. And it's been operating ever since. I am one of them now (Morrison 154-55).

Guitar's understanding of his duty to "save" Black people is based in the revolutionary

rhetoric of the Black Power era. Milkman even accuses him of sounding "like that red-

headed Negro named X," and he feels both fear and dread for his friend. Guitar is

symbolic of the attitudes of young Black youth in the 1960s who were fed-up with a

capitalist, racist, and oppressive American government that did not react to acts of

domestic terrorism carried out in Black communities by white citizens. Enamored by the

rhetoric of Black leaders like Malcolm X, they joined organizations or formed their own

in an attempt to act in a way that would garner the attention and *fear* of White America.

Whereas the violence inflicted on the Black body during the Civil Rights Movement

continued to place the Black community under siege, the new agenda rejected a strategy

of passivity and implemented a plan of action that would cause whites to take notice or

possibly lose *their* lives.

Guitar's "revolutionary" speech and actions in *SOS* patterns popular Black male

leaders outside the pages of the novel. In video footage of a 1960s era Black Panther

Party rally, Panther co-founder Bobby Seale addresses a recent "misprint" in a local

newspaper. He points to the subtitle under a picture of fellow colleagues that called the

organization reactionary and "anti-white. Seale acknowledges the accusation and

explains, "We are not anti-white. We don't hate white people. We hate oppression…"

(*EOP* "Power!"). Similarly, Guitar explains of his participation in the Seven Days, "What

I'm doing ain't about hating white people. It's about loving us. About loving you. My

whole life is love" (Morrison 159). Guitar believes that the motive (Black love) justifies

his actions and like many revolutionaries during the era adopts a nihilistic attitude and

loses sight of the future. Later, he undergoes a philosophical, physical and spiritual transformation (no alcohol, no parties), and moves stealthily through the pages of the novel appearing only as a reminder to Milkman to "watch [his] back," because "everyone wants the life of a black man."

Unlike Guitar who goes from aware of his position as a child to intensely aware of it as an adult, Milkman's awakening is a much slower process. It is not until the last chapters in the novel that he is able to understand and appreciate his rich Black heritage. Milkman's cultural connections to an African history and ultimate appreciation of the Black Aesthetic mark him as symbolic of a cultural nationalist standpoint. As stated earlier in this chapter, cultural nationalism is concerned with the connection to an African past and an appreciation of Black culture as a means of ultimate Black liberation. As a young man, Milkman is in constant battle with his present reality and a primordial connection to his heritage. Though he spends much of the novel lost in immaturity and ignorance, Morrison hints early on at his greater significance and power in the novel.

When Milkman is a child, the women who visit Ruth (his mother) notice that he is "mysterious" and ask if he "came with a caul," like a package comes with instructions (10). This line of questioning is a reference to the belief in Black folk tradition that a baby born with the "caul" (amniotic sac) covering his/her body possesses "powers" and can often see into the spiritual realm and/or have visions. In Granny Midwives and Black Women Writers, Valerie Lee cites oral narratives (compiled by folklorist Carroll Rich) on the "types of power" a caul possesses. She writes,

> "Those of Rich's informants who themselves were born with veils
> [another name for caul] testify of many types of power: the power to tell

when someone will soon die; the power to know when others talk about

you; and the power to cure thrush, a childhood disease that affects the

tongue" (Lee 121).

In some communities it is believed that if such a birth occurs then the afterbirth must be

immediately buried under a tree to prevent the premonitions and "spirits" from haunting

the child. In *SOS,* Ruth never answers the question, but asks if her guests "believe that,"

as if searching for her own answers through their possible acceptance of the "old"

traditions. Morrison shifts the focus to Milkman's uneasy disposition during the

conversation and the reader is left with the possibility that the boy does possess an ethno-

spiritual power that may soon be revealed.

There are other significant characteristics associated with Milkman's birth that

closely connect him to an African cultural tradition. The day before he is born, Robert

Smith, a member of the Seven Days, decides he cannot handle his "love" for the people

and leaps off Mercy hospital's roof. This act foreshadows Milkman's own understanding

of the power of flight as well as the myth of the "Flying Africans,"[46] of which his great-

grandfather was one. It is also revealed that Milkman notices one of his legs is shorter

than the other when he is fourteen years of age (62). This physical characteristic is

symbolic of his connection to Legba, an African deity who is labeled the "god of fate."

Legba functions as a guide (and trickster) who leads others on a fateful journey. He, like

Milkman, walks with a limp and has one leg shorter than the other. It is not until

Milkman begins to recognize his path that his legs become even.

In another childhood scene as Milkman rides in the car with his family during a

Sunday outing he is described as having to sit on his knees facing the back window

because he is too small to see over the dashboard of the car. Milkman is forced to watch the people and trees go by without knowing what lies ahead. Later, Morrison writes, "It was becoming a habit—this concentration on things behind him. Almost as though there were no future to be had" (35). What Milkman comes to understand is that his obsession with the past speaks to a void that prohibits him from knowing himself. The above examples exhibit Milkman's spiritual connection to an African past that he <u>must</u> find and accept in order to survive. In "Reclaiming the Lost African Heritage," John Henrik Clarke speaks to this acceptance when he writes, "…Many writers and scholars, both black and white, have pointed to a rich and ancient African heritage, which, in my opinion, must be reclaimed if American Negroes in general and Negro writers in particular are ever to be reconciled with their roots" (Clarke 11).

During his Homeric quest to find the key to his family's history, Milkman serves as his own guide through the physical terrain of Pennsylvania and Virginia. He begins to thirst for the unknown as he sheds the cocoon of materialism and becomes intoxicated with the songs, words, sayings, folklore, and simplicity of the Black community in the Blue Ridge Mountains. Morrison writes,

> He was curious about these people. He didn't feel close to them, but he did
>
> feel connected, as though there was some cord or pulse or information
>
> they shared. …But there was something he felt now—here in Shalimar,
>
> and earlier in Danville—that reminded him of how he used to feel in
>
> Pilate's house. Sitting in Susan Byrd's living room, lying with Sweet,
>
> eating with those men at Vernell's table, he didn't have to get over, to turn
>
> on, or up, or even out (Morrison 293).

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The people he encounters are part of a canvas that reflects the essence of Black Art. In "Black Cultural Nationalism," Ron Karenga asserts, "All we do and create, then, is based on tradition and reason, that is to say, on foundation and movement. For we begin to build on traditional foundation, but it is out of movement, that is experience, that we complete our creation" (Karenga 33). Milkman's "creation" is an inner quest for his African-ness. Each step draws him closer to the story of the flying African Solomon (or Shalimar) and his scattered descendants, symbolic of an African Diaspora that pulsates throughout the world. As Milkman concludes his quest and is able to piece together "the puzzle" of his family history, he returns to Michigan to gather Pilate and bring her to the "home" she searched for her entire life, but could never find.

Symbolically, Pilate exists as a merger between Milkman's cultural nationalist characteristics and Guitar's revolutionary militancy. She is a folk character with African features and ways, yet like Guitar she will kill without warning for those she loves. In a scene where her daughter Reba is attacked by a lover, Pilate jabs a knife in his chest and warns him, "Women are foolish, you know, and mammas are the most foolish of all" (92). Pilate lives as a rebel, outside of the institutionalized norms of the community. By having no navel and being named after "the man who killed Jesus," she is defined by opposition to what is deemed "correct." Her revolutionary standpoint includes not submitting to the orders or hierarchies of a capitalist society. She does not pay bills, associate with financial institutions, and runs an unlicensed "winehouse," during prohibition and beyond. She believes in an ancient spirituality that in essence "kills" the Christianity that so many in her community rely upon.

Simultaneously, as a symbol of cultural nationalism, "Pilate's various connections to Africa are unmistakable" (Lee 112). She possesses the knowledge of "roots," or herbal medicine ("greenish-gray grassy-looking stuff"), communicates in song, and exists as part of an African cultural continuum. In a scene when Milkman and Guitar are arrested after stealing a bag of human bones from Pilate's house, she is the only person able to aid in their release from jail. Pilate uses her "power" to delude the white policeman and in the process of telling a contrived story about a dead husband, she literally "shapeshifts" into another character, becoming simple and ignorant while simultaneously altering her height. Alma Billingslea-Brown makes this observation in Crossing Borders Through Folklore. She notes, "Morrison manipulates, in this passage, the reader's perceptual and sensuous experience in such a way as to demand active participation. To 'fill in the gap,' the reader must adhere to belief or willingly suspend disbelief in Pilate's magic" (Billingslea-Brown 49). Pilate's "magic," knowledge of an ancient world, and preservation of African survivals connects her to a Diasporic consciousness. In "Black Arts: Notebook," John O'Neal writes, "The concept of home and roots in America is the problem. People can only bring a nation out of mutual commitment to their common good. Here, we have simply been victims. Our concept must be a world concept, and we must see our roots as African. We are an African people" (O'Neal 47). At the end of the novel, when Pilate returns to Virginia with Milkman, it is understood that she is returning not only to her parents' roots, but to the land that is forever connects to an African history in America—a geographic space her African grandfather literally "flew away" from (and tried to take her father with him).

The novel's finale is integral to an understanding of how *SOS* speaks to both the hopeful possibilities for the community and the threat of destruction during the Black revolutionary era. Morrison places Guitar and Milkman at a crossroads that represents life or death for the Black community. Guitar tracks Milkman throughout his wilderness and stalks his every move, as he does the white victims of his "love" for the Black race. In an earlier scene, Guitar speaks of Milkman's father, Macon Dead. He says, "…I don't have to tell you that your father is a very strange Negro. He'll reap the benefits of what we sow, and there's nothing we can do about that. He behaves like a white man, thinks like a white man" (Morrison 223). Where Guitar was aware, but able to divorce Milkman from his heritage before, by the end of the novel he truly views Milkman as the product of Macon's "white" lineage. In Guitar's eyes, Milkman benefits directly from his father's economic privilege and is also a threat to the Black community. Therefore, the "son's day" (Sunday) has come. Milkman's attitude and actions pre-Virginia are representative of a middle-class mobility that places the Black proletariat in the rear-view mirror of Black progress. Guitar views Milkman's middle-class bourgeois existence as the real threat to the Black masses he claims to represent and protect, therefore it is his responsibility to "even the ratio."

Milkman has a concurrent transformation as he acknowledges his spiritual and cultural connection to his African and American heritage. He revels in the laughter of children who play a ring game based on his ancestral history, learns the power of Black love through his protective feelings toward Pilate and his relationships with Hagar and Sweet, he baptizes himself in ridge water while singing words in an African tongue, and

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claims the aerial powers of his African grandfather. Milkman's euphoria is not only a product of self-identification, but also reclamation of cultural heritage and pride.

When Milkman and Pilate arrive in Virginia and find an appropriate place to bury her father's bones, Morrison writes that as Pilate opened the bag, "a deep sigh escaped" and "a spicy sugared ginger smell, enveloped them" (335). The sigh appears to signal multiple expressions of relief: relief that the remains have finally returned home, relief that the trinity of Diasporic consciousness (Macon Sr., Pilate, and Milkman) is complete, and the relief of a spiritual release. After Guitar squats in the shadows and shoots Pilate, she also utters a sigh—one of love (336). She laments, 'I wish I'd a knowed more people. I would of loved 'em all. If I'd a knowed more, I would a loved more' (336).

Pilate is killed because she stands in the crossfire of Guitar's militant revolutionary nationalist philosophy and Milkman's cultural nationalist appreciation of an African past. Pilate is symbolic of the "masses," a community caught between the ideological shifts within Black leadership during a period of social unrest and political instability. The community, like Pilate, ultimately becomes a silent victim of a war of words that neglects the needs and the lives of the people. Throughout the novel, Milkman and Guitar engage in a battle over who loves the community more, in the same ways that revolutionaries and culturalists are at odds over definitions and concepts. In an interview with *The Movement* publication, Huey Newton speaks of his rejection of cultural nationalism. He explains,

> Cultural nationalism, or pork-chop nationalism, as I sometimes call it, is
> basically a problem of having the wrong political perspective. It seems to
> be a reaction instead of responding to political oppression. The cultural

nationalists are concerned with returning to the old African culture and

thereby regaining their identity and freedom. In other words, they feel that

the African culture will automatically bring political freedom…We

believe that culture alone will not liberate us. We're going to need some

stronger stuff (Newton 50).

Newton reads the contributions of the cultural nationalists as counter-revolutionary in all

imaginings of the term. For Newton, the leader of one of the most influential

revolutionary nationalist organizations during the Black Power movement, a return to the

African culture is "old" and unnecessary. Cultural affirmation and pride was not a means

to an end, only a stop on the journey. In the same timeframe of Newton's comments,

Black Fire: An Anthology of Afro-American Writing was published. The immense

collection of writings combines Black theory and Black Art as a means of connecting

aesthetic and prophetic ruminations on the revolution. The editors, Leroi Jones (Amiri

Baraka) and Larry Neal, both proclaimed cultural nationalism and the power of the Black

Aesthetic as a liberating force in Black American consciousness. Not surprisingly, some

of the writings speak to an ideological rift between nationalist concepts. A portion of

Edward Spriggs', poem "For the TRUTH (because it is necessary)" reads:

What kind of man are you/black revolutionary, so-called?/what kind of

man are you trying to be/ultra-hip-revolutionary-nationalist/quasi-

strategist-ego-centric-phony/intellectual romantic black prima donna

child/--screaming, 'revolution means change…'/never finishing the

sentence/or the thought/talking about 'para-military'/strategy and

techniques/publicizing a so-called underground program/wearing your

military garb/as if you never heard of camouflage/so in love with

intrigue/you have no thoughts/about the post-revolution life/that the total

destruction/you talk about assumes…(Spriggs 339-40).

The persona in the poem harangues the pseudo-revolutionary for his lack of vision for a

post-revolutionary society and destructive rhetoric. The fact that the "revolutionary" has

no plans for the future, but talks of "'para-military' strategy" questions the survival of the

Black community after the revolution comes. Once everything is destroyed, who will be

left? Who is ensuring the future?

In *SOS*, Pilate's death is a warning to young Black leadership that claims to act on

behalf of "the people," but uses its power to proselytize and destroy. Though Guitar

works as an agent for the community, his murder of Pilate is a direct repudiation of the

history she represents, as is his previous hunting of Milkman. He has "jeweled hatred" for

her—not realizing that the power is in her knowing *how* to save Black lives (210).

Likewise, when Milkman realizes Pilate is dead, he leaps out into the darkness toward

Guitar, unconcerned with the outcome. Morrison writes, "As fleet and bright as a lodestar

he wheeled toward Guitar and it did not matter which one of them would give up his

ghost in the killing arms of his brother" (337). Milkman's flight toward Guitar is

symbolic of a continuation of ideological warfare. The darkness that envelops both men

as Pilate's crumpled body lay in the earth, symbolizes the unknown future and possible

death of the community. Instead of preventing Pilate's death or even remaining with her

after she dies, Milkman turns his hurt, sadness, and frustration back toward Guitar.

Similarly, young Black leaders of the Black revolution became obsessed with their

distrust and disenchantment with one another, abandoning the dying community and

focusing their energy on intra-racial destruction. *SOS* proves that it *does* matter, who

"gives up his ghost." In the end, neither Milkman nor Guitar learn the most important

lesson of the quest: 'you just can't fly on off and leave a body,' or a community behind.

CHAPTER 4

"TOMORROW THE PEOPLE WOULD COME": CONTINUING THE REVOLUTIONARY TRADITION IN ALICE WALKER'S *MERIDIAN*

We who have watched our young grow too old too soon; we who have watched our children come home angry and frustrated and see them grow more bitter and more disillusioned with the passing of each day; and we who have seen the sick, trapped looks on the faces of our children when they come to fully realize what it means to be Black in America.

-Assata Shakur[47]

……………………….

You can pray until you faint. But if you don't get up and try to do something, God is not going to put it in your lap. And there's no need of running and no need of saying 'honey I am not going to get in the mess,' because if you were born in America with a black face you were born in the mess.

-Fannie Lou Hamer,[48]
Mississippi Freedom Democratic Party

In Alice Walker's seminal text In Search of Our Mother's Gardens, she comments on the alleged "death" of the Civil Rights Movement in 1967. She writes, "the Civil Rights Movement is only dead to the white media." She later explains that the Movement suffered from quasi-victories and landmark moments and through it all the focus remained on the sensationalized and televised aspects of the Movement, its marches, singing, and non-violent resistance. Walker solemnly notes, "No real effects of the Movement are ever noted such as human attitudes, changes in personal lives, etc." (120-1). Walker's sentiments about how the "real" revolution was not "televised" (as Gil Scott Heron promises it would not be) speak to the uncategorized "movement" of individuals, lives, emotions, feelings, and experiences. Like Nina Simone's inquiry in the bluesy "Do I Move You?" Walker's vision of the changes within the Black community demands a spiritual inner-journey that moves from the "head down to the liver." She imagines a soul transformation.

