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Wom(b)anism: Reading Relationships Between the Community and the Womb in Sankofa, The Women of Brewster Place, and Corregidora

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WOM(B)ANISM: READING RELATIONSHIPS BETWEEN
THE COMMUNITY AND THE WOMB IN *SANKOFA*, THE
WOMEN OF BREWSTER PLACE, AND *CORREGIDORA*

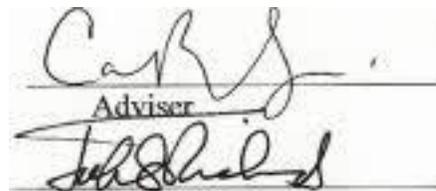
by

Belinda M. Waller-Peterson

A Thesis

Presented to the Faculty of
Bucknell University
In Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for the Degree of
MA in English

Approved:



The image shows two handwritten signatures on a light-colored background. The top signature is written in cursive and appears to be 'C. R. J.'. Below it is a horizontal line with the word 'Adviser' printed underneath. The bottom signature is also in cursive and appears to be 'J. Shields'. Below it is another horizontal line.

Department Chairperson

April 27, 2010

I, Belinda M. Waller-Peterson, do grant permission for my thesis to be copied.

Acknowledgments

First and foremost, I thank God who is the guiding light in my life.

Thank you to all of my ancestral foremothers, especially my grandmothers Shirley Elizabeth Epps and Alice Waller. Thank you to those who have inspired me intellectually, including Professors Karla Holloway, Salamishah Tillet, and Imani Perry.

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Abstract

This project attempts to contribute to the various discourses within the black womanist tradition. In 1983, Alice Walker published her landmark collection of essays entitled *In Search of Our Mother Gardens: Womanist Prose*. At the outset of the volume, Walker defines the core concept of womanism. After a poetic four-part definition of the term womanist, Walker concludes by stating, “womanist is to feminist as purple to lavender” (Phillips 19). Although this analogy is critically engaged, the scholarly discourse that emerged in response to Walker’s proposition shapes the intellectual inner workings of this project. Certain established concepts (such as ancestral mediation or the laying on of hands) work in conjunction with my own concepts of “wom(b)anism” and “the communal womb” to frame the interpretive discussions throughout these pages. Wom(b)anism and the communal womb both emerge from the black feminist and womanist traditions, especially via the role of ancestral mediation but also within the contested discourses on womanism itself. I apply the two concepts (wom(b)anism and the communal womb) to my readings of Haile Gerima’s *Sankofa*, Gloria Naylor’s *The Women of Brewster Place*, and Gayl Jones’ *Corregidora*. The relationship between the community and women’s wombs across each of these texts construct a narrative that features ancestral mediation (or intervention), various acts of violence committed against women’s bodies, and the complicated circumstances through which women heal themselves and their communities.

Introduction

I am a licensed, registered nurse in the state of the Pennsylvania and I trained to become a nurse for my undergraduate degree at Widener University. One of my last positions was as a Labor and Delivery Nurse at Pennsylvania Hospital in Center City, Pennsylvania, the oldest hospital in the nation. During my time there I had a deep and involved exposure to birth, maternity, and the entire world of women's health. Looking back now, based on those experiences, it makes sense to me that when I began to engage literature critically I was instantly drawn to narratives centered on women's health and the various themes that wrestled with women's health issues in literature. I engaged these narratives in my "Literary Theory" and "Baggy Monsters" English courses as well as in all of my work with Professor Carmen Gillespie including: "The Novels of Toni Morrison," "Black Women Writers and Myth," "Health in Literature," and "African American Literary Theory and History." Professor Ponnuswami's "Feminism and Drama" and Professor Carr's "Contemporary American Novels" also provided space for me to think through feminism, gender studies and other issues related to women's health in literature and culture. Under Professor Gillespie's advice and direction I distilled this literary interest into my thesis project entitled *Wom(b)anism: Reading Relationships Between the Community and the Womb in Sankofa, The Women of Brewster Place, and Corregidora*.

This project attempts to contribute to the various discourses within the black womanist tradition. Certain established concepts (such as ancestral mediation or the

laying on of hands) work in conjunction with my own concepts of “wom(b)anism” and “the communal womb” to frame the interpretive discussions throughout these pages. Wom(b)anism and the communal womb both emerge from the black feminist and womanist traditions, especially via the role of ancestral mediation but also within the contested discourses on womanism itself. These two terms (wom(b)anism and the communal womb) will be explicated in detail below and throughout this thesis they will be fleshed out in the various examples of narratives and themes that depict particular experiences of black women in literature and culture. According to Katie Canon, “there is no better source for comprehending the ‘real-lived’ texture of Black experience and the meaning of the moral life in the Black context than the Black women’s literary tradition. Black women’s literature offers the sharpest available view of the Black community’s soul” (68). Wom(b)anism and the communal womb emerge conceptually out of the black women’s literary tradition. These concepts work together to unveil thick understandings of the “real-lived” experiences of black folk. Womanism, wom(b)anism, ancestral mediation, and the communal womb all also originate in some way in the pointed responses to feminism by black women.

According to scholar bell hooks, though racism and sexism both exist in the United States, “maintaining white supremacy has always been as great if not a greater priority than maintaining strict sex role divisions” (*from center to margin* 52). Thus, hooks argues that the feminist or “women’s” movement was primarily concerned with addressing the concerns of white women and not issues of race. The negation of race

within the feminist movement prevented black women and women of color from realizing their human rights along with white women. This negation is of particular import as hooks states that “a central issue for feminist activists has been the struggle to obtain for women the right to control their bodies...It is in the interest of continued white racist domination of the planet for white patriarchy to maintain control over all women’s bodies” (52). This sexual (and racial) domination underscores the heinous historical implications of slavery and informs my impulse to read black women’s writing with specific themes in mind. Black feminism was born in response to this dual discrimination and the inability of feminism itself to account for the nuances of oppression in black women’s lives. According to scholar, Robert Patterson, “black feminist theory aims to obtain gender equality for black women, as well as to inscribe black women and their cultural contributions into the historical narrative” (90).

Eventually some scholars and writers realized the limitations of the black feminist project and the search for a broader discourse—centered on women—emerged. In her landmark collection of essays, *In Search of Our Mother’s Gardens: Womanist Prose* (1983), Walker coined and defined the term womanist. In a deliberately literary, four-part definition, Walker defines womanist as a framework that suggests an alternative to feminism—one that is inclusive of all individuals willing to commit themselves to the holistic enrichment of community, self and the world.¹ From the second part of her definition Walker writes:

¹ Walker, Alice. *In Search of Our Mother’s Gardens: Womanist Prose*. San Diego: Harcourt, Inc., 1983.

2. Also: A woman who loves other women, sexually and/or nonsexually. Appreciates and prefers women's culture, women's emotional flexibility (values tears as natural counter-balance of laughter), and women's strength. Sometimes loves individual men, sexually and/or nonsexually. Committed to survival and wholeness of entire people, male and female. Not a separatist, except periodically, for health. Traditionally universalist, as in: 'Mama, why are we brown, pink, and yellow, and our cousins are white, beige, and black?' Ans.: 'Well, you know the colored race is just like a flower garden, with every color flower represented.' Traditionally capable, as in: 'Mama, I'm walking to Canada and I'm taking you and a bunch of other slaves with me.' Reply: 'It wouldn't be the first time.' (Walker xi)

Walker's definition recognizes the need for feminism to expand in ways that encompass a larger constituency than those proposed by the first and second wave feminist movements.² By underscoring the possibility of lesbian intimacy, Walker directly addresses some of the critiques of black feminism delineated by Barbara Smith and others who lament the fact that black lesbianism was absent from early discourses on black feminism amongst other limitations.³ For Walker the womanist is not a separatist

² Black women responded to the exclusion of black and Third World women from the first and second wave feminist movements by writing critical essays such as Audre Lorde's 1984 "The Master's Tools Will Never Dismantle the Master's House," and the creation of organizations such as The National Association of Colored Women.

³ In her 1977 critical essay "Towards a Black Feminist Criticism," Smith addresses the manner in which white literary critics have historically engaged literature written by black women. Using criticism written about Toni Morrison and Alice Walker, Smith reveals the inherent misinterpretation by white critics of

save for specific health issues, which I interpret as a subtle suggestion that, where the womb is concerned (in life and in literature), women face specific challenges and histories of violence and exploitation that require the development of unique discourses through which we might come to understand these issues. The traditional universalism to which Walker gestures in this portion of her definition dialogically includes people of all hues. By framing the exchange (between a mother and child) Walker crystallizes the simplicity of racial distinctions as she simultaneously suggests that the “black race” is, “like a flower garden” inclusive of a wide range of colors, i.e. racial and ethnic identities.

In addition to deconstructing the racial, gender, and sexual boundaries of feminist discourses, the second part of Walker’s womanist definition also posits the maternal figure, “Mama,” as the arbiter of knowledge. Mama’s answers to the child are swift, literary, and wise in the conversational delivery. That Walker turns to a ‘mama’ figure should be seen as somewhat distinct from traditional maternal or mother figures in literature by the very vernacular way in which the maternal referent is rendered. It is also well worth noting here that Walker employs dialogue to flesh out this part of her definition. She is deliberately investing the folk conversational exchanges that occur in

important themes and ideologies that the two authors engage. Smith grounds this inability to connect with and interpret Walker, Morrison and other black women writers with the cultural/racial inequalities that have historically plagued women and blacks. She argues that black women in particular have and continue to be ostracized from society because of their race and gender. According to Smith, one of the solutions to this problem is the creation of black feminist theorists and critics who can offer critical analysis of literature produced by black women. The rationale Smith uses to support her argument is that black feminist theorists and critics are intrinsically equipped to understand the history, traditions and experiences of black women and the black populous. They would therefore be able to uncover inter-textual dialogues between authors and properly contextualize literature within the black American or African experience.

the ‘real life’ interactions amongst people (here mother and child), in order to perform the socio-political statement she intends through the womanist proposition. Womanism then signals Walker’s vision of feminism beyond its ‘lavender’ limitations as a universal and humanist way of being and thinking. It reflects her assertions that the survival and wellness of women is connected to the larger, common fate of humanity.⁴

The reason why womanism is compelling to me as a scholar is precisely because it is framed as a more common discourse for women’s issues. “[The] act of joining the terms ‘woman’ and ‘common’ at the border of ‘feminist/not feminist’ situated a particular mode of women’s resistance activity squarely within the realm of the ‘everyday’, thereby defining both academic and ideological claims on the definition, labeling, and elaboration of women’s resistance activity under the exclusive and limited label ‘feminist’” (Phillips xix-xx). According to Layli Phillips, within women’s studies, womanism was essentially dismissed; while at the same time in the world beyond the academy the concept of womanism “proliferated.” Phillips points to an ‘underground’ movement that occurs in the margins of the academy and accrues beyond the walls of the academy in the day-to-day lived experiences of people. “Womanism is a social change perspective rooted in black women’s and other women of colors’ everyday experiences and everyday methods of problem solving in everyday spaces, extended to the problem of ending all forms of oppression for all people, restoring the balance between people and the environment/nature, and reconciling human life with the spiritual dimension” (Phillips

⁴ In Walker’s novel *The Temple of My Familiar*, she re-envisioned and rewrites the creation narrative with the black woman and her womb as the source of the entire universe.

xx). For Phillips, womanism is not feminism mostly because its emphasis does not exclusively privilege women.