Walker considers her work a part of her own commitment to the salvation of "the people." As a participant in the "Freedom Summer" voter registration drive in the south, her lived experience allows her to create from a critical place of knowing. In "The Social Construction of Black Feminist Thought," Patricia Hill Collins states,

> For ordinary African-American women, those individuals who have lived
> through the experiences about which they claim to be experts are more
> believable and credible than those who have merely read or thought about
> such experiences. Thus, concrete experience as a criterion for credibility
> frequently is invoked by Black women when making knowledge claims
> (Collins 190).

Collins further notes that women of color employ experiential knowledge when defining a theoretical standpoint. Specifically, if one considers Walker and her "imagined community" of Civil Rights workers and poor, rural Blacks in Meridian, it is evident that Walker's practical experiences and knowledge about the rural "folk" place her at a theoretical advantage over others who attempt to construct narratives of belonging.

The connections between Black female activism and literary production reaches as far back as Phillis Wheatley and her often misunderstood 18th century "tokenism." Women writer/activists of the 20th century use their expressive and political freedoms to effect change. The now cliché "using words as a weapon," describes one of the many ways black women entered into the struggle for equality and justice. From the journalistic roots of Ida B. Wells that served as the foundation for an anti-lynching campaign, to Alice Walker's student activism and SNCC membership that is the premise for her first two novels—"the artist is the voice of the people and she is the people" (*ISMG* 138).

Alice Walker's Meridian places black women at the center of the Marxist notion that social uprising is inevitable once the oppressed is aware of unjust material conditions. The novel resists the notion that black male revolutionary and cultural nationalists are the only individuals qualified to participate in Black America's political struggle, within and beyond the 1960s. Meridian Hill exists as a freedom fighter, understanding that continued struggle and support is required for the Black community to become truly and completely whole. As a Black woman, her individual decisions to survive are symbolic of hope and survival of the masses. She supports the Black community in a self-sacrificing manner organically composed of spiritual, political, emotional, personal, cultural, and revolutionary experiences. In "Women in the Civil

Rights Movement: Reform or Revolution?" Rhoda Lois Blumberg defines female self-sacrifice in world revolutionary movements. She writes:

> Self-sacrifice is a characteristic of women's gender roles that has often been considered normal. Reliance on intrinsic emotional and spiritual rewards, rather than gains in finances or status, is not unusual. In fact, women have often found it easier to struggle for other groups or causes than for themselves as women. In this case [the Black movements of the 1960s] black women, young and old responded with enthusiasm and bravery to the calls for sacrifice (Blumberg 82).

It is important to note, the goal in this chapter is not to essentialize Meridian or the role of Black women activists. The use of the definition above is a move to contextualize how Meridian's spiritual connection to the Civil Rights Movement propels her to carry on in ways that her friends and acquaintances cannot/will not accept. Meridian's brand of activism requires that she thrive off the energy of the community, the voices and songs of the masses that echo from the trees. It is precisely because of Meridian's understanding of community and personal freedom that she does not abandon the Movement or the South for a pointless future, but remains vested in the pursuit of political power through experience and awakening.

In this chapter, I explore the refusal to surrender as an Afro-politico Womanist standpoint that supercedes an individualistic focus on personal goals. Through this lens, the characters Meridian Hill and Truman Held become symbolic of the crossroads in Black activism after the majority-defined "end" of the Civil Rights Movement. During this period in Black political history two realities were present. 1.) The majority of the

beneficiaries of the struggle (read: Black Middle Class) assimilated into comfortable places of power and/or retreated to private spaces that did not include the Black masses who were the foundation of their progress. 2.) Several movement activists used the victories won in the 1960s as trajectories for continued work within poor and working class communities.

In the first section of this chapter, I read Truman as symbolic of the threat of an amnesiac Black middle class that emerges in the space following the heightened levels of Black political activism in the 1960s. In her 1973 essay "Choosing to Stay Home" Walker contends, "The new Black middle class has forgotten the point of the fight and is complacent in its search for wealth and material objects" (Walker 168-9). Truman's frequent re-locations (in and out of Meridian's life) represent the fluctuation of middle-class political ideology, as he shifts from conservatism to liberalism on one end and non-violent action to revolutionary militancy at the other. At the close of the novel, Walker motions toward a hopeful future when she presents Truman's "last return" as an attempt at self-salvation by choosing to stay behind and remain a part of the Meridian's community.

Conversely, Meridian represents a small contingent of female soldiers who understand that to effectively support and ensure the progress of the Black community she/they must forever remain connected to the masses. While Truman phases in and out of the struggle, Meridian continues the fight. Her activist standpoint involves a conscious rejection of established institutionalized norms that function as obstacles to community awareness and political progress. Though she questions if the "revolution like everything else was reduced to a fad?" her belief in the promise of the Black community does not

allow her to abandon the dream. As Meridian matures, it is evident that her connection to the masses is spiritual rather than obligatory.

"Running off as soon as black became beautiful…" –Lynne Held

As one of the only fully developed Black male characters in the novel, Truman Held's spiritual distance from the Movement and surface understanding of events speak to the failure of male leadership to truly acknowledge the grand narrative of Black experience. For Truman, Black activism is episodic and decontextualized, devoid of a historical or intellectual tradition. His refusal/inability to completely connect with the masses inhibits his growth, and "holds" him ("true-man, held") hostage. Therefore, his "last return" to Meridian at the beginning of the novel and his ultimate decision to stay behind as she moves on, is his own release from the limitations of a formulaic understanding of Black experience.

As the narrative progresses, the reader finds through various flashbacks and dream sequences that Truman has made this journey several times in the years following the Civil Rights Movement and his work as a community organizer in the South. Though the organization Truman works with is never mentioned and the "movement" he is involved with is marginally identified as "Civil Rights," the informed reader understands the connections Walker makes between the Student Non-Violent Coordinating Committee (SNCC) and Truman's experiences as a student leader in the Movement. These historical truths that muddy the water between fact and fiction in the novel exist as

a nebulous hyper-reality that combines Meridian's own spiritual awakening with America's political awakening.

Truman's reoccurrence in the novel serves as mile markers for Black experience and mirrors the way American history categorizes Black progress. According to documented history, Black American experience is relegated to a few key titular moments. "Slavery," "Reconstruction," "The Harlem Renaissance," "The Civil Rights Movement," "Black Power," and sometimes (depending on the source) "Postmodernism," serve merely as moments in time, each denoting an era of change. The problematic is the same when social scientists identify Black social uprising (rioting, protests) as spurious, therefore, not existing on a continuum but as unrelated spontaneous reactions to a particular moment of injustice, like the 1992 Los Angeles riots following the Rodney King beating, for example (Upton). Truman is not any different. As a primary character, he embodies the attitudes of the Black middle class as he rapidly shifts from grass roots activist to distant intellectual, while also adopting aspects of revolutionary nationalism and a modified form of cultural nationalism.

Walker is savvy in presenting Truman as an Everyman, who, as stated earlier, morphs into a new being at the turn of the next page. Though her critique of the Black community is evident throughout the novel, it is especially biting when Truman's instability is closely examined. His ubiquitous presence is always in opposition to Meridian's steadfast determination to exist for "the people" and continue the good fight. Truman's resistance to Meridian's notions of change, hope, and progress is the Black community's cynicism about a coming change after the "death" of Civil Rights. After he

abandons the struggle he remains disconnected from Black poor and working class communities and therefore, refuses to consider the possibility of continued action.

In an exchange between Meridian and Truman in the 1970s, Meridian contemplates whether she should actually kill for the "revolution," a question that has haunted her since she was first asked years ago by a group of militant young black women. She contemplates teaching, rather than killing, as a viable impetus for the revolution. Truman replies:

> Do you realize that no one is thinking about these things anymore?
> Revolution was the theme of the sixties: Medgar, Malcolm, Martin,
> George, Angela Davis, the Panthers, people blowing up buildings and
> each other. But all that is gone now..."

Then after Meridian asks if he thinks revolution was "reduced to a fad," he replies:

> Of course…the leaders were killed, the restless young were bought off
> with anti-poverty jobs, and the clothing styles of the poor were copied by
> Seventh Avenue. And you know how many middle-class white girls from
> Brooklyn started wearing kinky hair" (206).

Though Truman's statements are couched in fact—the reality around him—Meridian does not/cannot accept the status quo. In the 1970s Truman, and the rest of America, considers survival the only characteristic left. People are living, working, and existing to

survive, a reality that Truman wants Meridian to acknowledge. For Truman the revolution and Black organizational leadership is dead.

The novel opens with a similar encounter. In the section titled "The Last Return," Truman arrives in media res. He finds that "that woman in the cap" is "staring down" a large army tank purchased during the 1960s, or what was commonly viewed as an infiltration of Northern liberals in the South trying to change the traditional way of life. When Truman asks a man (only identified as "the sweeper") about the commotion, it is evident that they both fail to understand the true import of the situation:

> "What's happening?" he asked, walking up to an old man who was bent
> carefully and still as a bird over his wide broom.
> "Well…some of the children wanted to get in to see the dead lady, you
> know, the mummy woman, in the trailer over there, and our day for seeing
> her ain't until Thursday."
> "*Your* day?"
> "That's what I said."
> "But the Civil Rights Movement changed all that!"
> "I seen rights come and I seen 'em go…You're a stranger here or you'd
> know this is for the folks that work in that guano plant outside town.
> "*Po'*folks" (3-4).

Later in the same scene after Meridian has successfully integrated the "museum," the sweeper exclaims, "…as far as I'm concerned. The stuff she do don't make no sense" (6-

7). Truman's surprise at the continued need for soldiers like Meridian in the Black

community represents his own misunderstanding of the community's needs. Not only

does the struggle continue on account of race, but it has also grown to include class. The

children eager to see Marilene O'Shay's[49] decomposed body (in the exhibit her husband

created) are majority Black, but the sweeper makes a note to inform Truman of their

common abject poverty rather than their race. Through the sweeper's story it is apparent

that the young children are forced to work in deplorable and inhumane conditions. They,

like children in "sweatshops" in developing countries are paid below living wage to

produce fertilizer that ensures the agricultural (read: economical) progress of the South.

     For these residents of Chicokema, all the Civil Rights movement changed was the

methods by which they are oppressed. When Truman asks the sweeper if he also works in

the plant, he replies that he used to but he was laid off for being "too old," again another

battle that must be fought. Meridian's revolutionary act is for "po' folks," Black folks

and old folks. By expanding her scope to include various levels of oppression she is able

to live outside of the limitations of time and exist within a metanarrative of experience.

Toward the end of his life Martin Luther King, Jr. recognized that the Black community

would be destroyed if the focus did not shift from individualism and capitalism to

collectivism. He writes,

> We must honestly admit that capitalism has often left a gulf between
>
> superfluous wealth and abject poverty, has created conditions permitting
>
> necessities to be taken from the many to give luxuries to the few, and has
>
> encourage (sic) smallhearted men to become cold and conscienceless so

that, like Dives before Lazarus, they are unmoved by suffering, poverty-

stricken humanity. The profit motive, when it is the sole basis of an

economic system, encourages a cutthroat competition and selfish ambition

that inspire men to be more I-centered than thou-centered (King 186).

Meridian's choice to remain in the South speaks to a "thou-centered" approach to the

needs of the masses. She continues to mobilize as a method of combating the realities of

unequal education, the exploitation of labor, and racism—al factors that do not affect her

directly as an educated woman born into a middle class home.

After witnessing Meridian's act, Truman mutters, "Now they will burst into

song." But, the narrator adds, "They did not." Truman remains tied to a romanticized

ideal of participatory action. He remembers the Negro spirituals accompanied by peaceful

protest, small victories won, and a youthful idealistic notion of egalitarianism within a

truly pluralistic society. He believes he can predict the singing, because the singing was

always there—as a salve for the wounds of hate. But when it does not come, he is left

silent, watching Meridian's power fueled by the latent energy of the community. A

community that he feels, at this point, is unnecessary to save.

In 1960, when Meridian and Truman initially meet, he is one of the leaders of a

voter registration effort in Georgia. The house the group was previously in has been

bombed and Meridian volunteered for duty. At this stage in his life Truman is a college

student and one of the young, fearless members of the Black upper-middle class whose

education has taught them that the conditions in the South are not justified. He thrusts

himself into the movement and views his deeds as a service to the Black community, not

unlike the white students who later arrive in the South during what is realistically

portrayed as "Freedom Summer." The reader views Truman's activism through

Meridian's eyes. In the section titled, "Battle Fatigue," Meridian recalls,

> Truman Held was the first of the Civil Rights workers—for that's what
>
> they were called—who began to mean something to her, though it was
>
> months after their initial meeting that she knew. It was not until one night
>
> when first he, then she, was arrested for demonstrating outside the local
>
> jail, and then beaten (Walker 80).

Later, the reader finds Truman "limping" and his eyes "swollen and red, his body

trembling" and he is so weary that he does not even recognize her. He is carried off again

in another police car before she can go to him. After that moment, the reader assumes that

Truman is no longer active in the "movement." While several passages are dedicated to

Meridian's continued self-sacrifice and physical attack upon her body during other

marches and protests, Truman disappears[50]. The next time Truman appears for a

significant portion of text is during the first of his ideological shifts.

After Meridian enrolls in Saxon College (across the street from his own

university), Truman presents himself as a Black intellectual, reminiscent of a Duboisian

era where the "New Negro" would lead the poor, black masses into a new century. He is

born into the Black middle-class, has spent time abroad, speaks a foreign language, and

dresses himself in impressive attire. In the section aptly titled, "The Conquering Prince,"

Truman and Meridian are en route to a social gathering. He arrives in "a flowing

Ethiopian robe of extravagantly embroidered white," and responds to Meridian's complements with "*Et toi aussi. Tu es très magnifique!*"(99). He later tells her in bits of English and French that he is glad she decided to attend Saxon because, "[She was] going to waste away out there in the sticks" (100). As their relationship progresses, Truman's overall attitude is that he possesses intellectual girth superior to Meridian's rural inferiority. He accuses her of being young and intolerant, and in a later exchange tells her that he preferred the company of white exchange students to her because "they read the *New York Times*" (152). He also confesses internally "although […] the rich were a cancer on the world, he would not mind being rich himself" (205).

At this transitory phase Truman is represented as a proponent of bourgeois socialism. In The Communist Manifesto, Marx and Engels discuss bourgeois socialism as existing for the benefit of the working class without disrupting the privileges and immediate needs of the bourgeois. Truman is not willing to compromise his status as a member of the Black middle class, as he acknowledges the injustices around him. He has the privilege of working in the rural South for "the summer" but returns "up Atlanta" when the school year begins. He has access to higher education and rides in his father's "new red car," and later chooses to live as an artist in New York. His actions are symbolic of his class status as sympathizer to the plight of the oppressed, but he is unwilling to continue to fight "their" battles after the movement is "over."

In "Women as Culture Carriers in the Civil Rights Movement: Fannie Lou Hamer," Bernice Johnson Reagon documents Fannie Lou Hamer's contribution to the fight for equality in Mississippi. Reagon recalls Hamer's opinion on the divide between

middle and lower class Blacks, specifically college-educated women (and men) who "had difficulty embracing her as their sister" (213). Hamer speaks in 1971:

> A few years ago throughout the country the middle class Black women—I used to say not really Black women, but the middle class colored women, didn't respect the kind of work that I was doing. But you see now baby, whether you have a ph.d., dd, or no d, we're in this bag together. And whether you are from Morehouse[51] or Nohouse, we're still in this bag together" (Reagon 214).

Hamer's experiences of intraracial discrimination on the basis of class speak to inherent problems within a movement that was viewed as being an economic rather than a social problem. Truman Held views the Black South as backwards or infantile in its ignorance. Instead, he identifies with a Northern cosmopolitanism that borders on elitism as he matures into a complete bourgeois sensibility. For him at this point, the "movement" is attractive because it consists of charismatic and educated leaders—not the proletariat who reside in "the sticks."

Truman reinvents himself as an advocate of Black Power during his second ideological shift. Black Power as an ideology consists of several layers. Pride in Black culture, an appreciation of Black experience and history, and an affirmation of Black spiritual wealth are sample characteristics of this school of thought. When Stokely Carmichael expressed Black southern frustrations in 1966 and made "Black Power" a notorious term, his emphasis was on the lack of political power Black Americans have in

the electoral process. Truman, on the other hand, moves between a desire to assert Black manhood (at the cost of *all* women), an appreciation of his own "Blackness," and Black revolutionary rhetoric.

When Truman deserts Meridian for the female white exchange students he expects her to understand his actions as a reflection of his own tortured soul. After reading The Souls of Black Folk by W.E.B. Dubois, he approaches Meridian with a new understanding of himself reflected in the passage below:

> He was startled by the coolness with which she received his assertion that what he had decided, after reading "*le maître,*" was that if he dated white girls it must be, essentially, a matter of sex. She laughed when she saw he expected her to be pleased and reassured, a bitter laugh that sent him away again, his chin thrust forward against her misunderstanding (107-8).

Truman misunderstands what he believes is Meridian's own "misunderstanding." In fact, it is Meridian who balks at his immaturity and considers a discussion of the text "too deep for Truman." Their readings differ, as their preferences differ—his being the current popular trend (white women) and hers, the intellectual relevance of the text. What Truman fails to realize is that when defined within the Black community, the "Negro problem" (discussed in the first few pages of Dubois' text), is not really a problem at all. For Meridian, Truman cannot rationalize his personal identity crisis by (mis)reading Dubois, neither can he expect her to understand his rejection of black womanhood and not feel "ashamed, as if she were less" (108).

Truman continues to embrace what he identifies as "Black Power" and exerts his

manhood in ways reminiscent of Black revolutionary and cultural nationalist thought. He

tells Meridian to walk with her head up "proud and free" and proclaims "Black is

beautiful." In the same vein he tells Meridian to "have [his] black babies," though he fled

earlier when he found out she was married and gave up her first child before coming to

college (119-120). Truman couches his physical desires for Meridian in a Black

Nationalist philosophy that the antidote for Black "genocide" is the mass reproduction of

Black babies, (mini soldiers for the "revolution") with women's gynecological and

psychological wellness notwithstanding. In Fighting Words, Patricia Hill Collins notes,

"Black nationalist projects of the 1960s often opposed contraceptive and reproductive

services for African-American women, viewing such services as genocide" (Collins 170).

Likewise, Patricia Robinson's Poor Black Women (1968), includes a reply from a group

of "black sisters" to "the Brothers" who claim "when [we] produce children, we are

aiding the REVOLUTION in the form of NATION building" (Robinson 1). The women

reply by blaming Black male desertion after childbirth for an increased use of birth

control among poor Black women and later cites birth control as "the first step in [our]

waking up!" (Robinson 2).

After his estranged wife Lynne (one of the white exchange students) accuses him

of being a fraud and leaving her "as soon as black became beautiful," Truman reflects on

his actions. He has to decide if he is merely hiding behind a rhetorical fence—a wall of

words and phrases that made him popular in the moment, but has no weight in the grand

scheme of his life—or if he is truly prepared to accept the challenges of the Black

community. Like that of the "new" Black middle class, *his* participation in the political

process has been one fad after another. In <u>Where are We Now: Chaos or Community?</u>
(1968) Martin Luther King, Jr. reflects on a divided Black America when he writes:

> How many Negroes who have achieved educational and economic
> security have forgotten that they are where they are because of the support
> of faceless, unlettered and unheralded Negroes who did ordinary jobs in an
> extraordinary way? How many successful Negroes have forgotten that
> uneducated and poverty-stricken mothers and fathers often worked until
> their eyebrows were scorched and their hand bruised so that their children
> could get an education? For any middle-class Negro to forget the masses is
> an act not only of neglect but of shameful ingratitude (King 132).

It is not until Truman is stripped of all his "possessions" (wife, child, love, art) and
returns to Meridian at the end, that he begins to understand his power, and greater
contribution to the communities. In the end, he rejects the trappings of middle-class
sensibility as he undergoes a psychic transformation and finds himself contemplating the
future through the eyes of the rural folk to which he returns.

"And in the darkness maybe we will know the truth." –Meridian Hill

As Truman's actions and beliefs represent the flight(iness) of the Black middle
class, Meridian embodies a self-sacrificing determination to serve the masses, at all costs.
I read Meridian's continued support of the community as representative of the Afro-

politico Womanist agenda. Afro-Politico Womanism as a standpoint theory supports a transformative Black community based on social, cultural, and political participation in world societies. In order for progress and significant change to occur, the entire community must be healthy. This includes access to medical care (including holistic, spiritual, traditional), emotional and mental healing, communication, and solidarity. This theoretical framework is a nationalist concept as it positions the needs, beliefs and survival of the Black community as a primary priority.

As is seen with the analysis of Truman, Meridian exists in the novel in relation to others. Though she claims to be alone, her solitude is enforced only by the mis-readings of her "craziness" by the community. From childhood to her adult life, she does not fit into her mother's Black community; rather she is a spiritual composite of Black experience. By this, her dedication to the "Cause" is more than a racial duty; it is the cause for her existence. Meridian views the *fight, struggle, and battle* of the 1960s as more than the demand for equality by brave soldiers in the Southern fields. Early on, she recognizes the fallacy in supporting a rhetorical challenge to kill another person in the name of the "revolution," and instead uses her knowledge of Black experience and Black thought-processes to engage in unarmed offensive grass-roots support of the Black community. She resides in the communities, goes door-to-door asking illiterate heads of households to register to vote long after the "freedom buses" have pulled away, and still listens to their life stories when they refuse her offer. Meridian does not consider her undying loyalty to Black people in the South *revolutionary*; neither does she consider it a passing phase. The South is her home. When Truman tells Meridian that he grieves for

the past, their loss, and the community's losses, in a "different" way than she does, she cannot accept his grief, because she does not see death.

Though Meridian spends her entire adult life debating the right answer to the question, "Will you kill for the revolution?" in the end she realizes that in order for the revolution to continue the real revolutionaries must live and ensure that others live. In an article written in 1970, "Double Jeopardy: To Be Black and Female," Frances Beale writes:

> We must begin to understand that a revolution entails not only the willingness to lay our lives on the firing line and get killed. In some ways, this is an easy commitment to make. To die for the revolution is a one-shot deal; to live for the revolution means taking on the more difficult commitment of changing our day-to-day life patterns (Beale 99).

As someone who has dedicated her life to living and fighting for the Black community, Meridian has refused to surrender. Her refusal to surrender is a spiritual decision as she uses the individual power of choice to display her commitment to the community. Meridian's choices are in direct contrast to the perceived "norms" and ideological shifts that Truman embraces. Truman accepts leadership roles, asserts his masculinity through sexual conquests, adapts to the changing social and political scenes, and understands the Movement to be "over." Contrarily, Meridian works as a part of the community, refuses to surrender her body to sexual gratification/pleasure, refuses the invitation into the Black Middle class, and *knows* movements are incessant processes.

Though Meridian remains in the poor, rural communities as a "worker" she does not adopt a traditional leadership role. Whereas, the other (male) characters active in the movement mobilize in very structured and institutionalized ways (producing pamphlets, speaking to the news media, organizing voter registration drives, and so forth. Meridian is primarily a doer, unattached to a specific organization or leader. This is significant when one considers the roles women assume(d) in the fight for equality and justice. As noted in previous chapters, women like Ella Baker, Fannie Lou Hamer, and Bernice Johnson Reagon, were organizers and leaders behind the scenes, with a disregard for the unhealthy emphasis on leadership. Baker's infamous quote "strong people don't need strong leaders," is in reference to the adulation many Black ministers received during the Civil Rights Movement as the focus shifted from the poor to the educated elite. In Political Process and the Development of Black Insurgency, 1930-1970, Doug McAdam defines "leadership" as a "resource whose availability is conditioned by the degree of organization within the aggrieved population" (McAdam 48). He then argues that without an organizational foundation (and/or the presence of leadership) indigenous groups are more likely to be "deprived of the capacity for collective action even when confronted with a favorable structure of political opportunities" (48). What McAdam and like theorists fail to take into consideration is grass roots community work functioning outside the scope of a traditional organizational structure.

Meridian refuses the system in other ways, the most significant being her refusal to "feel" anything other than a visceral connection to human suffering. Her body's rejection of sexuality and romantic love manifests in an inability to succumb to pleasure. As a young woman she allows men to fondle her and engage in sexual intercourse,

despite her mother's cryptic warnings to "be sweet," and not "be fast," but she does not

ever allow them to control her ecstasy (86). Her young lovers question her disposition by

asking, 'Why are you always so sourfaced about it?' or later beg her not to tighten her

muscles and lock her limbs, "this time" (55). Regardless, of their urgings the reader

learns that Meridian's body does not allow her to give:

> For as much as she wanted to, she—her body, that is—never had any
>
> intention of *giving in*. She was suspicious of pleasure. She might approach
>
> it, might gaze on it with longing, but retreat was inevitable (64).

Meridian is unable to experience a heightened physical sensibility with her male suitors

(including Truman), or even her young husband, because her desire lies elsewhere.

Society proscribes that for a woman to experience pure passion and orgasmic pleasure

she has to surrender her body to another person, a (un)truth Meridian is not willing to

accept. For, it is important to note that the times when Meridian does "feel," it is always

connected to a deeper understanding of ancestral ties or the love of the Black

community—and only then does her body release its tight grasp.

For example, when Meridian enters into the "Sacred Serpent," an Indian burial

mound on her father's land, she experiences an ecstasy that is unparalleled until she

becomes a part of the Civil Rights Movement. Meridian goes to the mound to

"understand" the history of her great-grandmother, Feather Mae, who had a life-changing

experience in the pit of the mound. For Meridian, Feather Mae stands as an exemplar of

free-spirited womanhood, living for pure pleasure and "denouncing all religion that was

not based on the experience of physical ecstasy" (51). When Meridian enters the pit of

the mound, she understands what it means to be alive:

> From a spot at the back of her left leg there began a stinging
>
> sensation…Then her right palm, and her left, began to feel as if someone
>
> had slapped them. But it was in her head that the lightness started. It was
>
> as if the walls of the earth that enclosed her rushed outward, leveling
>
> themselves at a dizzying rate, and then spinning wildly, lifting her out of
>
> her body and giving her the feeling of flying. And in this movement she
>
> saw the faces of her family, the branches of trees, the wings of birds, the
>
> corners of houses, blades of grass and petals of flowers rush toward a
>
> central point high above her and she was drawn with them, as whirling, as
>
> bright, as free, as they (52-53).

After she joins the Civil Rights Movement, Meridian is in a constant state of heightened

sensibility. Everything around her is tangible, and she soaks up the pain, hurt, and hope

of the community until she is emotionally spent. She is described as "always in a state of

constant tears," followed by "the shaking of her hands, or the twitch in her left eye" (82).

Both experiences, the mound and her physical sacrifice to the Movement, place Meridian

in a realm that cannot be satisfied by mere sexual gratification. She experiences the

mound before she becomes sexually active and the Civil Rights Movement after she has

married and given birth to her son. Neither traditionally "gratifying" experience (sex or

motherhood) can compare to Meridian's physical awareness. Her body rejects prescribed

roles and she eventually gives her infant son away because she cannot give him the love

he deserves. In turn, she accepts her self-sacrifice for humanity, social order, and

communal love as the true testament to a sensual power.

Another way Meridian remains focused on the masses, is the rejection of the

Black Middle Class. Through a scholarship given by a northern white philanthropist,

Meridian is able to attend Saxon College. Saxon is a historically Black women's college

in Atlanta, Georgia (read: Spelman College). The university prides itself on its

furtherance of bourgeois Victorian-era moral attitudes and a fine classical Liberal Arts

education, though it is physically located in the heart of the poor and working class Black

community. Saxon women are "as pure as the driven snow," and do not stray from the

predictable path of virtue and propriety. The Saxon woman is not unlike Barbara Welter's

analysis of the "Cult of True Womanhood," a class of attributes ascribed to white

virtuous women, and is later adopted by the Northern Black elite at the turn of the 20th

century. Within the "Cult" the four main attributes, purity, piety, domesticity, and

submissiveness, define Victorian-era womanhood and therefore, define the woman's

"place" in the home and society (Carby 25).

Meridian is situated as an outsider upon setting foot on the campus. She has been

married, has given away her child, questions the existence of God, and does not possess

the purity described in the university's mantra. In a school assembly Meridian speaks of

her conflicting feelings about what she is supposed to believe and what she feels:

> [A]ll Saxon students were required to attend a chapel service at which one
>
> girl was expected to get up on the platform and tell—in a ten-minute

106

speech—of some way in which she had resisted evil and come out on the

right side of God. Meridian…did not believe she now stood even in the

vicinity of God. In fact, Meridian was not sure there was a God, and when

her turn cam, she said so. …When her fellow students found themselves

near her afterward they would look about as if they expected lightning to

strike, and her teachers let her know she was a willful, sinful girl (93).

In Reconstructing Womanhood, Hazel Carby quotes Barbara Welter on the qualities of a

true woman. Welter argues that "purity was as essential as piety…its absence as

unnatural and unfeminine. Without it she was, in fact, no woman at all, but a member of

some lower order" (25). Though Welter refers to a social construction that was not

developed with the Black woman in mind, the social order at Saxon College is patterned

itself after the upper-middle class bourgeois values of its white benefactors. As a woman

who is neither pure nor pious, Meridian contradicts the middle class values of the

university. It is at Saxon when Meridian fully immerses herself in the "Movement" and

the plight of the poor Black community that surrounds the hallowed walls of the

university campus. She recognizes the irony of the gates that keep the women in and the

community out. Alice Walker critiques the historically Black colleges and universities

that believe the liberation of its students is achieved through a classical education, and

not communalism or collaboration with the Black masses.

Meridian's decision to refuse traditional route(s) prescribed for her by others

(because she is young, Black and female) leads to a conscious choice to live according an

alternate set of rules. In the midst of racial turmoil and social upheaval Meridian remains

still. Her refusal to merge into the pulse of the crowd and/or the trappings of convenient revolutionary rhetoric allows her to stand alone, and acknowledge the cries and songs of the Black community. She envisions herself as a liberator—a constant force within the chaos of the masses. In the following passage, Meridian contemplates her role within the struggle:

> I am not to belong to the future. I am to be left, listening to the old music, beside the highway. But then, [she thought,] perhaps it will be my part to walk behind the real revolutionaries—those who know they must spill blood in order to help the poor and the black and therefore go right ahead—and when they stop to wash off the blood and find their throats too choked with the smell of murdered flesh to sing, I will come forward and sing from memory songs they will need once more to hear. For it is the song of the people, transformed by the experiences of each generation, that holds them together, and if any part of it is lost the people suffer and are without soul (221).

Meridian recognizes that her continued action is product of her appreciation of Black historical memory. She has a spiritual connection to the people she asks to register to vote, those who risk their lives in the name of survival. Alice Walker uses Meridian's life to show how history repeats itself through memory and action. Meridian absorbs the stories, songs, feelings, and pain of those in the struggle and uses that energy to continue voter registration drives, feed the poverty-stricken, listen to the stories, and live among

those whom (Black middle class) society has forgotten. Walker's use of memory in the novel speaks to a larger cultural tradition involving black women's community and coalition building. In an essay on the black female literary tradition, Lorraine Bethel pronounces,

> "…Black women have a long tradition of bonding together in a community that has been a source of survival information, and psychic and emotional support. We have a distinct Black woman-identified folk culture based on our experiences in society…this Black woman-identified bonding and folk culture have often gone unrecorded except through our individual lives and memories" (Bethel 179).

Meridian (as character and novel) represents the power of "bonding" and "folk culture," within the scope of Black activism. She remains within the community and celebrates everyday victories as well as defeats. Her encouragement is not limited to voting rights, clean facilities, and the occasional segregated "museum." What Meridian proves to the communities in which she lives and wanderers like Truman, is that humanity is the true testament of strength. Like the memories that bind black culture together, true activists understand the "ethic of personal accountability" which connects each one to another through experience and shared circumstance.

As a Civil Rights novel, Meridian charts a path as an utopist text and the novel's ending speaks to the need for continuance—continued action and support within the Black community. When Truman returns to Meridian for the final time, she

acknowledges *his* purpose and charges him with the present task. She leaves him to contemplate his ability as a representative of the Black middle class to aid in the *real* revolution. Walker writes of Truman's ultimate transformation:

> Truman turned, tears burning his face, and began, almost blindly to read the poems she had left on the walls. He could not bring himself to read the letters yet. It was his house now, after all. His cell. Tomorrow the people would come and bring him food. Someone would come milk his cow. They would wait patiently for him to perform, to take them along the next guideless step. Perhaps he would (Walker 242).

Several scholars contend that Meridian's departure at the end of the novel is symbolic of death—the death of the Civil Rights movement and Meridian's own death due to her failing health. Others read her exit as the passing of the torch, the task of salvation going from one champion of the community to another. Yet, others read the final scene as "no reason to believe that Meridian's change has catalyzed, or been abled by, a corresponding transformation of her social and political context" (143-44 Dubey).

While there are many possibilities, Meridian's strength is the ability to imagine continuation and social change, especially as it is connected to the hopeful return of a prodigal middle class. In the last scene Truman's thoughts, emotions, and physical actions end the novel. Walker writes that Truman was not concerned with either the traditionalists who "gnash their teeth" at Meridian's behavior or the revolutionists who will "deplore [her] ambivalence" adding "Truman…was not himself concerned about

either group. To him they were practically imaginary" (242). Truman realizes his own humanity outside of organizational structures and limitations. The revolutionists and traditionalists are now "imaginary" to him, where before they defined his actions. In actuality, the organizations that Meridian and Truman reject are "imaginary" existing only for the prescribed "movement" and dissipating *after* the chains of exclusion have been broken. Symbolically, Truman represents the necessity of a Black middle class return to the masses and the need to continue unfinished business.