Sherley Anne Williams also suggests that black feminist theory isolated black female culture with respect to black culture more broadly. This segregated sense in feminist and black feminist discourse results in Sherley Anne Williams' turn to Alice Walker's womanist discourse. In her essay entitled, "Some Implications of Womanist Theory," Williams argues that womanism although broadly conceived by Walker, can provide opportunities for more holistic approaches to engaging the black experience. Williams does not necessarily disavow feminism or black feminism, she simply believes that "womanist inquiry...assumes that it can talk both effectively and productively about men. This is a necessary assumption because the negative, stereotyped images of black women are only a part of the problem of phallogentric writings by black males . . ." (Williams 220). Some of the other problems or challenges include the need for womanist critics to engage representations of women wherever they exist in literature, film, music, society, etc. Williams' sense of the implications of Walker's womanist theory set the stage for my reading/viewing of Haile Gerima's film, *Sankofa*, a film written and directed by a black male that features several poignant representations of black women in current and historical communities.

In her introduction to *The Womanist Reader*, Layli Phillips actually traces the concept of womanism to Chikwenye Okonjo Ogunyemi (1985) and Clenora Hudson-Weems (1989). She ascribes African womanism to Ogunyemi and she describes Hudson-Weems' Africana Womanism. Each of these is related to Walker's womanism but they

also both suggest specific racial and ethnic components to womanism. Ogunyemi's African womanism wrestles specifically with womanism across the continent of Africa and throughout the black diaspora. Her sense of womanism is distinct from Walker's womanism in order for her to be able to develop a critical focus on those issues relevant to African (and black diasporic) women including post-colonialism, tribalism, religious oppression and poverty. Ogunyemi explains that her critical journey to womanism was separate and independent of Walker's coining of the term. "Black womanism is a philosophy that celebrates black roots, the ideals of black life, while giving a balanced presentation of black womandom. It concerns itself as much with the black sexual power tussle as with the world power structure that subjugates blacks. . . . This philosophy has a mandelic core: its aim is the dynamism of wholeness and self-healing that one sees in the positive, integrative endings of womanist novels" (Ogunyemi 28). In a similar vein, Hudson-Weems proffers *Africana Womanism* to limit Walker's expansive womanism to the plights and challenges of black women especially as they are meted out in the womanist literary tradition. For Ogunyemi and Hudson-Weems womanism's import centers on the experiences of black women. While these womanist approaches might border on the separatist designation that Walker turns away from, they also provide some practical opportunities for the application of womanist ideas to film, literature, and critical theory.

According to Joanne Gabbin, "contemporary black women writers are telling their stories born in intimacy and nourished by communal revelation...[B]lack women writers are giving evidence of another aesthetic experience and in the process using particularly

womanist forms of thought and expression...” [my emphasis] (Gabbin 237). In her essay, “A Laying on of Hands...,” Gabbin applies the Christian (and black folk) practice of shamanistic healing through the hands to black women writers and the characters within their novels, especially the works of Toni Morrison and Paule Marshall. The laying on of hands “represents the transmission of a miraculous power that heals, restores, and transforms all that it touches. However mystical the practice appears, the existence of such powers is readily accepted by initiates...” (247). Gabbin’s context of birth and “communal revelation” as these concepts relate to the laying on of hands, is “particularly womanist” and wholly applicable to the concepts in this thesis. Gabbin’s theoretical employment of the “laying on of hands” to read specific themes in black women’s writing and to excavate culturally specific interpretations of those characters are both related to and emblematic of my own humble attempts to define and apply wom(b)anism and the communal womb.

In this thesis I develop and utilize the term wom(b)anism to read, excavate and critically engage the presence of what I refer to as the communal womb in the works of Haile Gerima, Gayl Jones, and Gloria Naylor. Thus wom(b)anism is an interpretive tool and critical approach that I employ in order to excavate the communal womb motifs and narratives. The term wom(b)anism evolves from Alice Walker’s womanist definition and branches out to interrogate specific references to and manifestations of the womb in novels by select authors. Wom(b)anism is the term that I have created to describe the interpretive framework through which readers can identify iterations of the communal womb. Wom(b)anism combines aspects of the black womanist ethos with an expressed

interest in seeking out literary depictions of or references to the womb in black women's writing and in other media that wrestle with representations of black womanhood. The communal womb then is a particularly significant result of wom(b)anist readings. The communal womb emerges from wom(b)anist readings and consists of the following three elements: 1) textual moments in black literature that involve an ancestral mediator – a figure defined by Karla Holloway; 2) a character who is faced with a crisis that involves her womb; and 3) the nature and consequences of the character's relationship to her community. The ancestral mediator is at the center of the dynamism and agency of the communal womb and as such this figure is worth discussing in detail.⁵

Literary and cultural critic Karla Holloway's book, *Moorings & Metaphors: Figures of Culture and Gender in Black Women's Literature*, analyzes black women writer's invocation of ancestry within their texts. Holloway argues that black women writers utilize an ancestral mediator to navigate the cultural and spiritual loss black women experience as a result of the systematic erasure of the historical and biographical narratives of black women. In Chapter 6 of her book, "The Idea of Ancestry: African American Writers," Holloway explains:

[. . .] the authors' use of ancestral metaphor is stylistically different in each of these stories. Sometimes the presence is meditative and instructive, sometimes it is meditative and condemnatory, sometimes it is

⁵ This clear language regarding the definitions of and distinctions between wom(b)anism and the communal womb comes directly from Carmen Gillespie's astute advice and direction of this thesis project.

meditative and silent. However, because she serves as a recursive touchstone for simultaneous existence of and revision in the idea of mediation, the ancestral presence constitutes the posture of (re)membrance. She is the linking of gender and culture that pulls these writer's works together. She accomplishes mediation in the connection of her figurative and metaphorical presence to the textual strategies of (re)membrance, revision, and recursion. (115)

The "figurative and metaphorical presence" of Holloway's ancestral mediator is a foundational requisite for my wom(b)anist readings of the communal womb (115).

The communal womb centralizes the black woman's womb in select texts in order to wrestle with and challenge dominant depictions of the lives and histories of black women. Scholars such as bell hooks, Patricia Hill Collins, and Deborah Gray White, detail in their scholarship the numerous pathological representations of black women (sexually, culturally, and spiritually). We can further define the communal womb as a metaphorical space within which the restoration and (sometimes) reparation of the black woman's womb originates and/or develops through the intervention of an ancestral mediator. It is my assertion that the communal womb presents itself in two ways: as narratives or literary themes across texts and within specific passages. The communal womb narrative or literary theme can be understood as the inter- and meta-textual stories that are present in select works by black women writers. Gayle Jones' *Corregidora* exemplifies this component of the definition. Throughout the text, the protagonist, Ursa,

struggles with her maternal ancestor's dominant communal womb narrative that details the rape and incest endured by her ancestors during slavery. This communal womb narrative hinders Ursa's self-realization. The communal womb theme/motif can be understood as the literary or visual depiction of a crisis or challenge to the womb that requires ancestral mediation. Gloria Naylor's *The Women of Brewster Place* captures this component of the definition in a passage involving main characters Mattie and Ciel. After the death of Ciel's very young daughter Serena, Ciel relinquishes her will to live. Mattie embraces Ciel and rocks her through time and history to help her connect with other mothers whose children died young. This section of the novel provides readers with a tangible example of how and why the communal womb manifests in black women's literature.

I apply Holloway's term, ancestral mediator, to select black women characters within the novels *The Women of Brewster Place* (1980) and *Corregidora* (1975), and the film *Sankofa* (2003) to further explicate wom(b)anist readings of the communal womb. The concept of the communal womb requires the presence of an ancestral mediator as well as the inclusion of the black community that supports or condemns the black woman in crisis. Finally, the concept of the communal womb facilitates a character's ability or inability to come to terms with the relationship between black women's bodies and various complicated historical realities. Rather than rest on the dictionary definition of the womb, the communal womb refers to moments in black women's literature as well as the narratives of specific characters in the black women's literary tradition that serve to

unpack the complex matrix through which women's bodies have been commodified, exploited, abused, and dismembered. Wom(b)anist readings make interventions into these histories by presenting characters and situations that insulate, protect, and recover black women's bodies. One powerful example of this is the figure of NuNu in the film *Sankofa* – both of which are glossed in chapter one. A confluence of the historical attempts to destroy black women's bodies and the powerful stories of the women who resist and undermine that destruction formulate the central subject matter of this thesis.

The connection between the ancestral mediator, literary figures/characters' wombs, and questions of gender/identity originate in the historically contested words of Sojourner Truth. Truth's rhetorical question is in fact an historical ancestral mediation in that it shapes black women's writing (particularly writing that wrestles with the body, agency and most especially the womb). Embedded in "ain't I a woman," is Truth's refutation of the double identifying signifiers that mark the black woman—race and gender. Africana Womanist scholar Clenora Hudson-Weems, argues that Truth was not a feminist or even a pre-feminist. According to Hudson-Weems, Truth distinguished herself rhetorically in this oft cited (and contested) moment in history. "Instead of aligning herself with the feminist cause, she was engaging in self-actualization, forcing white feminists, in particular, to recognize her and all Africana women as women and as a definite and legitimate part of that [i.e. feminist] community" (Hudson-Weems 26). Another important argument made by Hudson-Weems is that the characterization of Sojourner Truth as a feminist, regularly elides her simultaneous commitment to racial

issues (26-7). Wom(b)anist readings create a space where black women writers can meditate upon the rhetorical question posed more than a century ago by Sojourner Truth: “Ar’n’t I Woman?”⁶ Truth’s question challenges the broad (mis)representation of black female bodies by misogynist, racist political and social institutions, a query that scholars, historians, and artists continue to engage.⁷

Building upon Walker’s assertion that womanism is fundamentally concerned with the health and well-being of women, my concept, wom(b)anism, encourages the work of reading and explicating the metaphorical and theoretical implications of the communal womb as it manifests in selected works of African American women’s literature. A wom(b)anist interpretation of these texts provides a unique way of reading them—one that initiates and requires a search for the womb in literature and various other texts including film. Wom(b)anism is a way of ‘reading’ through which the communal womb motifs and narratives might be discovered. This emphasis on the womb as a primary point of critical investigation enables unique exploration of the implications of the womb’s textual representations. Walker’s recognition of the inability of feminism to adequately represent the diversity of women striving for equality and human rights manifests in the works of scholars and artists such as Katie Canon, Hazel Carby, Patricia Collins, bell hooks, Ntozake Shange, Barbara Smith, and Deborah Gray White. The

⁶ Sojourner Truth, 1851, Women’s Rights Convention in Akron Ohio.

⁷ Collins, Patricia Hill. *Black Feminist Thought*. New York: Routledge, 2000 and Spillers, Hortense. “Mama’s Baby, Papa’s Maybe: An American Grammar Book.” *Diacritics: A Review of Contemporary Criticism*. 17.2 (1987): 65-81.

frustration these women experience is also seen in the texts of their literary predecessors Lorraine Hansberry, *A Raisin in the Sun* (1959), Zora Neale Hurston, *Their Eyes Were Watching God* (1937) and “How it Feels to be Colored Me” (1928), and Harriet Jacobs, *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl* (1861).⁸

One helpful example to illustrate how all of these concepts work together to inform and shape certain ways of discerning the communal womb is to consider one of the communal womb moments found in Toni Morrison’s *Beloved* (1987). The novel’s ancestral mediator, Baby Suggs, intercedes on behalf of her daughter-in-law Sethe. When Sethe arrives at her door after her nearly fatal escape from slavery, Baby Suggs bathes Sethe from her battered head to her ragged feet and wraps Sethe’s vagina and womb in cloth torn from sheets. The binding of the womb signals the reclamation of Sethe’s autonomy and subjectivity. By binding Sethe’s womb, Baby Suggs helps to recover her womb as a space that is not defined exclusively by its ability to produce chattel and sustain the workforce of a plantation but rather as a liberated space that can reflect the reproductive choices that Sethe makes for herself. Morrison’s description of the scene

⁸ Harriet A. Jacobs, born into slavery in North Carolina around 1813, holds the distinction being “the first woman to author a slave narrative in the United States” (Gates, Jr. and McKay 279) with her 1861 narrative, *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl*. As a slave, Jacobs was forced to endure the sexual advances and brutality of her master. Resigning herself to overcome her slave status, Jacobs bore two children for a local lawyer then his “in the crawl space above a storeroom in her grandmother’s house” for seven years before she fled to New York (279). Once there, Jacobs wrote her narrative under the pen name “Linda Brent” to protect herself from retribution (279). Jacob did not write her narrative in the first person, like Frederick Douglass, rather as the narrator of someone else’s story. *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl* attempts to examine the inner aspects of the slave woman and her struggle as a sexual being and woman in slavery.

demonstrates the ritualistic nature of the ancestral mediation involved in this communal womb moment:

She led Sethe to the keeping room and, by the light of a spirit lamp, bathed her in sections, starting with her face. Then, while waiting for another pan of heated water, she sat next to her and stitched gray cotton. Sethe dozed and woke to the washing of her hands and arms. After each bathing, Baby covered her with a quilt and put another pan on in the kitchen. Tearing sheets, stitching the gray cotton, she supervised the woman in the bonnet who tended the baby and cried into her cooking. When Sethe's legs were done, Baby looked at her feet and wiped them lightly. *She cleaned between Sethe's legs with two separate pans of hot water and then tied her stomach and vagina with sheets* [emphasis mine] (98).

During the bathing process Baby Suggs covers Sethe after she washes each section which provides a sense of privacy and acknowledgment of humanity. This is significant because prior to this Sethe is dehumanized. Schoolteacher treats Sethe as if she's an animal. Through the act of washing Sethe in sections and covering her up, Baby Suggs is able to reclaim and assert Sethe's humanity. In addition, Baby Suggs covers Sethe with a quilt, a symbolic representation of a community of African American women.⁹ Finally, the binding of her "stomach and vagina" serves a twofold purpose.

⁹ In Jacqueline L. Tobin and Raymond G. Dobard's *Hidden in Plain View: A Secret Story of Quilts and the Underground Railroad*, the authors develop a powerful discussion of the communal significance of the quilt.

First, Baby Suggs is applying a healing balm to Sethe's womb, her "stomach." She is metaphorically wrapping the fabric of the community around Sethe's womb to embrace and secure it. This binding is physically done by the spiritual leader of the community. Second, Baby Suggs binds her vagina. The binding of the vagina, in addition to postpartum care, is an intentional guarding and reclamation of Sethe's womanhood and new-found sexual agency. As a slave she did not have access to womanhood and sexuality because she was unable to develop as a human being. Sethe was therefore unable to envision a sexuality or personhood that was not controlled by and subject to a master. Baby Suggs heals Sethe (via a laying on of hands) and provides a space for her to develop her humanity and agency.

While Morrison's example is instructive, the wom(b)anist themes I identify in the film *Sankofa*, and in the novels, *The Women of Brewster Place* and *Corregidora* also reflect the complex relationships between black women, their wombs, and their communities. Haile Gerima's *Sankofa* provides several visual examples for my study of the communal womb. *Sankofa* foregrounds the physical presence of and need for an ancestral mediator who can attempt to reconcile the black woman, the literal and symbolic womb, and the black community. This reconciliation repairs the rupture—between women, their bodies, and the community—that the institution of slavery systematically produced. Moreover, *Sankofa* engages the ways that the black body is misused as a commodity by dominant institutions such as slavery and religion. Director Haile Gerima specifically addresses the abuse of black women. The film projects a

female voice, through the creation of a woman-centered narrative, to inform the historical recovery of black womanhood and a metaphorical recovery of a mythological Africa. The primary voices in the narrative belong to the female protagonist Mona/Shola and her ancestral mediator NuNu. Throughout the first chapter of my thesis I consider the interactions and confrontations between the communal womb scenes in *Sankofa* and the black womanist experiences depicted in the film. One of the conclusions that I draw is that the centrality of women's narratives in literature and history is crucial to the restoration of agency over their own bodies.

Wom(b)anism is central to each of the novels examined in my thesis project, *The Women of Brewster Place* and *Corregidora*. *The Women of Brewster Place* wrestles with social forces which subject women's wombs to the violence of neglect and betrayal. Naylor does not offer a singular female protagonist but provides several compelling narratives. Within this tapestry of voices are those of Mattie and Ciel. The death of Ciel's daughter compounded with Ciel's abortion sparks the communal womb moment in this text. Like other ancestral mediators, Mattie cries out in pain for Ciel and intercedes on her behalf with a physical 'laying on of hands'. Mattie's mediation provides Ciel with the promise of restoration of personal wellness, and communal belonging. In this chapter I come to terms with the complex array of roles that the ancestral mediator can play in my wom(b)anist readings that highlight the communal womb. For the most part then, the focus of my analysis in *The Women of Brewster Place* is on the role of the ancestral mediator in the communal womb narrative.

Similar to *The Women of Brewster Place*, Gayl Jones' *Corregidora* addresses the effects that a traumatic genealogical narrative has on the wombs of women within a family. The womb here has both symbolic and traditional meanings. At the same time that the womb is exploited for incestuous desire, prostitution, and slavery, it also functions as the portal through which the history of the Corregidora women is transmitted. Similar to *Sankofa*, the initial transgression against the women's wombs occurs during slavery; however, the ramifications pass down through subsequent generations of free women. The Corregidora women's legacy of forced prostitution at the hands of their Portuguese slave owner, Corregidora, and the burning of the official documents that detail their abuse, forces the marginalized women to "make generations" so they can orally preserve and transmit their narratives (Jones 41). The ancestral mediation on behalf of Ursa Corregidora's womb, presents the possibility of her transcending the trauma of her historical narrative, facilitates her reconciliation to her deceased foremothers, and her mother, and demonstrates the way that the communal womb functions as a specific thematic entity in black women's literature.

In conclusion, the presence of the communal womb in black women's literature is expansive. Thus, I note well here the fact that this is not an exhaustive account of all of the communal womb motifs and/or the communal womb narratives produced throughout the history of black artistic production. However, through the visual depictions in Gerima's *Sankofa*, certain powerful scenes of the communal womb are realized. In the haunting presence of the Corregidora legacy the ancestral mediator comes to the fore of

my wom(b)anist readings and my attempt to collect communal womb motifs within this thesis. The communal womb narrative takes center stage in my reading of *The Women of Brewster Place*. Here we can begin to see the potential of the communal womb to contribute to the broadest ranging sense of the black literary tradition. Again, although these three examples do not necessarily constitute full coverage, they do in fact demonstrate a wide range of the communal womb in black women's experiences.

The Communal Womb Motif in Haile Gerima's *Sankofa*

Sankofa is an Akan word that means “to return to fetch something that has been forgotten.”¹⁹ In general it is represented by the sankofa bird who dips her beak into her tail as a reflection of this definition. In his 1993 film, *Sankofa*, Ethiopian filmmaker, Haile Gerima, sought to reveal what he believes is one of the deliberately hidden truths of slavery: that enslaved blacks were active participants in securing their freedom through subversive and violent acts of rebellion. In his 1994 interview with Pamela Woolford, Gerima states, “I brought out the individual identities and motives of the characters, transforming the ‘happy slaves’ into an African race opposed to this whole idea, by making the history of slavery full of resistance, full of rebellion” (Woolford 92). Gerima reports that he met resistance from Hollywood when he sought financing for *Sankofa* because his depiction of slave unrest and slave-generated rebellion is a counter-narrative to its predecessors, including *Roots*, which according to Gerima, depicts a traditionally non-threatening picture of slavery. Subsequently, *Sankofa* did not receive enough funding to be screened at large cinemas and its success was dependent on small film houses and communities that raised enough money to screen it locally. Gerima was able to finance the production of a limited number of copies of *Sankofa* but a fire in the warehouse where the film was stored destroyed approximately 10,000 copies, an emotional setback for Gerima as well as the actors and production crew (Muhammad).

¹⁹ Grayson, Sandra M. "Spirits of Asona Ancestors Come!: Reading Asante Signs in Haile Gerima's *Sankofa*." *CLA Journal* 42.2 (1998): 212-27.

Gerima's resistance narrative regarding the production and distribution of *Sankofa* underscores his belief that uncovering Africa and African history is essential to the overall healing of society and transformation of the world (Woolford 94). Gerima's insistence that history and collective memory serve to spiritually and culturally transform African people through a connection to a past rich in tradition and ancestry, informs his urgency about the need for films like *Sankofa*. The depiction of African (American) history and collective memory at the heart of *Sankofa*, presents a unique opportunity to explore the communal womb especially Karla Holloway's notion of ancestral mediation in the film. Gerima suggests the healing power of history in *Sankofa* by creating a narrative that focuses on the women in slavery whose stories are marginalized by American culture. According to Gerima, ". . . the only weapon the African race has is history. And history exorcises, history heals, the African people. I think memory and history heal everybody" (Woolford 100). Gerima's focus on marginalized women exemplifies my wom(b)anist approach and foregrounds the necessity to fully conceptualize the significance of black women's roles in history and literature. Part of the project of *Sankofa* is to 'fetch' or recover the obscured and marginalized narratives of black women in slavery. *Sankofa* chronicles the narrative of Mona who is possessed by Shola. Mona's cultural disconnection from Africa prompts the possession that takes her back to slavery where she lives as Shola. Ultimately, Mona connects to and acknowledges her history through her experiences as Shola and returns to her present moment reborn with a more nuanced understanding of the brutal reality of American slavery. *Sankofa* informs my study of the communal womb as it suggests that life-

threatening violence perpetrated against black women and their wombs, is connected to the spiritual health and survival of black communities and the recovery of African (American) history. This chapter provides a brief summary of *Sankofa*, engages the critical conversation about the film, and explicates specific communal womb scenes and the implications of reading a film such as *Sankofa* through a wom(b)anist lens. This chapter also argues for the recovery of the central role that women played in the resistance to the institution of slavery, a theme that has thus far been obscured by critical discourse surrounding the film. Foregrounding Shola, NuNu, and Kuta's narratives in relation to the communal womb and African Asante history, honors the spirit of *Sankofa* and more importantly the legacy of female leaders and warriors who established African clans and led their people in resistance to oppressive institutions.