When Meridian throws away her conductor's cap and allows her newly grown hair space to breathe—she is taking part in a regeneration and renewal process. Her departure is more than a "return to the world" as Truman sees it, or a release of feeling and emotion as the chapter title implies. Because Meridian has never left the world, one can read her "hurrying" off, not as an escape, but a return to another town, another cause, or another community.

CHAPTER 5

"A BURST COCOON": REINVENTING SELF AND COMMUNITY

IN TONI CADE BAMBARA'S *THE SALT EATERS*

Revolution begins with the self, in the self. The individual, the basic revolutionary unit, must be purged of poison and lies that assault the ego and threaten the heart, that hazard the next larger unit—the couple or pair, that jeopardize the still larger unit—the family or cell, that put the entire movement in peril. We make many false starts because we have been programmed to depend on white models or white interpretations of non-white models, so we don't even ask the correct questions, much less begin to move in a correct direction. Perhaps we need to face the testifying and overwhelming possibility that there are no models, that we shall have to create from scratch…

…Instant coffee is the hallmark of the current rhetoric. But we do have time. We'd better take the time to fashion revolutionary selves, revolutionary lives, revolutionary relationships…Ain't no such animal as an instant guerilla.

-Toni Cade, 1969

Several comparisons exist between Alice Walker's <u>Meridian</u> (1976) and Toni

Cade Bambara's <u>The Salt Eaters</u> (1980), as texts that examine the continuity of Black

women's activism after the "official" end to the Civil Rights and Black Power

movements. For example, in <u>The Salt Eaters</u> (*TSE)*, when Minnie Ransom, the town's

"fabled healer" asks Velma Henry, a weary champion of social justice, "Are you sure,

sweetheart, that you want to be *well*," the reader can easily recall Meridian Hill and her

quest for healing. At the start of <u>Meridian</u>, Truman Held (a former lover and colleague)

also questions Meridian's health after witnessing her successful attempt to integrate a

local carnivalesque exhibit, on behalf of a group of economically disadvantaged children.

She is visibly weak, loses consciousness for periods of time, and wears a conductor's cap

to conceal her hair loss. She replies to Truman's questioning, "Of course I'm sick. Why

do you think I spend all this time trying to get *well*!" (Walker 10, emphasis mine).

What is significant about both texts is the emphasis on community and individual

health. Both women are at the physical end of a self-sacrificing quest to rescue the Black

community from racism, classism, sexism, and even itself, as the dawning of a new era

approaches. In the process, Meridian participates in a vicious corporeal tug-of-war that

leads to bouts of spiritual "sickness." Her refusal to surrender her mind, body, or soul to

the world outside the plight of the poor, precipitates the breakdown of her very essence.

Like Meridian, Velma is self-destructive in her love and devotion to the Black

community. But this devotion has a dangerous outcome: her revolutionary solution to the

weight of the struggle results in attempted suicide. In the end, both women are

transformed through renewal processes and individual revolutions, as they realize that

they must live and be well to ensure continued social activism on behalf of the community.

Against <u>Meridian</u> and the presence of historical Black female activism, *TSE* acts as what Henry Louis Gates, Jr. defines as the signifying text. In <u>The Signifying Monkey</u> (1988) Gates explains:

> Much of the Afro-American literary tradition can be read as successive attempts to create a new narrative space for representing the recurring referent of Afro-American literature, the so-called Black Experience…These relationships are reciprocal because we are free to read in critical time machines, to read backward, as Merlin moved through time.
>
> …It should be clear, even from a cursory familiarity with the texts of the Afro-American tradition, that black writers read and critique the texts of other black writers as an act of rhetorical self-definition. Our literary tradition exists because of these chartable formal relationships, relationships of Signifyin(g) (Gates 111, 122)

The "chartable relationship" exists as an exploration of ways to "save" and heal the unhealthy Black masses. Both novels examine the lives of individual women and the impact their strength has on the community. Through their relationships with others and ultimate spiritual breakthroughs, Meridian Hill and Velma Henry understand their positions as torchbearers in the race for collective salvation. <u>Meridian</u> acknowledges the

flight of the Black middle class from the poor and working class communities as the source of pain and distrust among members of rural southern communities "left over" from the media attention during the 1960s.

In Healing Narratives: Women Writers Curing Cultural Dis-Ease, Gay Wilentz "examine[s] women writers from diverse ethnic backgrounds as cultural workers who aim, through their writings, to heal self and community from these socially constructed diseases" (Wilentz 3). For Wilentz, Velma's move from mental instability to "wellness" is possible through the acceptance of African healing practices and cultural traditions. Likewise, though her examination of Minnie Ransom she explores the "role of woman as healer to cure cultural dis-ease" (3). Wilentz's reading of healing in the novel is useful when thinking about representations of community-based Black political action during what scholars view as the waning years of Black community growth and progress (1970-1980). The theme of reconnecting with an African based spirituality and traditional way of life that points to communalism and community preservation runs throughout the novel. As cultural nationalists believe that reflection and acceptance of an African past is the only true form of liberation, Bambara argues for a holistic reassessment of the Black community that will confront the current confused state and channel the peoples' aimless behavior into a common freedom movement. *TSE* uses Velma's own reinvention to signify the necessary reformulation of fragmented selves.

During this period in Black political history the community exhibited disillusioned and nihilistic attitudes toward an uncertain future that ultimately led to a rupture in indigenous organizational strength. In Political Process and the Development of Black Insurgency, 1930-1970, Doug McAdam responds to urban uprisings in the late

1960s as the cause of an alleged void in organizational leadership and failed community organizing. He argues:

> If the riots of this period conveyed an image of escalating racial conflict,
> they also masked a series of more subtle processes that were
> simultaneously at work undermining the efforts of insurgents to develop
> the organizational and tactical forms needed to sustain the leverage
> attained by the movement during the mid-1960s. The result of these
> processes was dramatic and quickly felt. By 1970, the movement, as a
> force capable of generating and sustaining organized insurgency, was
> moribund, if not dead (McAdam 182).

Admittedly, by 1970 the Black community appeared to rest at a dangerous crossroads that reflected Martin Luther King's timeless question "Where Do We Go From Here: Chaos or Community?"(1968). The assassinations and losses of King, Malcolm X, Patrice Lumumba, Fannie Lou Hamer, John F. Kennedy, *et al.* and the banning of the African National Congress in South Africa produced a heightened social and political consciousness among Black people worldwide. There were no answers for the failure of white hegemony to recognize and respect the political rights of people of color. The ability for the American corporate structure to evade important legislation like the Civil Rights Act (1964), the Equal Employment Opportunity Act (1965), and the Fair Housing Act (1968) evidently supported the argument that "discrimination in employment and in the housing market continue[d] to prevail (Bell 7).

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The chaos and confusion that existed resulted from the fallacy of integration and social improvements for Black America. In addition to a scorched social landscape, prominent leaders in Black Power movement organizations were in exile, imprisoned, or strategizing within an academic atmosphere. Older movement veterans appeared to quietly back away from the national spotlight and associated themselves with local fights and struggles still brewing in their home communities. The Northern ghettoes began to worsen and in many ways outdo the rural South in terms of poverty, economic depravity, poor living conditions, and a lack of access to quality education (King 35). And as stated in Chapter Four, large numbers of the Black Middle class were beginning the deft escape to a suburban, conservative way of life that the Civil Rights Movement made possible.

Given the reality of the 1960s as a decade of Black death and disillusionment for many, the raised voices of "angry" Black youth inaccurately accounts for a decline in political organization within the Black community—especially since many struggles were just beginning worldwide. What McAdam and other social scholars identify as the "end" was actually a respite for many who had sacrificed non-stop and ridden the wave of social change and Black frustration. Although the years between 1970-1980 represent a shift in Black politics from the radicalism of the mid-late 1960s to a more fragmented approach to Civil Rights and injustice, the "organism" continued to grow and expand through a less cohesive process. One method of categorizing the confused state of the Black community connects the fractured organizational structure with the rise of a postmodern understanding of social constructs and a rejection of traditional unified goals. Terry Eagleton defines postmodern angst and skepticism in the following way:

…[S]uspicious of classical notions of truth, reason, identity and

objectivity, of the idea of universal progress or emancipation, of single

frameworks, grand narratives or ultimate grounds of explanation. …[It]

sees the world as contingent, ungrounded, diverse, unstable,

indeterminate, as set of disunified cultures or interpretations which breed a

degree of skepticism about the objectivity of truth, history and norms, the

givenness of natures and the coherence of identities" (Eagleton vii).

As the social climate shifted from an embrace and acceptance of unity and heritage,

postmodernism as a innovative method of understanding social processes worked to

eliminate the fundamental basis of the Civil Rights Movement. The concept of collective

action and organizational strength appears unable to survive within the context of

instability and indeterminacy that marked the 1970s decade. Ironically, though

postmodernism is a definite source of the rejection of collective history and a shared

cultural vision for the future, the terms "postmodern" and "blackness" have a love/hate

relationship within Black scholarship. Although Postmodernism is born out of a decade

of civil action and open defiance of previously established racial and social norms,

postmodern scholarship has traditionally ignored its ties to the fight for racial equality

and the redefinition of the nation-state.

This simultaneous inclusion and exclusion of Black experience has led to Black

scholars denouncing postmodernism as a white theoretical concept that cannot accurately

define Black experience. In the article, "Postmodern Blackness: Toni Morrison's *Beloved*

and the end of history," Kimberly Chabot Davis contends, "…we should be [wary] of

concluding that postmodernism is a "white" phenomenon. Any claim that the lives of black people have nothing to do with postmodernism ignores the complex historical interrelationship of black protest and liberal academic discourse" (Davis 2). Davis recognizes the dependent relationship between the advent of postmodern world and the socio-political conditions that fueled the American revolutions of the 1960's. As a result of social uprisings (led by the Civil Rights Movement) and critical analyses on the demise of modernism, cultural politics and the indeterminacy of political action *were* more readily explored. An unfortunate opportunity cost of this "progressive" era was the cohesive struggle for Black political progress. With the rejection of established cultural norms and traditions, disunity among members of the Black community reflected the impending future. In *TSE* one of the characters comments on divergent communal goals and the gradual adoption of alternate paths for liberation, "I dunno. Malcolm gone, King gone, Fanni Lou gone (sic), Angela quiet, the movement splintered, enclaves unconnected. Everybody off into the Maharaji This and the Right Reverend That. If it isn't some far-off religious nuttery, it's some otherworldly stuff" (193).

Though the outcome appeared bleak for the Black community and the adoption of ways outside the traditional reference of Black experience was accepted and encouraged by the changing socio-political landscape, this restless and chaotic period in the continuum of Black political experience was the calm before the storm for the Black female activists and authors examined in this project. Placing emphasis on the incapability of sustained "organized insurgency" after 1970, neglects an examination of sustained community activism as represented in the works of Black women activists and writers. Authors were able to view social movements as "discursive fields of action" that

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did "not always look like a movement or function "as the way movements have been defined" (Alvarez). Through a comprehensive examination of the changing worldscape, Bambara and others challenge traditional understandings of political mobilization and activism while using spirituality to discuss power and economic stability. Her visionary work comes forward in a space designed to complement the multifaceted political experiences of Black women in the African Diaspora.

This "revolutionary" period also saw the rise of what is commonly regarded as Black feminist theory within the global public and political sphere. The movement, organization, and attention of Black women aggressively regained its position as the true vanguard of Black community activism. Likewise, diverse representatives of Black womanhood regained credibility after being embraced by the new Black scholarly elite. Robin Kelley asserts that:

> The radical black feminist movement, not unlike other feminists, also
> redefined the source of theory. It expanded the definition of who
> constitutes a theorist, the voice of authority speaking for black women, to
> include poets, blues singers, storytellers, painters, mothers, preachers, and
> teachers. Black women artists are often embraced from all parts of the
> diaspora…
> …[R]adical black feminism offers one of the most comprehensive visions
> of freedom I can think of, one that recognizes the deep interconnectedness
> of struggles around race, gender, sexuality, culture, class, and spirituality
> (Kelley 154).

What Kelley observes is the ability of creative artists, musicians, and storytellers to resist the postmodern focus on indeterminacy and severed communal relationships. Through their everyday, continued efforts to ensure health and stability within the Black community, hope is restored and the possibilities for a positive future are ever-present. In this same vein, *TSE* as a "healing narrative" provides a space to consider massive Black cultural restoration as the next step in revolutionary community activism. The novel accepts what other texts suggest—that the connection between a spiritual and political self will decide the outcome of the future.

As a novel of promise and reconnecting to traditions, *TSE* explores communal regrouping and reinvention strategies at the dawn of a new era. Though the fictional residents of Claybourne, Georgia have witnessed organizational decline, gender biases, and the failures of community-based coalitions, through Velma Henry's regeneration process Bambara provides an alternative to a moribund future. Members of the community define her as a wife, mother, goddaughter, sister, spy, organizer, activist, anarchist, and lately, a mentally imbalanced victim of disillusionment and frustration. As Velma breaks through her shell of instability and disbelief, her consciousness-raising experience renews her strength and determination to fight for the community. While the novel centers around her attempted suicide and the choices she has to make to "be well," in the end, Velma's instability and reticent behavior mirrors the plight of the community around her. Claybourne is representative of ruptured Black communities nationwide trying to survive past the new era. As a tireless political activist and champion of social justice, Velma embodies the internal confusion of the community and fools herself into believing the only viable solution is self-murder. But as one of the physicians notes, her

suicide "hadn't looked like a serious attempt anyway." Comparatively, the attempted

suicide of the Black community during 1975-1980 was not "serious," but a cry for help or

a desire to be rescued and heal after the pain and wounds of the "movement" years.

The men smoked and drummed their fingers on the tabletop

and the women went on writing... -<u>The Salt Eaters</u>

As examined in chapter two, organizational strength and gender politics are

variables that factor into a thorough examination of Afro-Politico Womanism as a viable

strategy for the reclamation and salvation of the Black community. *TSE,* as an Afro-

Politico Womanist novel, speaks to a growing concern in the late 1970s for the fate of the

Black community as the new decade approached. Among other things, Bambara explores

the possible dangerous outcomes of a community "excus[ing] the self from the chaos of

the moment, looking for a past or for a future as if there were no continuum, and no real

threat that energized and carried one" (Bambara 98). As a narrative that addresses mental

fatigue and hopelessness, the novel provides a remedy for the fledgling fictional

community that is representative of the challenges facing a highly individualistic post-

Civil Rights generation. The residents of Claybourne, Georgia are still reeling from a

decade of violence, broken promises, and collective death, but refuse to gravitate toward

each other. This lack of connection surface as broken relationships between Black men

and women in the community, similar to the "psychological problems" which result from

the inability for Black men to find employment and support their families, as well as an

increased emphasis on masculine ideals and gender roles (Beale 90).

As a compounded issue, the same angst reflected in interpersonal relationships manifests within community organizations and groups designed to aid in the continued progress of the Black community after the "official" end to the organized pursuit of racial equality and Civil Rights. Through poorly derived strategies for community building activists organizations employed men at the helm and women "behind the scenes." This formation became problematic when Black women chose to redefine their experiences from within and previously "silent"[52] women spoke up and out for what they saw as the destruction of the Black community at the mercy of phallocentric theory. Because Afro-Politico Womanism does not support the creation and/or reliance upon organizations with top-down leadership, it acknowledges the rise of Black women's collectives that work against a traditional hierarchical plan of community action. Among other initiatives, *TSE* explores the relentless fight against masculine rhetoric that function as constrictors of Black womanhood.

The novel enters into a longstanding discussion of Black women in the Black revolution. Whereas before theorists, novelists, activists, and writers discussed the roles Black women would "play," at the time *TSE* is written (1978-1980) the conversation has shifted to address the formation of separate women's alliances, female subjugation, and domestic violence within the Black community. Works like The Third Life of Grange Copeland; for colored girls who have considered suicide when the rainbow is enuf; Corregidora; Eva's Man; Sister X and the Victims of Foul Play; Black Macho and the Myth of the Superwoman and so forth. contributed to a larger social/political discussion of the Black woman as sexualized and racialized and the particular struggles she encountered as a result of "double jeopardy." In "Double Jeopardy: To Be Black and

Female" Frances Beale examines the unpopular position of the Black woman within American society. As a racialized "Other," she is unable to benefit from the same rights and privileges as her white counterparts. Similarly, as a woman she is relegated to the last rung of the economic ladder, the result being less pay for comparable work and disrespect at work and home. Beale writes,

> The economic system of capitalism finds it expedient to reduce women to
> a state of enslavement. They oftentimes serve as a scapegoat for the evils
> of this system…so, by giving to men a false feeling of superiority (at least
> in their own home or in their relationships with women), the oppression of
> women acts as an escape valve for capitalism. Men may be cruelly
> exploited and subjected to all sorts of dehumanizing tactics on the part of
> the ruling class, but they have someone who is below them—at least
> they're not women (Beale 94).