Sankofa does not necessarily argue for a metaphysical transfiguration that allows one to experience the brutalities of slavery, but it does proffer an understanding and openness to one's history that unveils the crucial role that women and the womb play in the construction and deconstruction of their communities. Within *Sankofa*, the communal womb and ancestral mediation provide a crucial linking of black women and their threatened wombs to the communities that are separated from and pitted against them. The communal womb also exposes an intricate relationship of women to one another, a relationship fostered on shared experiences exclusive to women. A wom(b)anist 'reading' necessarily suggests the inclusion of marginalized women and their threatened wombs so that their narratives can be explored and contextualized within history and literature.

Criticism about Gerima's film tends to focus on African tradition, symbolism and *Sankofa's* historical accuracy. Collectively, scholars that write about *Sankofa* attempt to tease out African metaphors, symbols, traditions, and cultures that Gerima utilizes to confront what he describes as the presentation of dehumanized black people who are incapable of advocating on their own behalf (Woolford 92, 93). But, with the exception of Sandra Grayson's scholarship, there is scarce discussion about the role of women or the womb in *Sankofa*. The silence around the women in *Sankofa* necessitates further exploration of how women, specifically NuNu, provide a crucial link to African history. The reluctance of these scholars to identify the nuanced relationship that develops between Mona/Shola and NuNu inhibits a more complex reading and understanding of NuNu's mediating role in Mona/Shola's life. This oversight reinforces a reading of *Sankofa* in which Shola's love interest, Shango, is the sole catalyst for Shola's unrest and rebellion and NuNu is simply a mother figure on the plantation. NuNu's character and her impact on the community are imperative to *Sankofa's* historical recovery of African culture and tradition. A wom(b)anist reading of *Sankofa* foregrounds and contextualizes NuNu's significance as an ancestral mediator, her vital role as a resistance leader within her community, and her place in a broader historical narrative that includes the African Asante clan.²⁰

²⁰ The Asante connection is originally noted in Grayson's "'Spirits of Asona Ancestors Come': Reading Asante Signs in Haile Gerima's *Sankofa*." *CLA Journal* 42.2 (1998): 212-27.

Current critical interpretation of *Sankofa* defines and categorizes the resistance leaders as men, which negates the importance and significance of NuNu's character. For example, Kandé's article emphasizes the male leadership of the Maroon societies. NuNu's authoritative position in *Sankofa* situates her within the historic African Asante clan that had female rulers who led their people into war and refused to succumb to British colonization (Grayson 220).²¹ A wom(b)anist interpretation of NuNu's placement within the Asante clan suggests that she functions to galvanize and lead the community. Her historical presence solidifies the role of the ancestral mediator within a lineage of ancestral figures who fought to maintain their communities. The importance of reading texts through a wom(b)anist lens is underscored in *Sankofa* as Gerima attempts to reveal and portray one of the truths about the history of slavery and the function of slaves in their own emancipation and the role women have in these rebellions. *Sankofa* relies heavily on the idea of resistance and confrontation as tools utilized by slaves to liberate themselves from an oppressive Christian indoctrination and institutional slavery. Slaves organized revolts between the 16th and 19th centuries throughout the African Diaspora; slaves refused to passively yield to oppressive religious and slave institutions (Kandé 131).²² In *Sankofa*, it is these institutions that threaten Mona/Shola's existence and

²¹ According to Grayson, after King Prempeh I was exiled in 1896 by the British, Yaa Asantewa became Queen Mother. Yaa Asantewa waged war against the British (1900-1901), was captured, and exiled.

²² Some of the historic slave rebellions include: Quilombos Palmares in Brazil, 1791 - The Haitian Revolution led by Toussaint L'Ouverture, 1822 - Denmark Vessey, planned revolt to take over Charleston, SC, 1831 - and Nat Turner's Slave revolt in South Hampton County, VA. which also took place in 1831 (www.PBS.org).

require the intervention of NuNu, who must also embody the spirit of resistance and defiance in order to withstand the patriarchal systems she encounters. NuNu mirrors the historical Queen Mother (female ruler) Yaa Asantewa, and leads the other slaves in a rebellion against the plantation. NuNu also refutes the authority of the Catholic Church and the plantation by practicing African religious traditions and actively participating as a leader of the rebel slave group, the Maroons.

I argue that the women in *Sankofa* are the resistance leaders and that their actions and interventions drive the plot of the film, which is not to discount the role of the men in the film who offer leadership and resistance as well. The distinction that I draw is based on my primary example, NuNu. This distinction is crucial because, in general, critical conversation about *Sankofa* relegates the women in the text to the roles of victims. This severe limitation prohibits women from claiming agency over their bodies, and their powerful roles in enslaved communities. This is not, however, to suggest that historically slave women had legal rights over their bodies. The structure of the slave institution removed these human and legal rights by classifying slave women as chattel and property (Spillers 75). A 1798 Maryland legislative enactment states: “In case the personal property of a ward shall consist of specific articles, such as slaves, working beasts, animals of any kind, stock, furniture, plates, books, and so forth, the Court if it shall deem it advantageous to the ward, may at any time, pass an order of sale thereof” (qtd. in Spillers 79). Slaves are listed among animals and household items, completely removed from any semblance of humanity or personhood. However, a wom(b)anist reading of

Sankofa reveals what Gerima argues is a more accurate depiction of slave rebellion, which was not limited to gender hierarchies, by establishing NuNu as an ancestral mediator (Woolford 64). Her actions create a counter-narrative to the institutional oppression of religion and plantation life that attempt to dominate and colonize the slaves. She provides the slave community with more than a call to action; she teaches, heals, fights, and steals slaves away from the plantation to live with the Maroons. The combination of NuNu's actions requires that her character be read as a primary resistance leader thus her physical placement at the site of threatened wombs signals a particular act of resistance against oppressive institutional structures.

Gerima writes and directs a woman-centered historical narrative that creates a space for women as leaders of rebellions, active bearers and disseminators of history, and meditative presences that transcend time and place. These are all significant components of Karla Holloway's construction of the ancestral mediator and my definition of the communal womb. Throughout *Sankofa*, Gerima destabilizes visual text and language including metaphors and symbols significant to the cultural, spiritual and physical recovery of black women. Gerima empowers the sankofa bird and NuNu's invocation of Asona ancestors to historically inform Mona/Shola of her ancestral roots.²³ NuNu's use of African language reinforces her historical connection to African cultures and traditions and denounces American religious and social practices. NuNu uses this language at the secret Maroon meeting to address the Asona ancestors. It is through NuNu's invocation

²³ Grayson notes that "Asona is the name for one of the Asante clans, called the 'fox' clan" (220).

and mediation that cultural memory and place of origin moor black women to a rich tapestry of diasporic ancestral women. According to Holloway's discussion of the ancestral mediator, the fractured biographies and histories of black women contribute to the construction of time as a flexible, fluid concept. Time is neither fixed nor static. The collapse of time makes plausible the unconstrained intervention of the ancestral mediator on the behalf of fragmented black women throughout the New World, the African diaspora, and Africa. NuNu's interventions and mediations are not bound to time constraints and she demonstrates this with her knowledge of events in the past and in the future. She operates inside and outside of time and place. Holloway also argues that "the idea of ancestry revises the histories that it reenacts through its intimate mediation of history and memory" (122). Thus the women who are marginalized by the written record of history are empowered and central in texts such as *Sankofa* which privilege the recovery of women's narratives.

Gerima portrays NuNu as the embodiment of resistance through her actions in the text as well as her ability to defy the conventions of science, a radical and incredibly wom(b)anist presentation of the black woman's role in slavery (as opposed to the passive victim of sexual abuse who allows the men to fight the battles). NuNu actions also exemplify wom(b)anism; she refuses to allow Kuta's baby to die in her womb after she is beaten to death and performs a caesarean-section. Gerima counters the argument that he imposes gender roles on his characters and says "...in Jamaica, in Surinam, men and women took different positions at different places to lead a rebellion. And I guess I didn't

get caught up with this whole politically required gender theme, maybe I was freer to make that happen.” (Woolford 96) I challenge this assertion and suggest that it is precisely his knowledge of the co-gendered leadership within slave rebellions that allows him to foreground NuNu’s narrative and let her character drive the story. NuNu invokes the Asona ancestors to watch over the slaves and connects their rebellious actions to those of the Asante clan, led by Queen Mother Yaa Asantewa who initiated what is now known as the Yaa Asantewa War, against the British when they sought to gain control over the Golden Stool (Grayson 222).²⁴

NuNu is one of the central figures at Lafayette Plantation, the other is Shola, and two tales persist about her; she killed her former slave owner by staring at him, and after her death, a buzzard flew her body back to Africa. In both narratives, NuNu possesses supernatural characteristics that allow her to manipulate and defy the constraints of the human body. NuNu’s story is one of the first stories told when Mona arrives in the past as Shola, and one of the last stories told before Mona returns to Africa. NuNu is also the mother of Joe who is born from NuNu’s rape by a white man on the slave ship that transported her to her previous plantation. Joe’s confusion about his identity and culture and his religious ideological practices lead him to kill his mother, prompting the final narrative of her return to Africa. Several scenes in *Sankofa*, detailed throughout the

²⁴ Grayson states that the word stool is used to designate the position of the king or chief. Asante stool history chronicles the matrilineage of the Asante clans. Grayson includes documentation from the British Governor which reinforces the significance of The Golden Stool stating: “the Stool...contained the soul... of the Ashanti.”

chapter, assert that Gerima creates a woman-centered text positioning NuNu as a central figure, or Queen Mother, who leads the other slaves on the plantation in spiritual and physical rebellion against the religious and plantation practices that attempt to oppress the slaves, destroy the communal womb, and debilitate the community.

NuNu intervenes, physically and spiritually, at critical junctures in the text when violence against black bodies is imminent. NuNu's actions reinforce the significance of a wom(b)anist reading of *Sankofa* as she consistently challenges the representation of the womb through stories and her involvement with the Maroons. NuNu and Jumma, another slave woman, stand at the edge of the sugar cane field where they witness Kuta and the other runaway slaves' punishment for attempting to escape. NuNu's presence is obligatory because her healing abilities are required in the aftermath of such brutal violence. She is knowledgeable about herbs and communicates with and invokes the presence of African gods/goddesses in order to fulfill her role as the healer within a community that experiences violence and physical degradation constantly. NuNu's presence also invokes an ancestral authority and informs her community about how they should interpret and react to the capture and punishment of Kuta and the others. NuNu understands that the murderous beating of Kuta is an affront to the entire slave community, a direct and deliberate assault on its womb, as well as its space of creativity, reproduction, and sustenance. NuNu's knowledge of the complexity of Kuta's actions, and the hyper-sensitivity of the community preceding the beatings, underscores the necessity for NuNu's relatively close proximity to Kuta as well as her imposing presence

in the scene itself. From the moment the head slaves hoist Kuta's arms over her head, NuNu's stance is defensive and protective; she stands ready with her herbs, waiting to physically reclaim Kuta's battered body.

The involvement of two black head slaves in Kuta's beating complicates NuNu's mediation; Noble Ali whips Kuta while NuNu's son, Joe, counts. Like NuNu, they are aware of the impact that their actions have on the community; they understand that Kuta's pregnant body symbolizes the condition of black motherhood in slavery and the physical aggression that they unleash on her is a direct attack on the black slave community. Joe's history of denouncing his mother for the religious teachings and practices of the Catholic Church and Noble Ali's childhood separation from his mother after she is sold, positions each man in a contentious relationship with black motherhood. Joe and Ali's complicated histories warrant their emotional distance from their actions. However, neither man is able to reconcile himself to the destruction of black female flesh or the black maternal body as evidenced by their attempts to relinquish their tasks and the trepidation with which they carry them out. Noble Ali hesitantly beats Kuta and stops at one point to look to NuNu. Joe hesitantly and wincingly counts, avoiding eye contact with anyone, especially NuNu. Ultimately, it is only through the overseer's threat of physical abuse and death that each man attempts to carry out his task.

Noble Ali and Joe's deference to NuNu underscores the impact she has on all members of the slave community, regardless of their individual commitment and loyalty to it. While Joe avoids looking in NuNu's direction, Noble Ali tempers his actions in

accordance to NuNu's authority and looks to her for understanding and guidance in the midst of beating Kuta. After thirty-nine lashes, Ali realizes that they are at the threshold of what is considered by NuNu as a tolerable distribution of physical punishment against Kuta's maternal body. NuNu's physical stance and attitude become weighed down with the enormity of the egregious actions of Noble Ali and Joe. It is here that NuNu's intervention begins and she utilizes her deadly gaze to strike Ali to the ground after the forty-fourth lashing. NuNu attempts to mediate on behalf of Kuta's unprotected womb as she recognizes that Kuta's life is in mortal danger. While Ukpokodu states that because Noble Ali is forced to beat Kuta, his demoralization at the hands of the overseer constitutes the most "humiliating aspect" of this scene, I disagree. This de-centering of Kuta's mental and physical suffering is precisely what *Sankofa* is trying to expose. NuNu acknowledges the compromising and conflicting position that Ali's job as head slave places him in; like the other slaves, he must navigate the power structure of the plantation but as a head slave he must enforce the rules and distribute punishments according to the owner's specifications. At this point in the text, neither Noble Ali nor Joe have control over what they are expected to do by the owner and overseers. Their actions are in constant opposition to the health and continuity of their slave community. Though NuNu attempts to construct a black womanist understanding of their slave community, the two men resist this in favor of the other dominant structures.

NuNu physically cries out for Kuta's womb as the centralizing, unifying thread of the slave community. Kuta's murder is the physical manifestation of a secreted

component of American history -- the annihilation of black female flesh and utter disregard for the black maternal body. Hortense Spillers' assessment of the condition of black female flesh and bodies in slavery conceptually engages the significance of Kuta's death and NuNu's subsequent intervention. Spillers builds an argument that the black captive body, the slave body, becomes the site of "cultural and political maneuver[s], not at all gender-related, gender-specific," which manifests as the "actual mutilation, dismemberment, and exile" of black bodies and the "seared, divided, ripped-apartness," of black flesh (67). Spillers draws a clear distinction between the bodies that were stolen by Europeans from Western Africa with the help of African slave traders and the flesh that was physically tortured and destroyed saying "this body whose flesh carries the female and the male to the frontiers of survival bears in person the marks of a cultural text whose inside has been turned outside" (67). Kuta's physical condition as an expectant slave mother lays bare her vulnerability as a woman in bondage and her classification as something other than human and female. The deconstruction and removal of the female identity for black slaves, propels them into a condition in which they are without gender. This condition subjects them to the same physical brutalization that the black male slave body endures and destabilizes the concepts of maternity and motherhood. In the absence of these categories within the slave institution, women such as NuNu are central figures who are present to intervene on behalf of the black female body and black female flesh: gender-related and gender-specific.

NuNu cries out in anger and frustration for the black bodies that endure acts of violence and sexual abuse from power structures and individuals acting on behalf of those structures. In another instance of linking African history with slaves that are severed from it, NuNu harkens to the Africans who walked on water and flew away back to Africa in the face of the perils and oppression of slavery and plantation life. She yells, “You know this is the only chain they have on us. You know because of this flesh, this meat. We would fly in the air. We would swim in the river, walk under the sea and soon we will be home. We will be home.” In this moment preceding her physical intervention at Kuta’s womb, NuNu prayerfully advocates for all of the slaves who must continue to endure the atrocities and abuses committed against their flesh. She serves as a source of reassurance to her community at a moment when the overseer literally beats the spiritual integrity away from its flesh and body. NuNu pounds on her chest in defiance and declares that they (religious and slave institutions) can never destroy her soul. This last proclamation foreshadows the physical death of her body at the hands of her son who is colonized by both institutions as well as the physical disappearance of her body and her alleged spiritual return to Africa. NuNu acknowledges that the temporary condition of the black body in slavery engenders violence against the flesh and death without dignity. Yet she advocates for and reinforces resistance narratives as a means of transcending slavery.

In a measured act of resistance and assertion of black maternity and motherhood, NuNu cuts Kuta’s dead body down from the wooden joists where it hangs. She calls out to the African god Akyemfo to assist her as she intervenes on behalf of the dead mother

who is about to take her unborn child, and she calls out to the slave community to physically gather around her. The slaves, comprised of men and women, form a circle of protection around NuNu and Kuta, machetes in hand, facing the overseers and black head slaves who have their guns drawn. The slaves place their bodies in physical peril for the sake of the baby inside of Kuta and NuNu performs a crude cesarean-section to deliver the baby alive. NuNu's invocation of Akyemfo, for spiritual counsel, and Nana Akonadi, the good mother, are consistent with her defiant act of saving the life of the baby that was destined to die according to the overseer. Her actions momentarily invert the power structure of the plantation. Though the outcome of NuNu's intercession is not the restoration of Kuta's life, NuNu's mediation at Kuta's womb does reconcile the community to one another; they stand united around NuNu during her mediation/intervention, and Kuta's baby becomes a symbol of resistance and communal unity for all the slaves, including Noble Ali who laments his actions and later joins the Maroons. It is important to clarify that Ali joins the Maroons later in the text as a result of the attempted sale of NuNu, not as a result of his beating of Kuta. His reconciliation with the slave community occurs when he acknowledges his role in Kuta's death to NuNu and allows her to swaddle the baby to his back to signal his renewed loyalty to the other slaves. Following Kuta's death, NuNu claims the baby boy as her own and names him Kwame, which means 'the witness'.

Further evidence of the centralization of women within the narratives of *Sankofa* are the various scenes that grapple with the womb, maternal loss, and the role of the

ancestral mediator in reconciling the affected woman with her community. *Sankofa's* communal womb-imagery begins when Mona enters the dungeon of the Elmina Castle at the insistence of Sankofa who demands that she return to the past. The dungeon represents the womb as a tomb. Elmina Castle is located in Ghana, and was built in 1482 by the Portuguese. It is the first fort built on the West African Coast (Kandé 134). Elmina's association as the final destination for African slaves prior to their embarkation to the New World situates Mona's possession by the spirit Shola within a historical narrative of suffering and loss of identity attached to the castle; the castle becomes a signifier of slavery and the Middle Passage. The dungeon of the castle acts as a metaphorical womb that conceives a hybrid form of slavery in which slaves are not solely property, according to the pre-New World definition of slavery, but chattel that functions in the same way as livestock (Spillers 79). In her article "Mama's Baby, Papa's Maybe: An American Grammar Book," Hortense Spillers engages the conditions that necessitate this restructuring of slavery stating that the erasure of identity from the black body becomes a necessary component of slavery that enables slave traders and slave owners to commit and justify acts of brutality.²⁵ The physical destruction of Kuta's womb is a signifier for the entitlement that slave owners' felt in regards to their slaves as property. Kuta's death constitutes a financial loss for her owner but does not register as a moral

²⁵ Spillers, Hortense J. "Mama's Baby, Papa's Maybe: An American Grammar Book." *Diacritics: A Review of Contemporary Criticism*. 17.2 (1987): 65-81.

dilemma or as a contradiction to religious teachings. The removal of identifying markers such as gender allows for Kuta's physical and maternal obliteration.

Mona's entrance into this historically dead womb which is brought to life by Sankofa's incantations and drumming, signals her acknowledgement of her psychological and emotional disconnection from her African roots and the complicated history of her African foremothers. This disconnection allows her to pose in front of and around Elmina Castle in a photo shoot without considering the grotesque legacy of sexual exploitation of black women that was produced within the castle. However, once Mona descends into the dungeon and the womb comes alive around her, she faces African men, women, and children, huddled together in chains. The dungeon as both womb and tomb that erases the identities of the Africans that are in it; families are separated, languages intermingled, traditions disregarded, and bodies are dehumanized. These images are so disturbing to Mona that she runs through the dungeon screaming, searching for a way out. Though initially she willingly returns to the dead womb of her African mothers, she is unprepared for the uncensored reality that materializes around her.

What Mona experiences in the dungeon is the possession of her body by the spirit of Shola. The conflation of the African ritual of possession and the narrative reconstructing slavery in the castle force Mona to confront slavery through the eyes of an ancestor who has already experienced it. Peter Ukpokodu asserts that Sankofa's refrains of "sankofa," and "spirits of the dead rise and possess the living," invoke the presence of

the spirit of Shola.²⁶ Shola's possession of Mona's body occurs after Mona denies her African heritage; when Mona attempts to leave the castle and opens the dungeon doors, the black and white slave traders drag her back and she yells that she's an America. Mona's refusal to identify herself in relation to her African ancestors parallels Shola's refusal to identify herself in relation to the field slaves and rebel slaves (later in the film). Mona and Shola share a disconnection from their foremothers, which prevents them from protecting themselves from emotional and sexual exploitation. They have no knowledge of the history of resistance that is woven through the narratives of their ancestral mothers. Mona and Shola psychologically separate themselves from black women that resist categorical definition by dominant social and religious structures.

Shola's possession of Mona's body provides the opportunity for both women to reconcile themselves to their African history with the intervention of their ancestral mediator NuNu. Mona's possession is complete once the slave traders rip her shirt off and brand her back. Mona's scarred flesh becomes a symbol of her previously denied sexual commodification. This moment mirrors the communal womb scene between NuNu and Kuta in which NuNu harkens to the other slaves to form a protective circle around her so that she can deliver Kuta's baby. The absence of an ancestral mediator at the moment of Mona's transfiguration requires the communal participation of the slaves

²⁶ Ukpokodu states that possession occurs in response to incantation and drumming and calls forth a "higher force" to "occupy the body" of a living person. The occupied body has the characteristics of the god, ancestor or spirit that inhabits it, in Mona's case she becomes Shola, a house slave on the Lafayette Plantation who is repeatedly raped by her owner.

who are present in the dungeon with her; they form a protective circle around her as she falls to the floor after the branding and the community embraces her as one of their own.