Likewise, Black women's consciousness-raising groups engaged in sociological studies and compiled information that spoke to an increasing need to consider the Black woman's position in the future of the community. Like Afro-Politico Womanism, these groups considered the various factors that influence Black women's community involvement and the multiple struggles that need to be addressed to ensure a healthy community. Examples include The Combahee River Collective; Patricia Robinson and Group; Adele Jones and Group; and the Black Women's Community Development Foundation.

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In *TSE,* one site of political contention is the gendered divide within organizations supposed to further the political power of the Black community. As these organizations garner mass attention and support, the ideological concepts regarding Black women's roles in organizations begin to support a systematic male hierarchy. Largely as a result of case studies on fledgling Black male superiority in the Black community, Black women were viewed as a hindrance to Black male leadership. In "Black Women and Black Power" Cynthia Griggs Fleming writes,

> For so long, Black Power advocates argued, black men had been virtually
>
> emasculated by white American society. Thus, they must assume
>
> leadership roles and reclaim their masculinity as a prerequisite to the
>
> empowerment of all black people. Some reasoned that men could only
>
> assume their rightful place, though, if women would step aside and stop
>
> interfering" (Fleming 207).

While women could remain "African queens," "goddesses" and "princesses," the actual positions they held as workers, mothers, and organizers were simultaneously abhorred and desired. Black men saw the end of the Civil Rights Movement (which was regarded as a weak and feminized movement in opposition to "Black Power") as the opportunity to save the Black community, confront "whitey," and govern Black women—all in one daring swoop. Unfortunately, this thinking produced sexism and misogyny within organizations; and women who had previously complemented the work of male leadership were disrespected and assaulted for their "overbearing" nature. Ironically, one finds the same male leaders remained dependent on their female leadership base to fulfill the revolutionary mission of the organizations. Tracye A. Matthews speaks to the

hypocrisy of the superior Black male when she quotes Maulana Karenga, leader of the US organization and proponent of cultural nationalism. Karenga states, "the role of the woman is to inspire her man, educate their children, and participate in social development…Equality is false; it's the devil's concept. Our concept is complementary. Complementary means you complete or make perfect that which is imperfect" (Karenga as qtd. in Matthews 235). For many, during this period of the revolutionary movement,[53] that which is imperfect is the Black man who apparently requires the full unbending devotion of Black women to survive, but the relationship cannot be egalitarian.

In the beginning of *TSE*, after the reader is introduced to Velma sitting in the infirmary debating her will to get well what appears as a series of dream sequences are actually flashbacks (and flashforwards) that represent the chaos that has brought Velma to her breaking point. Within this mélange of memories the reader learns that Velma harbors pain and anger from a past riddled with female self-sacrifice resulting from stratagems that advance male leadership in the community:

> Like going to jail and being forgotten, forgotten, or at least deprioritized
> cause bail was not as pressing as the printer's bill. Like raising funds and
> selling some fool to the community with his heart set on running for
> public office. Like being called in on five-minute notice after all the
> interesting decisions had been made, called in out of personal loyalty and
> expected to break her hump pulling off what the men had decided was
> crucial for the community good (Bambara 25).

Velma recalls the sacrifices she made not as a method of boasting or a call for retribution but as the impetus for the near fatal act that has placed her in the infirmary. The theme of

"too much to bear" runs throughout the novel and is attributed to the weight female

activists and organizers carried behind the scenes. Like Velma, women organizers during

the Black Power movement initially agreed that Black men "should be given more

leadership and responsibility," but understood that behind the rhetoric men had a long

way to go before they would be able to participate in all aspects (Fleming 206).

Bambara presents the umbrella community organization Velma is a member of as

one that includes men and women representing "colleagues, chums, frat brothers, soror

sisters, business partners, co-workers, neighbors" (Bambara 28). The members are

representative of groups indigenous to the Black community that have historical roots in

the uplift of the Black race and community action. According to sociologist Aldon

Morris, "mass protest is the product of the organizing efforts of activists functioning

through a well-developed indigenous base" (Morris xii). This base includes all aspects of

the community (money, churches, organizations, leaders, etc.) from which social

movements can be created and fostered. These "indigenous resources" are then

transformed into resources of power and political strength that provide the foundation for

organizational growth (xii). In the novel, when a "visitor" from the "Coalition of Black

Trade Unionists" addresses the group the women in the room exhibit their positions as

indigenous resources as they ensure the organization's growth and balance. Bambara

writes,

> Once again the women took up their pens. They listened to Hampden
>
> while calculating: money to be raised, mailing lists to be culled, halls to be

booked, flyers to be printed up, hours away from school, home, work,

sleep to be snatched. Not that he spoke of these things.

And later,

And while he urged them to grasp the significance of new alliances

shaping up against the Carter administration, the men smoked and

drummed their fingers on the tabletop and the women went on writing: so

many receptions to cater, tickets to print, chickens to fry, cakes to box,

posters to press…(27)

Bambara unabashedly critiques Black organizations designed to bolster the public face of

Black male leadership while taking for granted the work that is necessary to support the

organization from the ground up. The women understand the real work that has to

continue whether or not alliances are formed with other organizations. Later in the same

meeting, when the women rebel against the male leadership, it is Velma's responsibility

to vocalize why the usual "pattern" (women doing all the work why the men sit by and

stare) has to change. She speaks,

And we have yet to see any of you so much as roll up your sleeves to

empty an ashtray…Do you have a grant for one of us? Any government

contracts? Any no-work-all-pay posts at a college, those of you on boards?

…We shuttle back and forth to the airport, yawl drink at the bar. We

caucus, vote, lay out the resolutions, yawl drink at the bar. We're trying to

build a union, a guild, an organization. You are all welcome to continue

operating as a social club, but not on our time, okay? (37).

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Velma and the newly formed "Women for Action" find it necessary to establish their own organization separate from the men who are not seriously invested in the plight of the Black community. The choice to break from the larger collective speaks to the continued support Black women give the community within and outside of a time of crisis. As noted in the introduction of this project, continued activism often requires women to distance themselves from the egotistical battles between male "leaders" who remain more invested in their own causes. As Velma remembers these moments she continues to internalize the rupture between the male and female "workers" and stands somewhere in between trying to hold the pieces together.

In addition to exposing ills related to the failure of organizational solidarity, Bambara also references the connections between male/female relationships and the dangerous influence of capitalism and public policy. The ability of discriminatory and racialized government policies to disrupt the lives of its "minority" citizens exists as another topic of contention that contributes to disruptive gender relationships in the novel. Through the exploration of gender politics and the lower class community, Bambara addresses increased numbers of Black women on the welfare payroll, and the stigmatization of the Black welfare mother including illegitimacy, and dysfunctional relationships. She explores these weighty issues through the eyes of Meadows—a university trained medical specialist—as he walks through the streets of Claybourne. He is an outsider to the community, described as a fair-skinned Black man, having "red-gold hair of no less than five grades—curly in front, stringy in back, wavy around the ears, slick on top, and downright nappy in the center" (186). He realizes that he is "never more

clear to himself than when Black people examined him" (186). Later, while walking and

daydreaming he accidentally steps on a man's feet who in turn warns 'Watchit, honky!'

Meadows passionately retorts, 'Honky! You muthafuckin dumb bastard, don't you know

a Blood when you see one?'(186). Meadows is defensive about his "right" to be included

on the rolls of "Blackness," mocking the intelligence of a member of the Black lower

class because of his own insecurities regarding his identity. As he moves throughout the

community he becomes increasingly aware that it is his social and class difference that

forever places him on the opposite side of the Black underclass—not his skin color. As he

becomes aware of his surroundings he observes the poverty and desolation that engulf the

particular section of the community in which he has wandered. On his journey of

contemplation, observation, and reflection he encounters several inhabitants of the

neighborhood and immediately considers his temporary presence in this new locale as

juxtaposed with their everyday realities. He sees a woman wearing a housecoat, barking

dogs, the hulls of abandoned cars, and realizes that he has entered into a world from his

distant past:

> This was evidently where the poorer people lived. There were broken-
>
> down stoops that looked like city and leaning porches that looked like
>
> country. Houses with falling-away shutters and brick walkways that
>
> wouldn't make up their minds. Claybourne hadn't settled on its identity
>
> yet, he decided. Its history put it neither on this nor that side of the Mason
>
> Dixon. And its present seemed to be a cross between a little Atlanta, a big
>
> mount Bayou and Trenton, New Jersey, in winter (Bambara 181).

Meadows eyes the streets, homes, and people with a trained ethnographic eye, a participant observer who is separated from the fate of those around him by class and culture while simultaneously vying to be accepted within Black culture. Noting that "the block [was] so like his first a hundred lives ago," but at the same time acknowledging his disgust of the pathologies within the Black community that allowed the memories of poverty to remain relevant.

As Meadows hurries down the street he notes, "a dark-skinned man with a cap yanked low over an unruly bush." He quickly classifies him as a "welfare man," the men who made their living benefiting from mothers on welfare (182). The reader learns that Meadows "had seen them, made a study of them, knew the look, the posture," and as a result of his "studies" he abhors their presence and emasculated irresponsibility. These men alarm and frighten Meadows in the supermarkets "because the women were there, there and losing. And because he was there, there and helpless" (184). Meadows' observations enter into a public debate on Black masculinity, poverty, and the plight of the Black family. As a public policy, welfare aids in the dependency on a system of supplemental income—typified as income male members of the household are unable to contribute. The men, according to Meadows, in turn depend on their female partners and exist as "boymen"—perpetual children enacting infantile and irresponsible behavior:

In parks, on roofs, in bars, on stoops, but especially in supermarkets

running their whining line while the women reached round them for a can

of whatever was on sale. The boymen grabbing at their pocketbooks or
their arms and the women saying "Naw, man, gotta feed my kids…

…And by the time they got to the line and the welfare mamas were fishing
out the coupons, worn out with all the haggling, the boymen would lean in
for the kill, mashing their joints into the women, mashing the women into
the shopping arts, the mesh outlined on ass or hips, the purses clutched so
hard the vinyl tore. 'A dime, woman, a damn dime.' And the women,
defeated would dip into the coins and give it up, then look over the items
moving along the belt for the one thing the children might possibly do
without (183).

When outlining the socio-political variables that contribute to this project in
Chapter Two, I identified the highly controversial (and widely read) 1965 report on the
Black family compiled by then senator Patrick Moynihan (NY) as a source of
problematic gender relationships within the Black community during the Black
revolutionary era. Because several Black leaders allowed the Black family to be defined
from the outside, dangerous attitudes toward Black women surfaced and threatened unity
within the larger community. In the infamous "Moynihan report," Patrick Moynihan
contends that the "underlying cause of the rising welfare roles, the increased poverty,"
and high rates of Black male unemployment is the reversed gender roles within the Black
family (Crass 6). According to Moynihan, Black women are typically more educated and
economically independent while their men remain dependent, uneducated and chronically

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unemployed. What results from this degenerate family structure is the emasculation of

Black boys by the matriarch, the rejection of Black masculine "power," and the

proliferation of female-headed households (6).

In a general sense, the connections Moynihan makes between poverty, welfare

assistance, and the Black matriarch are illogical. For example, if Black woman are able to

support their families as a result of higher education and employment in white-collar

positions, as Moynihan posits, why is it necessary for these same women to receive

public assistance? Or, if the increase in poverty (and federally funded "handouts") results

from Black male depression and flight from their homes because of a domineering,

economically independent female partner, why not institute policies that would address

employment and education discrimination—the real root of the issue? Not only did the

federally supported report bring national attention to the issues of poverty and

dysfunction within the Black community, lawmakers were now able to shift the blame of

rising AFDC[54] costs to a pathology of poverty and despair which the government should

not be responsible for, in their opinion. In "Beyond Welfare Queens: developing a race,

class, and gender analysis of Welfare and Welfare Reform," Chris Crass writes,

> Moynihan argued that the Black family was a tangled web of pathologies.
> Drug addiction, self-hate, violence, lack of work ethic, dependency, out-
> of-wedlock, illegitimate babies and the teen mothers who can't take care
> of themselves let alone a child. These pathologies are the result of the
> breakdown of the Black family (Crass 7).

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The debates over who was to blame for the all of the aforementioned issues (pathologies, costs, dysfunction, and so forth) bled into the Black community and further alienated Black men and women within their relationships to each other. What Moynihan, his colleagues, and members of the Black community failed to acknowledge was by the 1960s "only 16 percent of nonwhite unwed mothers received ADC compared with 30 percent of white women" (Levenstein 10). Conveniently, the branding of lower class Black women as "welfare queens"—highly promiscuous women who produce hoards of children and make *their* living as recipients of welfare, fit into the already established stereotypes regarding Black women in the larger society. Levenstein cites negative press as another contributor to already problematic perceptions of a luxurious life for Black female welfare recipients. She writes:

> Newspapers did not report that 28 percent of ADC households in 1960
> lacked flush toilets and 17 percent had no running water. Instead, the
> media often portrayed life on welfare as so comfortable as to be addictive,
> failing to acknowledge that because of meager employment opportunities
> and government grants, at least one in seven ADC recipients also worked
> for wages outside the home (10).

The negative associations surrounding Black women's power, vulnerability, independence and dependence becomes the meeting place for white conservative backlash, federal debate, and slanderous statements made by Black leaders. Women are blamed for their abilities (to qualify for welfare, have children, to be educated, or to be

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independent) while Kay Lindsey observes the government is the real culprit citing: "the state has created an artificial family, in which it, via the welfare check, takes the place of the husband and can thus manipulate the 'family' more directly" (Lindsey 88). The intimacy of a strong relationship is absent within this manufactured family and as Meadows observes, the men and women he encounters in the supermarket do not even refer to each other by name (Bambara 185). They maintain a familiarity based on desperation and helplessness, not unity.

Additional outside influences contribute to strained gender relations among the Black masses. Whereas Black educated middle-class men are able assert their authority in leadership positions within civic organizations in the community and are respected for their knowledge and income; lower-class males do not have the same privileges. Like Bigger Thomas in Richard Wright's Native Son, street credibility and reckless acts as a form of respect becomes an accessible outlet for internal rage and frustration. Overall, the ways in which men and women interact with each other become dangerous and destructive for the health of the family and community structures. In "Is the Black Male Castrated?" Jean Carey Bond and Patricia Peery acknowledge the tumultuous relationships between Black men and women. They write:

> After all, the cat who sponges off of you, knocks you around every now
> and then, and maybe leaves you, is Black, not white. By the same token,
> the chick who tells you this is her money, she made it, and you can just get
> the hell out, is Black, not white. But we are, in fact, focusing only on the
> trees when we expend time and energy in this senseless and debilitating

family squabble while the real culprits stand laughing in the wings (Bond

and Peery115).

What Bond and Peery identify is a Marx-influenced critique of the connection between

the state and female subjugation. The authors note the damage inflicted on interpersonal

relationships when hegemonic ideology of the state oppresses male members of the

proletariat. In turn, these members recreate acts of oppression and domination within the

home, and as Ruby, another female character in *TSE* articulates, "all the unresolved stuff

slops over into man/woman relationships" (Bambara 199).

"Scattered, fragmented, uncoordinated mess...and nothing changing" –Ruby

As the women and men struggle through the challenges that lie ahead, another

area of contention that adds to Claybourne's chaos is the overall subsistence of the

community. The attempts at reconstruction and progress are displayed by organization

building, the embrace of tradition, incorporating nationalist ideologies into systems of

community government, and the prevention of "big business" from infiltrating the small

town. Ironically, the various attempts to address the aforementioned issues lead to further

disunity among community groups and members. Each organization wants its specific

need met, leaving little room for coalition building and/or the collapsing of ideas under a

larger umbrella cause. In a telling scene, Velma's husband Obie, who works at a

community center called "the Academy" (7 Arts), makes observations about the

reoccurring ideological schisms in the community. He notes:

It was starting up again, the factions, the intrigue. A replay of all the old

ideological splits: 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 action. Camps were forming threatening

to tear the Academy apart…The masseuse, karate master, the language

teachers and the resident reggae band feeling more than estranged were

asking, Whatever happened to Third World Solidarity? (90-91).

What Obie notes in the 1970s is familiar to him because the same issues resulted in

disaster for the Black community in the 1960s. The fact that "it was starting up again"

alludes to the revival of latent tensions between groups. Each groups' solution to the

internal challenges is indicative of the "war of words" fought between Cultural and

Revolutionary Nationalists as discussed in chapter three of this project. Each nationalist

group believes their methods of action are the only way the Black masses will progress

and prosper.

Not surprisingly, the nationalist debate also appears in the novel, but on a much

larger level. Whereas with Song of Solomon and Meridian I read the nationalist discourse

as primarily a vehicle within the Black community, in *TSE* Bambara reflects the changing

face of the nationalist question. Obie considers the grass-roots work that needs to be done

in the community and how the next move was to complete the work that the Lowndes

County Freedom Party started,[55] and "mobilize the people to form and support a Black

political party before it was too late" (91). In addition to the needs of the Blacks he also

recognizes the connections that need to be made with similar political groups of color like, the "Puerto Rican Nationalist Party," the La Raza Unida groups," "the American Indian Movement" along with a "loose, informal network of medicine people throughout the communities of color to be lifted up and formalized" (91). Obie's focus on coalition building reflects the changing politics of the era.