Shola re-emerges from the womb of the dungeon on the Lafayette Plantation as a house slave who loves a rebellious field slave named Shango and struggles with the sexual abuse she endures at the hands of her owner. Shola identifies NuNu as one of the people who can guide her towards self-discovery, a connection with her community, and the purpose of resistance against the slave institution. Shola's love interest, Shango, also teaches her cultural rituals and traditions, and encourages her to rebel against their slave owners and rebuke their traditions and values. Shola identifies Shango as one of the two people who initiates her spirit of rebellion stating that after Shango puts the sankofa bird necklace around her neck, she knows that she will be a rebel. While Shango contributes to Shola's awakening, his presence in Shola's life does not function in the same way as NuNu's. NuNu embraces Shola in the same manner that she embraces the slave children. NuNu provides Shola with tales that encourage her belief in African culture and reinforces Shola's connection to Africa. NuNu shares her childhood experiences in Africa with the children and the slave community as a way of maintaining an image of their collective metaphorical home.

NuNu's maternal embrace of Kuta's son mirrors her embrace of Shola at another crucial moment in the text when she mediates at the site of Shola's battered womb. NuNu tearfully tells Shola that Afriye was raped on the slave ship and bore a hateful child; it is then that Shola realizes that NuNu is Afriye the Porcupine. NuNu's narrative acts as the

catalyst for Shola's unrest and self-recognition and provides an important connection between Shola and NuNu at their traumatized wombs. Contrary to scholar Sylvie Kandé's argument that Shango alone "convinces scrupulous Shola of the necessity of violent action (she kills a planter in the canefield)," I submit that the shared experience of sexual exploitation between Shola and NuNu as well as Shola's ability to identify NuNu's true name and history forces Shola to reject her own identity as a victim. Shola understands NuNu's sadness and torment because Shola is continually raped by her owner, and it is through this shared experience of sexual exploitation that Shola recognizes the meaning of resistance. She subsequently idolizes NuNu as an example of strength, knowledge, and determination. Certainly Shola and NuNu's sexually abusive narratives are not exclusive to them alone, for as Spillers asserts "the captive body becomes the source of an irresistible, destructive sensuality" (Spillers 67). Similarly, bell hooks states that "rape was a common method of torture slavers used to subdue recalcitrant black women" (hooks 18). Shola's rejection of victimhood enables her to claim ownership of her womb; she murders her owner the next time he attempts to rape her. Shola's assertion of agency and self-recognition culminates in her physical death and the subsequent rebirth of Mona with a newly formed historical consciousness.

Note well here the importance of Shola's assertion of agency over her rapist in relation to NuNu's intervention unveiling a connection between Shola's act of agency over her womb and NuNu's interventional assistance in the posthumous act of agency regarding Kuta's womb. NuNu enables Shola to identify her place in a larger narrative of

African women rebels and leaders whose bodies have been sexually abused. Once Shola attains this information, she can no longer be placated with Father Raphael's insistence that prayer and faith will make her life better. In fact, the harder she prays the more sexually abusive her owner becomes. NuNu's intervention binds Shola to a larger narrative of sexual exploitation that predates both women; one whose "political aim... was to obtain absolute allegiance and obedience to the white imperialistic order" (hooks 27). The awareness of these narratives causes Shola to flee the plantation. Here the similarities between Shola and Kuta begin to emerge. Both women flee the plantation for the sake of their wombs; Shola's sexually battered womb, and Kuta's pregnant womb.

Once they are captured, both women are hung by their hands and beaten in a manner of retribution that is consistent with their reasons for running. Kuta's nine-month pregnant body is stretched out, arms over head, and beaten.²⁷ The overseer makes no considerations for her pregnancy and forces her to assume the same position as the other slaves.²⁸ The deliberate omission of this consideration with respect to Kuta's condition is a direct response to her attempt to deliver her son as a free black; an act so heinous from the perspective of the institution of slavery that she must be beaten to death. Likewise, Shola's naked body is stretched out, arms bound over her head, in front of her owner,

²⁷ In the opening chapter of Frederick Douglass' narrative, he recounts his childhood experience of witnessing the brutal beating of his Aunt Hester. He refers to this scene as the "blood-stained gate of slavery." As a 7 year-old child Douglass was mortified by the brutality of the beating itself. The master tied her arms up to a joist, similar to Kuta and Shola. She was stripped, and Douglass understood the awful sexual implications of the beating.

²⁸ This practice for beating pregnant slaves is noted by a former slave in bell hooks' *Ain't I a Woman?*

Father Raphael, and Joe. Because Shola's running away is associated with her rejection of her sexual abuse and religious indoctrination, her owner displays her nakedness to sexually humiliate her as he beats her. Father Raphael simultaneously presses a large cross into her chest and demands her renewed commitment to Catholicism as the slave master continues to beat her. The black female slave was subject to the unrestricted sexual desires of white men within the institution of slavery and any effort she made to resist sexual relations was met with violence and public humiliation (hooks 27). Shola's owner cuts out some of the plaits that NuNu put in her hair, condemns her for congregating with the other black slaves, and attempts to reclaim her body via the humiliation and brutalization of the aforementioned actions. Joe's presence in this scene attempts to reinforce the dominant power structure; he is NuNu's antithesis and the product of the sexual and religious colonization of the black female slave via the rape of NuNu/Afriye. Joe's presence attempts to reinforce the inevitable sexual violation of black women and it suggests that black people can be complicit in the destruction of rebellious and resistant African spirits. He is present at Kuta's murder and Shola's beating. Joe also murders his mother NuNu.

Finally, Shola's murder of her rapist completes her spiritual journey; she severs the sexually abusive narrative by chopping up her rapist with her machete before it is implied that she is killed and her soul travels back to Africa to join Mona in the dungeon of Elmina Castle. NuNu's intervention on behalf of Shola allows Shola to come to terms with her own sexual abuse and the constant destruction of her womb at the hands of her

owner and results in a more resolute, self-aware Shola who returns and becomes Mona (again). The conflation of the two women (Mona/Shola) emerges from the womb of the dungeon as a newborn baby through the birth canal with the learned experiences of an adult. Though she is disoriented, Mona/Shola recognizes the elder woman -- who covers her with a quilt -- as “mama,” further acknowledging her historical understanding of her place in African culture as well as the role of her foremothers and ancestral mediators. The woman covers Mona’s nakedness, offering her the dignity and respect that was not afforded to her by the photographer or to Shola by her owner – particularly in the scene where she is stripped, proselytized and beaten. Mona’s cultural awakening is complete and Shola’s spiritual journey is complete; both women have achieved a wholeness that respectively allows each to proceed with her life and allow her soul to rest in peace.

In addition to reclaiming the past and “making the history of slavery full of resistance, full of rebellion,” Gerima centralizes women within this re-historicized narrative and allows the ancestral mediator to intervene on behalf of the women, their threatened wombs and the communities that are deeply affected by the conditions of slavery. The criticism of the film leaves open the space for dialogue about the communal womb and ancestral mediation alongside issues of religion, sexuality, social hierarchies, and African culture. While scholar Samuel Ayedime Kafewo states that in the end Mona “runs to hide behind the old man [Sankofa], backing away from the photographer,” and “shields herself behind the old man on her way to take her pride of place among the African heroes and heroines,” this assertion negates Shola’s act of agency as well as her

resistance to a dominant narrative created by her rapist in which she was the victim. As a result of Shola's actions, Mona does not have to hide behind Sankofa, she has her own strength. Mona is also not the victim of "Gerima's camera-phallus" as Kandé suggests because Mona, through her connection with Shola and NuNu, is able to transcend the dominant sexual gaze of a white male society that is represented by the photographer's camera and the slave owner (Kandé 140). As a result of NuNu's mediation at the site of Shola's womb, Mona and Shola emerge from the womb of the castle with the potential for wholeness. *They* acknowledge NuNu as they sit down with the other men and women of the Diaspora at the water's edge to pay homage to their African ancestors and she acknowledges *them*.

Sankofa's depiction of the communal womb manifests through the collective memory of a mythological Africa. NuNu initiates this memory with her stories of Afriye the porcupine and her invocation of Asona ancestors. NuNu's intervention foregrounds the marginalized narratives of the women in *Sankofa*, which center on their battered wombs. NuNu's intervening presence at Shola and Kuta's wombs provides a direct historical connection to African culture and results in the possibility of wholeness for Shola/Mona. Thus *Sankofa* unveils Gerima's artistic vision of the crucial role of women within their slave communities; a vision that he created based on his research of slavery.²⁹ That crucial role is centered on complex and nuanced manifestations of the communal womb. For NuNu, the communal womb narrative consists of her violent rape

²⁹ Gerima elaborates on his historical research in his interview with Pamela Woolford.

during middle passage (a womb of sorts for the entire institution of slavery), the ways in which the product of that rape, Joe, becomes a walking signifier of the tensions between the black woman, her womb and the institution of slavery. And finally, the narratives that NuNu employs to communicate transcendence to the children of the community in the face of the brutal reality of slavery. For Kuta, the communal womb narrative consists of her desire to confront the institution of slavery directly by escaping. Her escape is a double confrontation with the institution of slavery because her womb has a specific commodity value within the institution. Her communal womb narrative then culminates in the community's posthumous reclamation of the child. Lastly, Mona/Shola's communal womb narrative consists of her transportation through time and place via the womb/tomb of Elmina Castle in Ghana and the subsequent brutal rape that she endures. NuNu's intervention into Shola's recovery of self and Kuta's beating/murder ultimately set the stage for Mon/Shola's rebirth through the womb/tomb as a holistic woman. Finally, these narratives and scenes work together to construct one of the most significant visual depictions of the communal womb and its attendant narratives.

The Communal Womb Motif in Gloria Naylor's *The Women of Brewster Place*

In the 1970s and throughout the 1980s, African American women writers and scholars confronted the objectification and (mis)representation of black women in literature by publishing texts such as *The Bluest Eye* (Toni Morrison, 1970), *Sula* (Toni Morrison, 1973), *Corregidora* (Gayl Jones, 1975) *for colored girls who have considered suicide when the rainbow is enuf* (Ntozake Shange, 1975), *The Salt Eaters* (Toni Cade Bambara, 1980), *This Bridge Called My Back: Writing By Radical Women of Color* (Cherie Moraga and Gloria Anzaldua, 1981), *The Women of Brewster Place* (Gloria Naylor, 1983), *In Search of Our Mother's Gardens: Womanist Prose* (Alice Walker, 1983), *Black Feminist Criticism* (Barbara Christian, 1985), *Beloved* (Toni Morrison, 1987), and *Talking Back: Thinking Feminist, Thinking Black* (bell hooks, 1989).³⁰ This is not a comprehensive list. Each of the novels, critical texts, and collections of critical essays listed challenge literature's traditional one-dimensional portrayal of black women as well as historical inaccuracies that dominated academic scholarship and political movements during this era of emerging women's rights. Womanist artists such as Ntozake Shange, Toni Morrison, Gloria Naylor, Gayl Jones, and Alice Walker, use their novels and essays create a space where black women put their experiences into their own words in a way that expresses a truth about black womanhood that was obscured under the dominant masculine narrative. Thus, identifying the relevance and importance of the

³⁰ *The Cambridge Companion of African American Women Writers* provides a comprehensive timeline of historical and literary achievements and moments involving African American women.

African American woman's perspective in literature, critical analysis, and theory, scholars and creative artists endeavor to explicate "when and where we enter."³¹

Gloria Naylor and Toni Morrison use their fiction and critical essays to raise questions regarding language, literary (mis)representation, and narrative methodologies that are inclusive of black women and experiences that are uniquely their own. In Toni Morrison's 1993 Nobel Prize for Literature acceptance speech, as she reflects on the struggles that all people have endured over time, she chooses the cultural imagery of a griot to engage and consider her thesis: language as power. The griot, in African and Caribbean cultures, is the keeper and disseminator of their community's oral history. Morrison's griot, an elderly African American woman who resides outside of the community, theorizes on language and the ways in which societies, cultures, and governments dismantle, reconfigure, and manipulate language to suit their particular social and political agendas. Morrison's centralizing of the African American woman as griot rewrites the negative stereotype of the black matriarch³² and underscores her influential and crucial role within the black community. This is a role that writers such as Gloria Naylor envision with the deliberate construction of a community of interdependent women in *The Women of Brewster Place* (1983). *The Women of Brewster Place*, whose

³¹ Paula Giddings 1996 text *When and Where I Enter: The Impact of Black Women on Race and Sex in America*, provides a historical assessment of the lives of black women in America.

³² Scholars such as Hortense Spillers and bell hooks write against the naming and labeling of black women. In her article "Mama's Baby, Papa's Maybe: An American Grammar Book," Spillers wrestles with the historical naming of black women by the dominant patriarchal slave institution in order to erase identity and establish otherness.

subtitle is *A Novel in Seven Stories*, creates a neighborhood of women that is literally walled off from the rest of the city, upward economic mobility, and political representation. Just as Morrison's *The Bluest Eye* tells the story of little black girls struggling to realize their identities and develop self-worth in a society that places a premium on Eurocentric beauty ideals, Naylor gives voice to all black women living on Brewster Place fighting the oppressive establishment of social, political, and economic hierarchies that hinder their upward mobility in life, relationships, and self-love.

The critical response to *The Women of Brewster Place* has been wide ranging in its interpretive scope and as a body of scholarship, it reflects the depth of womanist criticism as well as the possibility of wom(b)anist readings of Naylor's literary works. The reviews of the novel were generally favorable, if not ecstatic about the novel's literary and feminist accomplishments. In her 1982 review of the novel published in the *New York Times Book Review*, Annie Gottlieb exclaims: "Miss Naylor bravely risks sentimentality and melodrama to write her compassion and outrage large, and she pulls it off triumphantly" (Gottlieb 4). In another glowing review published in *The New Republic*, Dorothy Wickenden writes: "Despite the simple elegance of Naylor's prose, there is a risk that the accumulation of horrific experiences may deaden some readers' senses before the novel builds to its devastating climax. Yet the spirit with which these women cope is, finally, more powerful than the circumstances of their lives" (Wickenden 5). Throughout this chapter I will attempt to account for the ways in which my

wom(b)anist readings of the text help to explicate the powerful coping strategies underscored in Wickenden's incisive review.

Various scholars also eventually joined this discourse on the powerful impact of Naylor's themes and characters in *The Women of Brewster Place*. Michael Awkward's essay, "Authorial Dreams of Wholeness: (Dis)Unity, (Literary) Parentage, and The Women of Brewster Place," explores the unity of form and content in the novel and amongst its female characters. For Awkward Naylor's novel reflects African American culture's impulse toward unity "even in the face of powerfully divisive opposition" (Awkward 37). "The unity of form and content in Gloria Naylor's *The Women of Brewster Place* is, . . . essentially related to its exploration of the redemptive possibilities of female coalescence" (Awkward 37). The notion of female coalescence is consistent with my wom(b)anist readings detailed below. Although Awkward directly acknowledges that the disunity of the novel is formally reflected in its division into seven sections, he reads this formal structure as another element within the text (in this case the structure of the text itself) through which readers might better be able to appreciate the womanist communal wholeness to which the novel ultimately gestures.

In "Reading Rape," a critical essay not solely focused on *The Women of Brewster Place*, Laura E. Tanner explores the complexities of the relationships between the reader, the depiction of rape in art and literature, and the role of voyeurism that sometimes emerges through the reading and interpretive processes. Tanner distinguishes the gang rape in scene in the novel in one powerful passage. She writes: "[i]n Naylor's

representation of rape, the victim ceases to be an erotic object subjected to the control of the reader's gaze. Instead that gaze, like Lorraine's, is directed outward; it is the violator upon whom the reader focuses, the violator's body that becomes detached and objectified . . . As the look of the audience ceases to perpetuate the victimizing stance of the rapists, the subject/object location of violator and victim are reversed" (Tanner 83). This gang rape scene, eloquently glossed here by Tanner, represents one example of the kind of crisis that is a requisite component of the communal womb narrative. Therefore I will return to this scene below.

In general, *The Women of Brewster Place* wrestles with social forces that propel women into unhealthy relationships and subject the womb to the violence of neglect, betrayal, and brutality. Naylor does not offer a singular female protagonist but provides several compelling womanist narratives. Within this tapestry of voices are those of Mattie Michaels and Lucielle Louise Turner (Ciel). Mattie raises Ciel along with her own son after the death of Ciel's grandmother. Once Ciel becomes a woman, she chooses to be in a relationship and has a baby with a man who is not interested in building a life with her. Despite living together, Ciel and Eugene's relationship never develops into a mutual, intimate, constructive partnership. When a second pregnancy ends with an abortion because of Eugene's refusal to accept another child in their lives, Ciel turns her attention to her baby daughter Serena. The death of Ciel's daughter compounded by the abortion sparks my wom(b)anist reading of this text. Similar to NuNu, Mattie cries out in pain for Ciel and intercedes on her behalf at the site of her empty womb with a physical laying on

of hands.³³ The elder Mattie embraces Ciel and rocks her through time, place and circumstance until she connects with mothers and wombs of countless women throughout history (103-104). Mattie's mediation provides Ciel with the promise of wholeness because she has connected to an ancestry of women who have traveled the road she travels and survived. Mattie's intervention also prompts a dream in which Ciel's return to Brewster Place serves as the catalyst for communal healing and restoration. Though Ciel and Brewster Place's restoration only occurs in Mattie's dream, the dream signifies the hope that Mattie has for the future of battered women based on the healing power of the communal womb. *Brewster Place* demonstrates the potentiality of ancestral mediation on the communal womb and the significance of the healing that can occur there.

In Mattie's dream, Ciel's return appears to usher her into the role of an ancestral mediator as she conveys to Etta the feeling of being called back to Brewster Place. When asked if she returns because she is on vacation Ciel responds:

“No, I'm not on vacation.” Ciel looked around slowly. “You know, it was the strangest thing. It rained all last week, and then one night I had a dream about this street, and something just told me I should be here today. So I took a few days off and came—just on an impulse [...]” (179)

³³ Gabbin, Joanne. “A Laying on of Hands: Black Women Writers Exploring the Roots of Their Folk and Cultural Tradition.” *Wild Women in the Whirlwind: Afro-American Culture and the Contemporary Literary Renaissance*, ed Joanne M. Braxton and Andrée Nicola McLaughlin. New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press (1990): 246-282.

Ciel expresses the feeling of being summoned back to Brewster Place and articulates a general knowledge of the events that occurred there. This suggests that Naylor envisions ancestral mediation as a cyclic concept that reoccurs in order to wrestle with communal and social conflicts. To this end, *The Women of Brewster Place* examines the negative effects that toxic relationships have on the health of the womb, the woman, and her community. It also suggests that the physical presence of an ancestral mediator within this community helps to create a space where wholeness and restoration of women can abide and thrive. Naylor positions Mattie Michael as the central figure whose narrative intertwines throughout the remaining six stories. Each of the women characters struggle with the complexities of negotiating individual identity and communal identity. The disconnection of the woman from herself and her community emerges from her inability to connect herself to a larger narrative of ancestral women from whom she can gain direction and purpose.

Subsequently, these unhealthy relationships threaten to oppress the women and destroy the community by emotionally and physically damaging the womb. This damage and disruption becomes evident as the womb becomes a central target for assault, manipulation, and terror throughout *Brewster Place*. Each narrative features a poignant moment when the woman suffers a transgression against her womb by her partner or a man in her community, with one exception—the young middle-class activist who moves to Brewster Place to live among “her people” in the struggle. Naylor’s deliberate collection and creation of a community of women who attempt to construct a safe space

in which they can build relationships and friendships, and receive moral support and encouragement from other women who share their experiences in life, manifests on Brewster Place with destructive and potentially restorative results.

The traumatic experiences of the women that arrive on Brewster Place merge together and culminate in two events that threaten to tear the community apart. The first event is the tragic death of Ciel's young daughter, which results in Ciel's physical and spiritual decay. The second event is the brutal gang-rape of Lorraine which results in Ben's (the neighborhood handyman) murder. The death of Ciel's child and the rape of Lorraine both underscore the tragic narratives that emerge in wom(b)anist readings of this novel. Both shake the community to its core and cause a disruption in the everyday lives of the novel's characters. Therefore, this chapter focuses on these two events as pivotal moments in Brewster Place's communal womb motif and I will suggest that Naylor's rendering of each woman's story as a separate and distinct experience that contributes to the communal womb motif hinges on the initial and continual presence of Mattie Michael who witnesses, intervenes, or consoles the woman-centered community which results in the creation and dissemination of a spiritual, oral narrative, historically rooted in an ancestry of strong, (sacrificing), women.

Mattie's arrival on Brewster Place follows her son's failure to appear in court after she leverages her house to secure his bail. Her economic misfortune does not merely result in her dislocation from a home that she inherits from her ancestral mediator, Eva Turner, but it also continues the process of Mattie's eviction from family residences.

Mattie's loss of home begins with her sexual encounter with Butch Fuller which results in her pregnancy, enrages her father, and forces her to leave her parent's home. Once she recovers from these life-changing challenges, Mattie becomes a source of infinite wisdom whose understanding exceeds mortality and gestures toward a supernatural ancestral mediator and healer. Naylor effectively positions Mattie as a galvanizing ancestral mediator within the dismal, mundane struggle that women engage in everyday. Mattie's status does not come without personal loss and self-sacrifice. She denies herself from participating in mutually fulfilling romantic relationships throughout her adult life, arguing with Eva that her son is her first priority. Her self-imposed celibacy isolates her from the emotional connections that cause other women on Brewster Place to "fling dishcloths in someone else's kitchen to help him make rent, or to fling hot lye to help him forget that bitch behind the counter at the five-and-dime" (Naylor 5). Mattie exemplifies the ancestral mediator as her removal from the extremes of infatuation and love allows her to navigate the predicaments of the other women and offer constructive guidance towards achieving personal wholeness and healthy relationships.

Mattie's wisdom stems from her own naïveté as a young girl growing up sheltered by her church-going parents. This sheltered upbringing led to her teenage pregnancy. Despite her father's warnings against Butch Fuller, who her father describes as "a no-count ditch hound." When Butch comes to her house, Mattie cannot resist his charm and seductive advances that end in him inviting her to accompany him to pick herbs and sugarcane. Mattie heeds her father's warnings in part and brings a machete with her.