By 1970 certain revolutionary nationalist organizations recognized that the fight against oppression was a worldwide struggle for all people of color. During this period Third World scholars like Frantz Fanon were embraced for research on the psychological effects of colonization on colonized people. Also public outcry against the U.S. government-lead terrorism of the Vietnamese people, the defeat of the American military, and the subsequent ending of the Vietnam War, shone the light on worldwide oppression as a result of an existing capitalist paradigm. In The Black Panthers Speak, Phillip Foner outlines the Black Panther Party's aims of building a coalition between groups that address the needs of oppressed minorities. He notes that the Black Panther Party formed alliances with groups who modeled their community programs after the Party (Foner 219). Examples of these groups include the Puerto Rican "Young Lords;" the Chicano "Brown Berets;" the "Young Patriots" who focused on poor whites; and the Chinese-American "Red Guards" (Foner 219). Unfortunately, what Obie and Velma face when trying to unite divergent factions in their home community and align them with similar groups, is a return to the pervasive "gender wars," and discontent among organizations internal to the Black community. They encounter heavy resistance on the part of "the Brotherhood," who are not eager or willing to allow the "Women of Action" to merge with their organization. The constant bickering and dissention among like factions results

in a "Babel of paths, of plans" that hinders effective political mobilization and/or progress. As seen with the various organizations within the Black revolutionary period, vital issues become buried beneath the self-interest of individual groups and leaders.

The "scattered" community is further represented through the warnings and wise words of the "elders" who work within the physical and spiritual realm to protect Velma from herself and also comment on the inevitable outcome of the chaotic community. As Minnie Ransom tries to bring Velma back from her self-imposed mental exile, she holds a psychic conversation with her spirit guide (Old Wife) that ends in a diatribe against the carelessness of the "new people," or present generation. Like an elder surveying the actions of her family, Minnie shakes her head at the "children" who threaten the sanctity of the Black community. She remarks,

Soon's they old enough to start smelling theyselves, they commence to looking for blood amongst the blood. Cutting and stabbing and facing off an daring and dividing up and suiciding…Everybody all up in each other's face with a whole lotta who struck John—you ain't correct, well you ain't cute, and he ain't right and they ain't scientific and yo mama don't wear no drawers and get off my suedes, and he hit me, and she quit me, and this one's dirty, and that one don't have a degree, and on and on (46).

Like those who subscribe to a postmodern ideal, the new breed of Black people is not invested in upholding the traditions and common goals that kept the Black community together in the past. In addition to people like Meadows, who have become removed from

the plight of the Black community and can only observer from afar, the individuals that comprise the masses themselves are "looking for blood amongst the blood," and willing to destroy those around them to further independent and capitalistic goals. According to the elders in the novel, people have forgotten how to be whole and well and therefore, individuals cannot fully participate as part of a cultural unit—hence the insistence on self-destruction (107).

"In the last quarter, sweetheart, anything can happen. And will."—Minnie Ransom

Velma Henry is the link that holds the novel together. Through her experiences, mental and physical depression, and unwillingness to bear the heavy burden of an ailing community, the reader sees her choice to survive within the larger context of an idealistic vision for the contemporary community. Velma's character is integral to the narrative because she embodies the Black activist whose own well-being is connected to the political strength of the masses. As an example of the Afro-Politico Womanism agenda, Velma works tirelessly within the community and does not align herself with divided ideological camps. Her experiences fall between cultural nationalist beliefs in liberation through the embrace of African traditional healing and the emphasis on a political revolution that would restructure contemporary society. Velma's attempt at suicide provides a temporary release from a chaotic and disjointed community and allows her to reinvent herself and return whole:

> And in time Velma would find her way back to the roots of life. And in
> doing so, be a model. For she'd found a home amongst the community

workers who called themselves 'political.' And she'd found a home

amongst the workers who called themselves 'psychically adept.' But

somehow she'd fallen into the chasm that divided the two camps. Maybe

that was the lesson. Maybe the act of trying to sever a vein or climbing

into the oven was like going to the caves, a beginning…(147-8).

Velma's physical and mental changes throughout the novel precede a defining moment in

her life and the life of the community. As she struggles to find her way back and

understand the reasons for her breakdown, the reader learns about Minnie Ransom's

bouts of "madness" before she realized her gift for spiritual healing. As a young woman,

Minnie embarked on a spiritual journey those around her failed to understand. She was

representative of the town's successes, an upstanding member of the community until she

returned from the north "on the train lying down." Bambara writes, "They called her

batty, fixed, possessed, crossed, in deep trouble…the sight of Minnie Ransom down on

her knees eating dirt, craving pebbles and gravel, all asprawl in the road with her clothes

every which way—it was too much to bear" (51). Eventually, Minnie realizes that it was

necessary for her to shirk the materialism and manufactured traditions that defined her up

to that point, in order to realize her true calling. Though others in the community believed

her actions to be an omen of death or possession, Minnie finds that the process was about

"a gift unfolding" (53). This gift is the power to heal those who have disconnected from

the earth, traditions, and spirituality—the only method of remaining whole in a

fragmented society.

Velma experiences similar "fits of madness" before she slits her wrists and places her head in the oven in an attempt to silence the voices inside. She considers suicide the most viable method of escaping herself and the pressures of a community that does not want to save itself. Her husband (Obie) recalls her strangeness before the attempted suicide,

> But *she* couldn't relax. Not Velma. Walking jags, talking jags, grabbing his arm suddenly and swirling her eyes around the room, or collapsing in the big chair, her head bent over…And at night, holding her, he felt as though he were holding on to the earth in a quake, the ground opening up, the trees toppling, the mountains crumbling, burying him (162).

What ultimately scares Velma (and Obie) is the same process that Minnie goes through as a young woman. The key to the earth shaking upset of her life is the gift unfolding—the ability to be a conduit of healing and salvation for the sick. As a community activist, Velma receives the gift so she will be well equipped to aid in her community's healing and growth as the "last quarter" of the era approaches. Like others in the community, she believed that the work she needed to do in the 1970s would be focused more on repairing the damage done to the 60s generation. What she finds is that the theoretical solutions to the problems facing the Black community did not "take." "Time was running out anyhow" and the masses were spiraling toward a destructive reality that required a full-scale reinvention rather than damage repair (258).

As a novel of healing and self-reclamation, *TSE* suggests a remedy for a (fl)ailing

southern community scarred by failed liberation efforts and post-Civil Rights nihilism. It

is significant that the novel is set in the American South, not only because of slavery's

legacy and the connection to an African spiritual history, but also because the south as the

point of first contact and contention is the logical region where healing must begin. The

southern region as Promised Land and utopia in the 1970s was a prominent theme in

many cultural and political deliberations on the site of a new Black revolution. In a 1970

essay titled "Looking Back" by Helen Cade Brehon she writes, "After looking back over

the years I am certain that the greatest strides, the greatest changes, will be seen in the

South. The people in the South have tolerated more, so they are more fed-up, disgusted,

and will act" (Brehon 231). Helen Cade Brehon echoes hopeful and idealistic sentiments

about the future of the "revolution" in the midst of uncertainty about positive change. The

city of Claybourne is representative of the collective healing that needs to take place in

Black communities nationwide. When the combined efforts of those affected by social

ills, tumultuous relationships, and general discontent within a capitalist, racist, and sexist

context can rejoin and return to spiritual-based traditions—a true metamorphosis can

occur. Black women writers during the rise of Postmodernism (and the fall of the Black

communalism) visualized a better tomorrow that would liberate their communities from

pathological destruction and reconnect relationships. Bambara anticipates a collective

shedding of current evils as the horizon appears, and the masses emerge from "a burst

cocoon" (295).

CHAPTER 6

CONCLUSION

"SOMETHING THAT'S BEEN UP HAS TO COME DOWN":

GLOBAL BLACK CONSCIOUSNESS AT THE DAWN OF A NEW ERA

The debate over the social and political responsibility of Black artists is inherent to conceptions of the Black aesthetic. Not surprisingly, the largely androcentric discussions about the functions of protest literature fail to speak to a complete representation of Black art. In protest literature written by black women, the social, political, economic, and personal standpoint of the marginalized subject provides possibilities for continued activism on behalf of the larger community.

- Kalenda C. Eaton

From this it becomes clear that as long as blacks are suffering from an inferiority complex—a result of 300 years of deliberate oppression, denigration, and derision—they will be useless as co-architects of a normal society where man is nothing else but man for his own sake.

-Steven Biko

As seen in the critical analyses of <u>Song of Solomon</u> and <u>Meridian</u>, <u>The Salt Eaters</u> is a cautionary tale for an uncertain future. In the novel, the survival of the community depends on Velma's decision to continue fighting for everyone around her, including herself. In addition to a solitary female protagonist working within the community, Toni Cade Bambara places Minnie Ransom and Velma together. They feed off each other, as one needs the other in order to survive. Symbolically, Minnie as an elder cannot let Velma go because as a member of the younger generation Velma holds the key to Claybourne's survival. Through her confused dream state, Velma realizes that it is Minnie's traditional healing practices keeping her alive. Thus, the old and the young within the community must work together to combat the external evil that seeks to destroy progressive action. This realization is significant when thinking about the tenuous connections between cultural and revolutionary nationalism and the ideologies upon which they are based. Cultural nationalism is steeped in the concept of a return to ancestral traditions and the recognition of African retentions (i.e. the "old"), and Revolutionary nationalism embraces a coming revolution fueled by the collective force of people of color worldwide (i.e. the "new"). The underlying argument of <u>The Salt Eaters</u> and the lesson to be learned as a result of the rift between nationalisms is: one cannot survive without the other.

A similar lesson is learned in <u>Song of Solomon.</u> Though probably the least utopian of the three novels, there is encouragement in the fact that Milkman Dead comes alive after connecting with his past in the form of his aunt Pilate and the eventual quest on which he embarks. The lessons he learns resulting from his obsession "with things behind him" affect how he handles present realities and his goals for the future. Like

Velma, Milkman and Pilate face a community on the brink of an uncertain future. Though the community is isolated from the rest of the world, the damaging effects of hopelessness, poverty, and despair fill the streets and produce a restless tension. Instead of channeling the energy toward community empowerment and change, both Guitar and Milkman, as representations of revolutionary and cultural nationalism, choose to continue a senseless fight. Guitar wants to kill Milkman over allegedly stolen "gold" and Milkman in turn wants Guitar's life because he threatens his own and the lives of those around him. Thus, the war continues and in the end each leaps forward to a probable death. Again, not choosing to live for the future, but die over personal conflicts of the present.

In <u>Meridian</u> the title character does not differentiate between past and present. Both merge as Walker presents them—vignettes intertwined and closely related. Meridian's willingness to see the struggles of the people in the communities around her as existing on a continuum of political and social responsibility, places her at odds with the rest of the world, but at peace with herself. The novel's future rests in her continued activism and the return of those who escaped the oppression of Southern racism and injustice. For Meridian, she cannot move on until her former brothers and sisters in the struggle understand that their place is with those masses left behind in a mad dash to reach the elusive finish line.

Other connections between the texts are the fact that locales where either the protagonist or the community itself undergoes a transformation are all geographically situated in the American South. In turn, each community harbors some form of chaos and/or disillusionment that prevents it from moving forward. Whether it is the fear and poverty that exists within the small southern communities that Meridian "visits," the

postmodern fragmentation that permeates the neighborhoods in Bambara's Claybourne,

Georgia, or the secluded and indifferent community of Virginia that holds the key to

Milkman's past, present, and future—the communities need a breakthrough. As a result

of the social climate in the small towns, the protagonists function as repositories of

possible solutions to the problems facing dying communities in the post-Civil Rights era.

As texts that can be read under the Afro-Politico Womanism paradigm, Song of

Solomon, Meridian, and The Salt Eaters contain pointed critiques of class structures,

organizational leadership, and the absence of collective action within the Black

community. The characters analyzed above, as well as the communities in which they

reside represent a larger connection to the political history of Black America. As stated in

Chapter Two of this project, the connections between politics and art are significant,

especially when used as tools for reclamation and change within a Black socio-political

context. This project suggests the endless possibilities for change once the community as

a cohesive unit is prepared and willing to address the needs of the collective. While the

aims of this hopeful reasoning may appear idealistic and unrealistic, Afro-Politico

Womanism as a way of understanding the needs within the community provides space to

use an alternate lens when defining the failures and successes of the Civil Rights and

immediate post-Civil Rights era. Through close readings of the novels offered in this

study, one can see the revolutionary dreams of the authors as utopist visions for the

future.

Afro-Politico Womanism represents several aims for understanding the methods

by which activists (recognized and unrecognized) conduct practical "work" within the

post-Civil Rights Black community. "Community" is used to define the general body of

Black citizens who have historically been excluded from reaping social "gains" from the Movement. Traditionally, the masses (as they are often deemed) are left out of the decision-making processes and are unable to attain the political power necessary to advance their collective situations due to the failures of leadership. As a community-based approach, the concept works within pre-existing internal structures, eliminating a focus on issues external to the needs of a multidimensional community. This emphasis on available internal resources seeks to eliminate the usurpation of power by those deemed more "qualified." The model assumes an understanding of various culturally and racially specific experiences and personal histories that comprise the whole. As a literary theory, Afro-Politico Womanism provides options for understanding the genre of revolutionary narratives and literatures of the Black Aesthetic.

Though the focus of literary analyses in this project were novels written by Black women, it is possible to read comparable Black revolutionary era fiction written by Black men through the same lens. Examples include John Edgar Wideman's The Lynchers (1973) in which "the masses" are depicted as lost and uncertain, like those in The Salt Eaters. Significantly, the protagonist of the novel is a middle class Black man who has decided *to* return to the poor and working class community in an effort to further political mobilization. Other offerings include Sam Greenlee's earlier novel, The Spook Who Sat By the Door (1969). This novel also critiques the return of the Black middle class to a struggling and ignored Black community, this time in a feigned attempt at political mobilization.

Global Connections

In addition to diverse authors and protagonists that can work within this model, Afro-Politico Womanism can be readily applied to an understanding of the Black community and attempts at political mobilization within the African Diaspora. While it is dangerous to assume a commonality of experiences, it is important to understand cultural connections that exist between postcolonial countries in Africa, the Caribbean, and the Americas. In "Together" Black Women, Inez Smith Reid provides historical background for a 1970s specific understanding of Black Power as it relates to a global consciousness. She quotes Kwame Nkrumah (former president of Ghana). He writes,

> I see [Black Power] in the United States as part of the vanguard of world revolution against capitalism, imperialism, and neocolonialism which have enslaved, exploited and oppressed peoples everywhere, and against which the masses of the world are now revolting…It operates throughout the African continent, in North and South America, the Caribbean, wherever Africans and the people of African descent live. It is linked with the Pan-African struggle for unity on the African continent, and with all those who strive to establish a socialist society (Reid 258-9).

Nkrumah identifies American bred Black Power as a critical component of Diasporic liberation. For many, global acceptance of Black Power was a means of acquiring complete and total freedom from hegemonic superstructures that work under a capitalist

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paradigm. Black Power and the coming Black revolution raised political consciousness in countries where Blacks outnumbered whites by large percentages, but were suffering under the yoke of colonial traditions (i.e. segregation, racism, and genocide).

A prime example of the Black Power movement's (BPM) international reach is the formation of the Black Consciousness movement (BCM) in South Africa, shortly after the rise of Black Power.[56] Both movements were similar in their desires and demands of civil rights and justice for the persecuted Black community. Regarding the racial constructs surrounding the Black Consciousness movement Robert Fatton Jr. writes, "The development of Black Consciousness as a counter-consciousness, channeling the unified positions of the black population to the dominance of the white core, became a fundamental and necessary ingredient in the process of challenging white supremacy"(Fatton 40). By the late 1960s and early 1970s South Africa's history of political, social, and racial division was acknowledged worldwide. Social protests led by students as well as cross-cultural dialogues with civil rights leaders in foreign countries brought overdue attention to the discriminatory systems known as Apartheid. The economic situation in South Africa was largely dependent on segregationist practices and the denial of equal rights to all South Africans. For years, facets of colonial rule divided the nation while significant overseas export and import solidified the apparent worldwide acceptance of government-sanctioned injustice.

The racial conditions in South Africa differed greatly from the common notions of oppression and racism to which Black Americans were accustomed. Though South Africa's history of colonization, trade, and miscegenation also resulted in a diverse "Black" population, the racial classifications did not represent the same black/white

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dichotomy that was seen in America. While White, Asian, Black, and "Coloured" (offspring of black and white parents) South Africans are regarded as Africans, there exists an established hierarchy that offered certain privileges to a chosen few.[57] In South Africa, White South Africans (Afrikaaners) held minority rule within the country while Asian (majority Indian) and Coloured South Africans were often de-racialized. Robert Fatton, Jr. defines "de-racialization" as the process "whereby certain concessions which do not endanger the existing structures of dominance are to be extended to the better-off sectors of the black population" (Fatton 33). For years, this preferred treatment was the cause for much indifference on the part of formally organized social factions. For example, the question of whether to accept fellow minorities produced a negative answer for Africanism, which preceded the Black Consciousness Movement (BCM). In the 1960s as the social and political climate in South Africa began to change yet again, members of the BCM attempted to broaden their racial horizons and pushed for a redefinition of blackness. While this new classification still did not include "white liberals," it was less exclusive than others. Fatton writes:

> Indeed, the notion of 'blackness' which decisively molded the
> Movement's outlook was embedded in both the consequences of being
> black in a white supremacist state and the realities of material exploitation
> derived from a racial capitalism. As such, the concept 'black' came to
> encompass all of the exploited, irrespective of their Africanness. Asians
> and "Coloureds"…were previously regarded with skepticism and
> ambiguity by the Africanists, but were fully integrated into the Black

Consciousness Movement provided they accepted their blackness.

Moreover, the term 'black' was not attributed to all Africans. In fact, the

Movement reserved the pejorative term 'non-white' to define those

Africans, Asians and Coloureds who collaborated with white authorities

(Fatton 32).

During the BCM, "Blackness" had less to with physical description or racial background and more to do with a shared socio-political situation and the willingness to fight against colonial rule. As Fatton continues to say, "Being African was not a sufficient condition to qualify as a black; to be black implied a determined antagonism to apartheid and the political will to eradicate it" (32). It is important to note that this "determined antagonism" did not refer to "white liberal" aims to fight for the rights of the oppressed South African. This denial of the struggle to lower class and/or sympathetic whites is also seen in the ideologies of the BPM in America. The common notion that all whites were "a part of the system" prevented any cross-cultural dialogue between the black and white races (Snail 244).

As seen in Black American political advancement there existed the privileged few among Black South Africans who benefited from positions of privilege within the white society. These "assimilationists," were categorically ridiculed for their lack of vision, direction, and loyalty to their race; and, therefore, excluded from association with the BCM. Again Fatton notes, "the cultural hegemony of white liberal and white bourgeois lifestyles made it difficult for several generations of African nationalists to radically oppose a system to which they owed many loyalties and allegiances" (2). This embedded

pathology is what consciousness movement leaders in Africa and America worked to eradicate. Also similar to the Black revolutionary movement in mid 20th century America, the BCM emerged after the older, more traditional forms of resistance were banned and/or died out. The movement was comprised of black South African youth and had a more radical agenda.[58] Like the young leaders of organizations within the BPM, the primary goal was consciousness-raising within the Black community. Initially, the leadership understood that the primary obstacle facing the global Black community was an enslaved psyche that survived slavery and colonization. As analyzed in Chapter Two, cognitive liberation as a basic variable in the foundation of collective action and political mobilization works to dispel myths and eliminate fear, as it provides the cornerstone of liberation movements. Instilling the levels of awareness and consciousness and eliminating fear are at the basic levels of change. In a moment of reflection on the progress of the movement Biko writes:

> We have been successful to the extent that we have diminished the element of fear in the minds of the black people. In the period '63-'66 black people were terribly scared of involvement in politics…But since those days, black students have seen their role as being primarily to prepare themselves for leadership roles in the various facets of the black community...many black people have come to appreciate the need to stand up and be counted against the system (Biko 145).

The call for a unified Black nation was deemed a necessity in the struggle for Black

South African liberation, and this same ideal was being identified worldwide. The BCM

in South Africa is one example of the movements that parallel the Black revolutionary

period in America. The importance of the connection has more to do with the shared

experiences of Black people on a global landscape and how similar mobilization tactics

arise when the masses decide to revolt against systems of political oppression.

In keeping with the aims of this project it is equally necessary to acknowledge

literary offerings written by Black female novelists that depict the Black postcolonial

community in turmoil. The international authors provide thorough depictions of Black

life outside an American context and provide critiques similar to those seen in the works

of Alice Walker, Toni Cade Bambara, and Toni Morrison. The "Third World" women

critique the external gaze on the Black masses by the Black middle class, provide

representations of attempts at betterment through internally defined political action, as

well as examine gendered debate in their communities. Examples include works by

female novelists representing Africa and the Caribbean. Buchi Emecheta (Nigeria), Ellen

Kuzwayo (South Africa), Besse Head (South Africa), Erna Brodber (Jamaica), and Paule

Marshall (Barbados/America) are a few who have produced work addressing

organizational strength, cognitive liberation, gender politics, and political mobilization—

on an international scale.

In conclusion, I read Paule Marshall's Black revolutionary era novel, <u>The Chosen

Place, The Timeless People</u> (1969) as another offering that can be read according to an

understanding of the aims and goals of Afro-Politico Womanism. I chose Marshall to end

this discussion on global consciousness and political connections because of her

multidimensional relationship to Black America and the Caribbean. As a Black author,

Marshall holds an interesting place within a larger conceptualization of what it means to

be "post-colonial." She is a hybrid of sorts, a child born and raised in America by parents

who emigrated from Barbados. She has stated that her childhood memories are of a

tightly knit and insular Barbadian community in New York. Though she lived in

America, the members of her maternal community did not see a connection between their

experiences and the "shared" history and experiences of the American Black population,

and therefore, both groups lived worlds apart. Marshall's writings primarily focus on the

connections between the Caribbean and America, often with a Black American

protagonist finding her way through a "return" to an African past. Often that past surfaces

in African survivals or retentions in insulated southern communities, trips to the

multivalent Caribbean, or dreams of traveling to an African or Caribbean "home."

"…[C]reaking with the regularity of a metronome as it spun on its axis"
–The Chosen Place, The Timeless People

The Chosen Place, The Timeless People (CPTP) provides an examination of life

on fictional Bourne Island, where indigenous Blacks separate themselves according to

color, caste, and British education. Those who live in "Bournehills," the antiquated and

underdeveloped portion of the island represent the poor and working classes, while those

residing in other sections of the island comprise the middle-class and foreign dignitaries.

Island industry is a throwback to one hundred years of British rule and colonization,

when Bourne Island was a major contributor to the sugar industry. Sugarcane remains

cultivated by Bournehills residents and the island's economic stability rests on foreign

investors, tourism, and humanitarian projects. For example, as the novel opens, the reader is introduced to Saul, his wife Harriet, and Allen, white American delegates from the Center for Applied Social Research (CASR), an organization interested in "helping" the poor in Bournehills progress socially and economically.

Racial constructions on the island are similar to that in other nations formerly under the yoke of colonization. The skin colors of the indigenous Bourne islanders ranges from white, near white, brown, black, and blue. The lighter shades are a direct reminder of a colonial past of miscegenation, sexual exploitation, and control. As a result of this troubled colonial history, many of Bournehills residents still bear the last name of Duncan Vaughan, an English planter who attempted to populate the entire island with his seed. He is described as having "sired the last of the forty children he had had from the black women who worked on his estate at the age of seventy-five and then died six months before it was born" (Marshall 69).

The reader is introduced to the individual lives and stories of the people in Bournehills through the eyes of Merle Kinbona, a woman who is the voice of the people. Like her surname suggests, she represents the "family goods" of a community that is unable and often unwilling to speak for themselves. Her origins are in Bournehills, though she has traveled and lived abroad for a number of years. Merle, like few others, chose to return to her *native land*[59] in an effort to save herself and "the Little Fella," (the masses). Her personal experiences abroad haunt her and she frequently has "breakdowns" and periodically secludes herself from others (117). Deemed a champion of the community, she is the listening ear and political voice of those around her and is described as single-handedly representing "the entire spurned and shameless lot" (67).

As seen in <u>Meridian</u> with Truman Held's accomodationist nature, and the

references in <u>Song of Solomon</u> to the selfish and cold-hearted Macon Dead, the Black

elite on the island has also severed their social bond with the masses. In their eyes, the

people in the poor community are unworthy of the "special" treatment and external

resources funneled into the community by external corporations. The reader learns that

aside from the current presence of CASR on the island, in the past several groups and

organizations from abroad have attempted to aid in community progress. At the welcome

reception for Saul and the rest of the CASR crew, the upper crust of the island warn the

visitors against "those people" in "the hills." The prominent "Black men" who "call[ed]

to mind some slightly outmoded, upper-class Victorian gentlemen of the turn of the

century," castigate the masses for their non-progressive attitudes toward building a better

future. One attendee explains:

> …You don't know that place. There's no changing or improving it. You
>
> people could set up a hundred development schemes at a hundred million
>
> each and down there would remain the same…[T]he small farmers' co-
>
> operative government tried starting there a few years back…nearly caused
>
> a war down there…Work their crops together? Share with each other? Not
>
> those people. The poor co-operative officer had to run for his life (56).

And later,

> …I tell you, Bournehills is someplace out of the Dark Ages…And the
>
> television set that British firm gave them for the social center played one

day and then mysteriously broke down…the jukebox from America didn't

last a week…There's no understanding those people, I tell you!

Saul ignores their negative attitudes and condescending manner toward those "beneath"

them and later acknowledges, "God, the middle class is the same the world over" (74).

What is important to note is the faulty logic used to "understand" the actions of "those

people." In a show of solidarity, the men at the reception attempt to warn Saul against a

significant monetary loss if he places too much emphasis on restructuring the Bournehills

community. What is lost in this exchange is the reason for the repeated rejection of

foreign aid, methods of crop production, and/or entertainment. For the residents of

Bournehills to completely benefit from any external resources, they understand that the

needs of the community must be defined internally. Including the emphasis on co-

operative crop production, the items mentioned above are speculative desires and do not

speak to the wishes of the people. In "Urban Social Movements, 'Race' and

Community," Paul Gilroy provides an analysis of "the political and cultural vitality" of

Black British social movements. In the essay he writes of the disparity between the larger

community and the goals of the leaders. He explains,

> Community is as much about difference as it is similarity and identity. It is
>
> a relational idea which suggests…the idea of antagonism—domination
>
> and subordination between one community and another. The word directs
>
> analysis to the boundary between these groups. It is a boundary which is
>
> presented primarily by symbolic means and therefore a broad range of

meanings can co-exist around it reconciling individuality and

commonality and competing definitions of what the movement is about.

The political rhetoric of leaders is, after all, not a complete guide to the

motivations and aspirations of those who play a less prominent role

(Gilroy 415).

Though written with a Black British context, Gilroy's analysis of community and the

existence of "competing definitions" for political action fit into most examinations of

internally defined movement goals. What the island leaders fail to realize is that the

stubborn resistance of the Bournehills residents is representative of a cultural history of

survival and liberation on their own terms.

The islanders hold on to the resilience of their forefather "Cuffee Ned" who led

the only successful slave revolt on the island, and burned the crops with a fire that lasted

"five days," (a contested number that provides scenes of comic relief in the novel). It

was not until the British planters captured 'Ned' and placed his head on a stake for all the

islanders to see, that they were able to subdue the revolutionaries' actions. But as one

hears in the oft-told history throughout the text, the significance of the revolt is what

drives the islanders. They find comfort in knowing that one of their own took control

over his own destiny in an attempt to lead his people to freedom. Therefore, today the

Bournehills residents exist as a nation within a nation defining their own lives. By

refusing aid/gifts from England and America, they prevent the possibility of external

government rule by those neo-colonizing nations that seek to conquer and control what

was once theirs. Though the Black leaders on the island disagree with Bournehills

methods and consider the community "lost" and ignorant, as Gilroy explains above, the "motivations and aspirations" of the masses are not readily understood by (or even aligned with) a leadership base that remains separate from the community. For Bournehills, to rise, the people must define their terms. Likewise, it is not until the end of the novel that even Saul can understand the lessons the people in Bournehills are trying to teach those who infiltrate from the outside. In a conversation with Merle, he thinks about how programs like the one funded by CASR can be more effective. He states, "I'm more than ever convinced now that that's the best way: to have people from the country itself carry out their own development programs whenever possible. Outsiders just complicate the picture" (467).

Shortly before Saul leaves the island and Merle goes to find her estranged family in Africa, the people begin to organize. Through cooperative efforts, the research team is successful in getting the residents interested in a citizen's council that could be instrumental in addressing grievances. Also, the council would enable the residents to elect representatives who could truly "speak" on behalf of the Bournehills district. This success should not be read as solely attributed to Saul's presence on the island, or Merle's encouragement, though both factors are important. Like the sweeper who speaks to Truman in the first scene of Meridian, Bournehills has "seen rights come and has seen 'em go," but in the end, they are left with the reassurance that they can realize their dreams of economic and political freedom through their own efforts—without a leader-focused agenda. Merle is able to leave at this moment, because she knows the people will survive whether or not they perform according to prescribed notions of "freedom." As a people, they maintain self-sufficiency.

<u>Coda</u>

On a national and international level, the West refuses to be implicated in the systematic destruction of communities of color worldwide. Typically, for Black Americans, the key identifiers of continued oppression are racism and economic discrimination within a capitalist context. Negative perceptions, stigmatization, and overall fear plague the legacy of Black people worldwide due to the troubled history between Africa, America, and Europe dating to the trans-Atlantic slave trade and the profits of American slavery. The specifics of the accusations are not novel and many have argued for repatriation during the post-bellum years and reparations for Black Americans in the contemporary years.

In large part, the context of this project rests with destroyed idealism post-Civil Rights and the lasting legacy affecting the current state of Black America. In all the novels presented in this dissertation, there is a slight sense of loss associated with the community and individual women's lives. This act of foreboding works as an omen of disappearing Black activism—a desire to remain invested in saving Black lives through the connection to the community, even after everyone else has gone home. The female activists who support the Afro-Politico Womanist agenda "step up" to the task at hand while the appointed leadership is away debating the next course of action. Overall, the novels in this study end with a question mark for the future. At the end of twenty-six

years of national political unrest, no one knew what the future held for the Black community. The community was truly at a crossroads.

Since the chronological end of this study (1980), Black communities across the nation were thrown into utter chaos resulting from misguided conservative agendas and internal division. During the tumultuous 1980s, (or the Reagan-era) a stark rise in crime, violence, death, drug use, and poverty plagued urban Black communities. Federal legislative debates over the fate of the "welfare queen" and the "crack addict" did little to actively address genocide within inner-city neighborhoods—especially since the misnomers were racialized and gendered in an attempt to further demonize the minority communities. Also, during this period, aside from (or rather as a result of) white conservative backlash, members of the Black middle class turned an otherwise paternalistic eye away from poor and working class communities and placed their hope in a new day.

The affects of abandonment on the masses were further disillusionment, desperation, and despair. In a much earlier time, the community had seen this before. The turn of the twentieth century ushered in the "New Negro" who represented an educated elite, severely distant from the Black proletariat he represented in the national arena. Likewise, as one looks to the Civil Rights era, the roster is filled with the names of prominent figures and leaders who fought alongside the members of the community, only to leave them behind when the destination appeared near. Whereas before, the Black community was largely intertwined and internally supported, the "new day" brought external leadership, realignment of political loyalties, and a resurgence of the Black intellectual—focused on assessing from the outside, rather than working from within.

Afro-Politico Womanism speaks to the need for the continued emphasis on Black mobilization and community action in poor and working class communities as defined by the people, without a reliance on the individual leader internal or external to the movement. In addition to political action, Afro-Politico Womanism understands that the community needs to heal relationships and move out from under an oppressive web of psychological trauma. I end with the following sentiments made by Merle Kinbona in The Chosen Place, The Timeless People about her present condition. The statements are significant because they aptly mirror the dilemma facing the Black community at the dawn of the 21st century. She states,

> 'I am like someone bewitched, turned foolish. It's like my very will's gone. And nothing short of a miracle will bring it back I know. Something has to happen—I don't know what, but something—and apart from me (because it's out of my hands I'm convinced) to bring me back to myself. *Something that's been up has to come down*…before I can get moving again!' (Marshall 230) (Emphasis mine).

GLOSSARY

Afro-Poltico Womanist Agenda: a method for understanding how fiction by Black women writers provides space to consider the merger of cultural and revolutionary nationalism as a prime element of the Black political process.

Black Cultural Nationalism: The belief that Black people will not survive and/or "win" the revolutionary war against white America if they (black people) do not first know and accept their African identities and connect to their ancestral roots. A "celebration of blackness." Also defined as "visual artists, writers, songwriters, (and musicians) using cultural forms as weapons in the struggle for liberation" (Van Deburg 9). Often ridiculed by Black revolutionary nationalism for an allegedly absent political agenda, and pacifist policies.

Black Panther Party for Self-Defense, or "Black Panthers": Revolutionary Nationalist organization founded by Huey Newton and Bobby Seale, in Oakland, California in response to police brutality and social injustice in the African American neighborhoods in Oakland. Infamous for the "storming" of the capital building in Sacramento, CA, when Ronald Reagan was governor, in response to a California judicial move to ban the right to

bear arms in the state. The Black Panthers were major players in the Black Power

Movement between 1965-1975.

Black Power: Term introduced to mainstream white America through Stokely

Carmichael's declaration during a 1966 Civil Rights movement "March Against Fear" in

Greenwood, Mississippi, "The only way we gonna stop them white men from whuppin'

us is to take over. We been saying freedom for six years and we ain't got nothin'. What

we gonna start saying now is Black Power!" (Van Deburg 32) Black Power as a demand

of justice and political rights has been used frequently throughout the 20th century, as a

rallying cry for oppressed masses of Black people. In a country (America) where the

benefits of power are reserved for white Americans, "Black Power" signified a demand

for equality (economic, political, social) and the destruction of the white power elite.

Black Revolutionary Nationalism: The more "militant" branch of Black Nationalism.

Black revolutionary nationalism was an anti-capitalist movement based in the teachings

of Malcolm X, Mao Tsetung, Karl Marx, Robert F. Williams, and Frantz Fanon, among

others. Also viewed as a standpoint based on rhetoric, justice, and community

organization. The prevailing belief among revolutionary nationalists was that the

oppressed cannot be completely free until the entire "system" is overthrown (Van Deburg

153).

COINTELPRO: The FBI's Counter Intelligence Program, created by J., Edgar Hoover

in the early 20th century to "watch" and monitor subversive organizations and individuals.

Figured prominently in the deportation of Marcus Garvey, a black revolutionary leader of the 1930s. Later, COINTELPRO is regarded as the impetus for dissention among black nationalists groups (i.e. The Black Panthers, and US), and the intra-organizational conflicts that led to mistrust, sabotage, and eventually betrayal. Often, FBI "informants" disguised as group leaders were responsible for starting dangerous rumors that led to feuds.

Nationalism: The attribution of goals and cooperative empowerment of a collective group of individuals connected via race, ethnicity, or other significant common grouping.

People's Army (PA): A group of George Jackson supporters, or "Jackson forces." George Jackson was "a BPP field marshall, and celebrated prison author" that was "assassinated (in 1971) at San Quentin Prison (California), while allegedly trying to escape" (Bush 217).

Political Process Model (PPM): Formed from the understanding that "widespread protest activity is the result of a combination of expanding political opportunities and indigenous organization" (McAdam 2). The model as referenced in this project provides a historical context for understanding the process of political mobilization within Black communities.

US: Cultural Black Nationalist organization headed by Ron Everett (now known as Maulana Karenga). "US set out to construct as new black culture based upon selected

African traditions, for the purpose of launching a cultural revolution among African Americans at large" (Brown). US members adopted "natural" hairstyles, the Kiswahili language, African names, and founded programs within South Central Los Angeles. US is the founding organization of Kwanzaa, the African American holiday celebration practiced worldwide.

NOTES

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[1] In this project I frequently use the term "community" as representative of the Black masses. This includes poor and working class, rural and urban Blacks who are connected via a common cultural heritage that speaks to a shared history of slavery, subjugation, oppression, economic depression, organization, the affirmation of racial pride, and shared political goals.

[2] A few women who come to mind in the crossover arena include Joan Armatrading and Me' Shell Ndegeocello.

[3] The term "real revolution" is derived from Alice Walker's observations that "the real revolution is always concerned with the least glamorous stuff." Like teaching children to read, registering disenfranchised Blacks to vote, preserving history, etc.

[4] Many scholars have noted the FBI's involvement in the dissolution of both the US organization and the Black Panther Party for Self-Defense. The exchange of gunfire that resulted in the deaths of two Panther members was said to be orchestrated by FBI informants as a part of COINTELPRO (Counterintelligence Program) whose aim was to dissemble and dismantle "militant" organizations. One tactic being creating dislike among and between black insurgent groups—allowing them to destroy each other, naturally. See Fighting for US (2003) by Scot Brown and We are not what we seem (1999) by Rod Bush for discussions of this topic.

[5] Paraphrase of quote by writer and activist Audre Lorde, "The master's tools cannot dismantle the master's house."

[6] In 1974, Alice Walker defined Womanism as: "From *womanish*. (Opp. Of girlish, frivolous, irresponsible, not serious) A black feminist or feminist of color. From the black folk expression of mothers to female children, "You acting womanish," i.e. like a woman. Usually referring to outrageous, audacious, courageous, or willful behavior…Appreciates and prefers women's culture, women's emotional flexibility (values tears as natural counter-balance of laughter), and women's strength…Committed to survival and wholeness of entire people, male and female. Not a separatist, except for health. Traditionally universalist…Loves struggle. Loves the Folk. Loves herself. Regardless" (Excerpt)

[7] Noninstitutionalized tactics "represent…a distinct challenge to elite groups. [The tactics] communicate a fundamental rejection of the established institutional mechanisms for seeking redress of group grievances; substantively, it deprives elite groups of their recourse to institutional power" (McAdam 57).

[8] Though I focus primarily on four well-known authors who have written texts that fit under the Afro-Politico Womanist paradigm, I am aware of several other contemporary authors and novels produced novels during the time period specified that speak to the plight of the Black community. For example, Gloria Naylor's *The Women of Brewster Place;* Carlene Polite's *The Flagellants*, and *Sister X and the Victims of Foul Play*; Alice Walker's *In Love and Trouble* and *The Third Life of Grange Copeland*, Paule Marshall's *Praisesong for the Widow*, for example. Also included on this list are other writers like, Margaret Walker, Octavia Butler, and Gayl Jones.

[9] Debate is a problematic term often used by black scholars with diverse opinions about an issue, when usually no real discussion between the contending parties exists. See Anna Julia Cooper and Langston Hughes, W.E.B. DuBois and Booker T. Washington, Richard Wright and Zora Neale Hurston, Richard Wright and James Baldwin, Eldridge Cleaver and James Baldwin, Joyce Joyce and Houston Baker, and so forth.

[10] While I understand that the historical context of this statement imposes severe limitations and does not take into account other literary movements that represent the "people," like the Harlem Renaissance, I purposefully want to situate my argument within a recent past that is too-often paired with the scholarship on the Harlem Renaissance. See *The Johns Hopkins Guide to Literary Theory and Criticism*, and *Ideologies*

of African American Literature: From the Harlem Renaissance to the Black Nationalist Renaissance by Robert Washington for examples.

[11] See Ishmael Reed's *The Last Days of Louisiana Red*. Street Yelling's character is referred to as the charismatic lumpen, which echoes his highly symbolic nomenclature and affinity for rhetorical practice.

[12] See the "Joyce-Baker-Gates debate" in *New Literary History*: 18, winter 1987. Beginning with Joyce A. Joyce, "The Black Canon: Reconstructing Black American Literary Criticism," *New Literary History*: 18 (Winter 1987) 335-344.

[13] Though I employ Doug McAdam's seminal *Political Process and the Development of Black Insurgency, 1930-1970* as the primary theoretical text for this project, I view the political process model as an incomplete empirical study of African American political mobilization. Key parts of the model are deficient because of a limited ability to present a composite of activist practices during the black revolutionary period (1966-1980). Therefore, through close readings and restructuring of the political process model itself, I attempt to develop a tool for understanding representational practices and compose a working definition of literary activism that incorporates political and literary theories of "action."

[14] Lyrics: *Now we demand a chance to do things for ourself/We're tired of beatin' our head against the wall And workin' for someone else/We're people, we're just like the birds and the bees We'd rather die on our feet/Than be livin' on our knees/Say it loud, I'm black and I'm proud*

[15] Gen. 9:19-29 (NIV)

[16] See the English translation of Frantz Fanon's <u>Black Skin, White Masks</u> (1967).

[17] Piven and Cloward are Resource Mobilization model scholars.

[18] This point will become important later as I reveal the "true" activist practices of seemingly inactive participants in the Black revolutionary period.

[19] In March 2003, I conducted a brief interview via email with Kathleen Cleaver, former communications secretary for the Black Panther Party. In response to my question about what I called the "male-driven Black Power movement," she offered, "The actual practices and experiences of the women who joined the Black Panther Party was highly diverse, idiosyncratic, and changed over time and from place to place…particularly that driven by a need to support certain theories of feminism developed subsequent to the experiences of the young black sisters who made up—by mid 1969—the MAJORITY of the members of the Black Panther Party."

[20] There is a widely told story about Stokely Carmichael, who at the time was the head of the Student Non-violent Coordinating Committee (SNCC), the popular source of the term "black power," and later active in the Black Panther Party and the Pan-Africanism Movement. When someone asked him about the position of the black woman in the black revolution? He jokingly answered, "Prone," which is interpreted as a subservient physical position where one's body is literally face down or appears to be in an act of worship and/or defeat. Though Carmichael was joking when he made the comment, his statement highlights the very real beliefs and ideas about women's inability to be a significant force in the "revolution."

[21] Anna Julia Cooper's oft quoted proclamation, "When and where I enter…the entire race enters with me," is one of many affirmations that tie the complete and total liberation of the black race to the education of the black woman. Even as Cooper is acknowledged for her role in the liberation of black women, her bourgeois status is problematic when discussing issues that involve complete representation. In actuality, as Mary Helen Washington notes, "[Cooper] does not imagine ordinary black working women as the basis of her feminist politics" (Introduction xlvi).

[22] It is important to note that Cooper, Terrell, and others were members of the Black middle class that at the time were proprietors and supporters of the Victorian values associated with womanhood and the role of the "lady." While they all were members of women's clubs like the National Association of Colored Women, some understood the need of the community as a whole (regardless of social position), while others, like Cooper, chose to focus on middle and upper class issues.

[23] Excerpts gleaned from website created by Kari Boyd McBride, University of Arizona http://www.u.arizona.edu/ic/mcbride/indv/indvmoyn.htm

[24] Examples of how the effects of the Moynihan report manifests within literature during the period will be discussed further in chapter five.

[25] See Aldon Morris <u>The Origins of the Civil Rights Movement</u>.

[26] This excerpt from Malcolm X's, "The Black Revolution," is quoted in <u>Retreat to the Ghetto</u> by Thomas L. Blair (1977).

[27] From the OAAU "Statement of Basic Aims and Objectives" and the "Basic Unity Program" (1965). These excerpts were quoted in the article, "The US Organization, Black Power Vanguard Politics, and the United Front Ideal: Los Angeles and Beyond" by Scot Brown (2001).

[28] All references to "Black Nationalism" are in the American context, unless otherwise noted.

[29] The types of Black Nationalism listed are taken from Van Deburg's <u>New Day in Babylon</u> (1992) and Dean Robinson's <u>Black Nationalism in American Politics and Thought</u> (2001).

[30] I am identifying the first three waves of American Black revolution as: Slave rebellions, Black political participation during Southern Reconstruction, and the formation of Black nationalist organizations during the early years of the 20th century.

[31] I take this term from Dean Robinson's <u>Black Nationalism in American Politics and Thought</u> (2001).

[32] In this chapter I argue that Revolutionary Nationalism and Cultural Nationalism as represented by specific organization within the Black Power movement were placed in opposition to one another. Despite the controversial rhetorical and ideological battles waged over the terms, both types of nationalism have several important similarities. For example, the primary goal of both ideologies was to ensure a national identity that would place the Black American on an even par with his American compatriots. This includes but is not limited to: an emphasis on mental and physical liberation, economic stability, social and racial justice, an end to discriminatory practices, and unity within the Black community.

[33] Although, the debate over the inclusion of "white liberals in the struggle" became a hot point and caused a rift in many revolutionary organizations, such as the Student Non-Violent Coordinating Committee (SNCC) and the Black Panther Party for Self-Defense.

[34] Throughout this chapter, I will use the terms "Black Revolutionary Movement" and "Black Power Movement" interchangeably.

[35] Stewart, Maria. "On African Rights and Liberty" (1833), in <u>Civil Rights Since 1787: A Reader on the Struggle</u>. Eds. Jonathan Birnbaum and Clarence Taylor.

[36] The term accomodationist is widely used. I am using the definition used in Bush's <u>We Are Not What We Seem</u> (1999).

[37] Though Robert F. Williams did not consider the terms "nationalist" or "revolutionary nationalist" useful or relevant, his seminal text <u>Negroes with Guns</u> was widely read and served as a reference for the ideological basis of the revolutionary nationalist standpoint.

[38] This statement is similar to Maulana Karenga's argument that "nationalism is a precondition for revolution, it is culture that is the primary vehicle for achieving this national awareness and commitment" qtd. in Flowers' <u>Pens of Fire</u> (1996).

[39] See the section titled "Cognitive Liberation" in Chapter One of this project for a thorough discussion of this term.

[40] The mythic tale of African slaves from the Igbo tribe who were brought in chains to the "Gullah" or Low Country islands off the coast of Georgia and South Carolina. Legend has it that after surveying the "situation" the slaves turned back to the ocean and flew back "home" to Africa, one by one. There are several literary and oral presentations of the mythic "Flying Africans." See <u>The People Who Could Fly</u>, <u>Praisesong for the Widow</u>, <u>Daughters of the Dust</u>, among other transcribed folktales from former slaves like "All God's Chillun Got Wings," for example.

[41] Psalms 68:31

[42] Historian Robin D.G. Kelley's <u>Freedom Dreams</u> (2002) provides a comprehensive analysis of the impact Marcus Garvey's movement had on the Black community of the early 20th century.

[43] In addition to Cruse, see Dean Robinson's <u>Black Nationalism in American Politics and Thought</u>, as an example.

[44] Comprehensive studies of these two organizations include <u>Fighting for US</u> (2003) by Scot Brown, Philip Foner's <u>The Black Panthers Speak</u> (1970), and sections in Van Deburg's <u>New Day in Babylon</u> (1992), and <u>We are not what we seem</u> (1999) by Rod Bush.

[45] It is important to note that many of the Black revolutionary nationalists referred to themselves as socialists at various junctures in the Black Power movement.

[46] See footnote 39.

[47] Quote transcribed from audio obtained in *The Freedom Archives* (San Francisco), A Project of the Agape Foundation.

[48] Ibid.

[49] Many scholars have focused on the objectification of Marilene O'Shay in <u>Meridian</u> as it relates to Meridian's own position and silencing as a woman. For example, Lynn Pifer writes of the "issues" with presenting a mummified woman strangled because of her infidelity and inability to ascribe to the virtues of True Womanhood in her article kdkd: "Coming to Voice in Alice Walker's *Meridian*." For the purposes of this project, I will not address these issues.

[50] Later we find that Truman does not march anymore because 'what [he] believe[s] cannot be placed on a placard" (108).

[51] Ironically, in <u>Meridian</u>, Truman's university (R. Baron College) is a parody of Morehouse University in Atlanta, Georgia.

[52] "Silent women" is a term that I contend within the larger project because of its reliance upon a belief that Black women who stepped aside and were often pushed back from the forefront of activist organizations were actually silent. I argue that omission and dismissal does not equate to silence. Though contemporary women have admitted to a conscious decision to fall back and let male leaders stand at the helm of the Black community, many others acknowledged the "necessity of egalitarian roles." See Pratihba Parmar's documentary "A place of Rage" and "<u>Together</u>" Black Women (1972) a sociological study by Inez Smith Reid, for commentary.

[53] It is important to note that over the years the initial philosophies of Black Power movement leaders changed frequently.

[54] AFDC, American Families with Dependent Children program, originally called ADC (Aid to Dependent Children), more commonly known as "welfare."

[55] The Lowndes County Freedom Party was an all-black political party in Alabama (1966). Called "SNCC's 1st experiment in exclusively Black activism," the party was responsible for political mobilization and voter registration in a county where no Blacks were registered to vote. They used the symbol of the Black Panther, which was later adopted by the Black Panther Party for Self-Defense in Oakland, CA. For more information see Jonathan Foster's "Radical Loss: The First Black Panthers and the Lowndes County Election of 1966" <u>The Urban Historical Review</u> 5 (Spring 2001).

[56] It is important to note that even though Black Consciousness mirrors Black Power in many ways (rhetoric, gestures, phrasing, age of participants), advocates of Black Consciousness refused to be regarded as a movement patterned after the American movement. The primary difference being Black Power's alleged desire to work within the American system and a Black Consciousness movement desire to work outside the South African system.

[57] A similar racial division exists on Caribbean islands and in Latin American countries, where White (including Jewish), Asian (including primarily Chinese and East Indian), Black, and Colored unite under a common nationality but are historically divided according to color and/or caste.

[58] The use of the word "radical" is not similar to the definitions that could be associated with the attention-grabbing tactics used by the Black Panther Party and/or other "radical" factions in the struggle for equality in America. The BCM was more akin to the non-violent, peaceful demonstrations of the Civil Rights Movement in America until the Johannesburg riot of 1976. Robert Fatton, Jr. describes the youth movement of the BCM as "rooted in non-violence and religion" (Fatton 40).

[59] This phrase is taken from the title of Aime Cesaire's groundbreaking work, <u>Notebook of a Return to My Native Land</u>, in which he offers the internal suffering of an assimilated islander living abroad, who longs to return to his native post-colonial island home.

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