Butch's conversation is weighed down with sexual innuendo from the moment he encounters Mattie, and he does not cease until Mattie willingly relinquishes her virginity to him. Mattie's pride and inability to adequately and cohesively verbalize her actions prevents her from revealing Butch's identity to her father, Sam. Her silence acts as a betrayal directed against her father as Naylor reveals that he sacrificed his body, his land, and he made other undisclosed negotiations, all to benefit his daughter. Sam's self-sacrifices are reminiscent of those made by Morrison's Eva Peace who left town with both of her legs and returned with one leg and an insurance check for her family. Sam clearly demonstrates that he is willing to humble himself and sacrifice material wealth and gain on behalf of Mattie, however, when she is unwilling to confide in him, he pummels her pregnant body until she is "a pile of torn clothes and bruised flesh on the floor" (Naylor 24). Only the intercession of Mattie's mother, who threatens to meet her husband's soul in hell, forces him to stop beating Mattie (24). The sexual tension that permeates her interaction with Butch culminates in the violent interaction with her father that forces her from her home. Both men allow love and lust to generate emotionally charged exchanges between them and Mattie that ultimately shape the way in which she must navigate and live her own life.

Naylor's depiction of homelessness, home, and communal space develop in the home of Eva Turner, an elderly black woman. Faced with the challenges of being a single mother, Mattie struggles to provide her son with a comfortable life in an unfamiliar city. This quest drives her to the home of Eva who offers Mattie and her son, Basil, a place to

live. Eva's presence in Mattie's life signals the second instance of women attempting to provide a safe space for other women. The first was her mother refusing to allow her father to beat her death. Eva's concept of home and family extends beyond familial bonds to incorporate homeless women in need of a communal space. Eva exemplifies her dedication to uplifting family and community as she raises her grand-daughter Lucielia Louise, despite her age, and her ease in integrating Mattie and Basil into her life: "the young black woman and the old yellow one sat in the kitchen for hours, blending their lives so that what lay behind one and ahead of the other became indistinguishable" (34).

As Mattie's ancestral mediator and maternal example, Eva models a woman-centered communal support system in which she redirects Mattie's expectations for surviving as a black woman removed from traditional familial support. However, this framework of women living and raising children together does not attempt to negate or undermine romantic heterosexual relationships. Even though Mattie imposes celibacy on herself, Eva intermittently confronts her about this perceived unnatural state of being arguing that young women should have a man to share their lives with in addition to their children and women friends (37). The purposeful inclusion of romantic relationships as a requisite for healthy, "normal" womanhood, reinforces Walker's womanist theory which privileges the uplift of women and men at the same time in order to fully realize a more cohesive, loving humankind. Naylor seems to suggest that failure in relationships and marriages does not signal an inherent inability or character flaw within women to establish long-lasting, loving bonds. To the contrary, failure provides the opportunity to develop deeper relationships with other women whose wombs have also been

traumatized through various experiences. Eva also ensures that Mattie will have financial security and be able to afford to live in her home after she passes by refusing to charge her rent every month. This consideration allows Mattie to build a nest egg, something that she would not have been able to do if she was struggling on her own. Eva and Mattie exemplify Awkward's thesis (in his essay discussed above) that: "the protagonists of the individual texts actually form, at the novel's conclusion, a community of women" (Awkward 38).

Mattie's narrative, positioned immediately after the chapter "Dawn," the birth of Brewster Place, introduces the theme of the communal womb as a necessary and vital resource for her women characters who are thrust outside of social and economic support structures and it underscores Mattie's position as the central unifying force within Brewster Place. Celeste Fraser argues that Mattie functions as the antithesis to the stereotypical black matriarch and her role undermines negative portrayals of black women in research and public discourse such as The Moynihan Report.³⁴ While I do not disagree that Naylor writes against this restrictive, oppressive category established by white patriarchal hierarchies to objectify and undermine black women, I believe that she constructs Mattie as a character who embodies the vision necessary to positively influence her community. When Mattie succeeds in mediating on behalf of the women of Brewster Place, they are able to reconnect with themselves, the community, and a legacy

³⁴ In 1965, Robert Moynihan published "The Negro Family: The Case For National Action Office of Policy Planning and Research United States Department of Labor" popularly known as the Moynihan Report, it is an analytical study that argued that black women emasculated their men and destroyed their families.

of women who attempted to conquer the circumstances that threatened to physically and spiritually kill them. To the contrary, women characters that do not have access to the properties of the communal womb due to sexual, political, religious, or racial differences are more vulnerable to the perils and predators that lay in wait. This type of black matriarch is precisely what Karla Holloway identifies as an ancestral mediator. Mattie functions as the crucial link in the text between women's threatened wombs and the community. Naylor visualizes Mattie's role as one that creates a space for potential healing and restoration, as evidenced by Mattie's dream in which the community comes together to tear down the wall that stands as a physical barrier between them and upward mobility. While communal restoration only occurs in Mattie's dream, it serves as an example of a wom(b)anist reading in its fundamental attempt to critique destructive representations of the womb and the community. The dream also symbolizes the induction of another woman into the ancestral mediator lineage.

Mattie's experiences as a young woman under the guidance of Eva form the basis for her maternal relationship with Ciel, a fatherless child. Numerous similarities exist between the two women that further exemplify the way in which Naylor intertwines the women's narratives – underscoring again the value of Awkward's impulse toward reading “coalescence” of form and content in the text. Ciel, like Mattie resurfaces on Brewster Place, and though she mentally condemns herself and her daughter to live on the dead end street, Mattie's mediation reconnects her to a history of women who suffered and survived. Ciel struggles to raise her beautiful daughter Serena without the

support of her wayward husband Eugene. While the previous stories provide the woman's perspective from the onset, Ciel's narrative opens from the perspective of two men, Ben the handyman and Eugene, her husband, who are both failures as fathers, providers, and protectors. The significance of this narrative shift is embedded in each man's history, its relation to Ciel, and the irony through which both of their failures manifest in the death of innocent children and the commission of violent acts against women's wombs. Ben's inability to protect his young, disabled daughter from the sexual abuse of a white neighbor haunts him long after she runs away, leaving him with his own failure as a father/protector and ultimately driving him to drink. He recognizes his failure to stand up to his neighbor and defend his daughter. However, his paralysis is complicated by economic factors. Though Ben clearly identifies with Lorraine as the daughter figure that he cannot protect from the savagery and brutality of a patriarchal, materialistic world, it is also evident from his appearance at the beginning of Ciel's chapter that his parental impotence extends to Ciel and Serena. The narration of Eugene's story before Ciel, in her own story, underscores his selfishness, his outright refusal to be a father to any of the children he creates, and his infinite ability to blame the women who seek to protect Ciel and Serena.

Throughout Ciel's story, Eugene's refusal to conceive of a life that involves struggle and sacrifice for the benefit of his family is in stark contrast to Naylor's community of women who love and lift each other up even with limited resources. In a fit of frustration and anger at the reality of Ciel's pregnancy with their second child, Eugene

berates her and renounces his position within their family unit saying, “I’m fuckin’ sick of never getting ahead. Babies and bills, that’s all you good for,” and “with two kids and you on my back, *I ain’t never gonna have nothin’*” (*emphasis mine*, Naylor 94). Similar to Mattie’s deep maternal connection to her son that results from her status as a single mother, Ciel realizes that her daughter is “the only thing [she] ever loved without pain” and she becomes determined to provide her with happiness and love (93). Ciel’s resolution does not negate her desire for companionship, love, and a father for her children. However, she understands that Eugene’s restless dissatisfaction with the struggle involved in raising a family with limited resources prohibits him from participating in their lives. Eugene’s inability to participate and be present in his family has dire consequences for Ciel and her communal womb narrative.

Eugene’s negative attitude has an adverse impact on Ciel’s body, specifically her womb. This results in the abortion of their unborn child, and by extension the death of their living child, and the impending death of Ciel which is ultimately only healed through Mattie’s mediation. Ciel meets Eugene’s return after an indeterminate amount of time away from his family with trepid optimism and hope only to discover that her pregnancy compounded with the loss of his job destroys any chance of happiness and familial wholeness. After Eugene’s negative and near violent response to the news that Ciel is with child, she almost immediately undergoes a D&C (dilatation and curettage),

terminating her pregnancy.³⁵ In the novel, Eugene's "nothin'" (i.e. his emphatic statement that he wants nothing to do with his unborn child) is echoed immediately by Ciel's doctor referencing her abortion. The doctor calmly says: "Nothing to it Mrs. Turner" (Naylor 95). Still Ciel's actions only serve to disconnect her from herself.

After her womb is scraped and her child aborted, Ciel partitions herself into two women, one capable of facilitating violence against her womb, and one who fiercely protects it. In order for Ciel to cope with her decision to terminate her pregnancy she considers herself as two separate women. Ciel then dissociates from the one who makes the decision to have an abortion (95-96). The communal womb motif unveils the active manipulation and destruction inherent in medical procedures that "scrape it clean" for the sake of letting a man be a man, and having something in life (95). As in Gerima's *Sankofa*, a dominant masculinist act directed at the womb results in desperate maternal decisions that compromise the woman's body (Ciel's D&C and/or Kuta's posthumous birth scenes) and set in motion the processes of the communal womb. As a result of Eugene's indifference and subsequent negativity about Ciel's pregnancy; and Ciel's desire to have a man in her home for the security and comfort he symbolically brings, Ciel terminates her pregnancy. Likewise, Kuta rebels against the slave institution by running away so that her unborn child can be born free. Her actions signal the frustration that Ciel feels especially when Eugene attempts to walk out on her and Serena. Both

³⁵ Dilation and curettage (D&C) is a procedure in which the cervix of the uterus is expanded (dilated) so that the uterine lining can be removed with a spoon-shaped instrument called a curet or curette.

women serve as examples of what Gerima and Naylor envision as the consequences of patriarchal institutions and dominant ideologies. Kuta's decision results in her brutal murder and the posthumous birth of her son, while Ciel's abortion results in her split persona and initiates a dysfunctional dependence on the vitality and exceptionality of Serena. Although Serena dies and Kuta's son, Kwame, lives both children become central to the healing of their immediate communities by offering hope and the promise of unity.

Ciel is mentally and spiritually crippled by her inability to decipher or conceive of a life that does not include Eugene. This disability results in her making decisions that are detrimental to her and Serena. Despite her actions that terminate her pregnancy for the sake of her marriage, Eugene refuses to allow himself to be content and happy with his family. Instead, he resigns himself to leaving town again to allegedly pursue work. In lieu of what Ciel has endured because of Eugene's discontent, his impending flight threatens to destroy the barrier that she erected between herself and the woman who had the abortion (100). His abandonment of her and Serena forces her to confront the futility of her actions; she alone wants the marriage to survive and for the family to be whole. However, Ciel realizes that the completeness she hopes to find in Eugene is an illusion, "she looked at Eugene, and the poison of reality began to spread through her body like gangrene...and he stood before her just as he really was—a tall, skinny black man with arrogance and selfishness twisting his mouth into a strange shape" (100). Though Ciel finally understands that Eugene is incapable of giving her what she needs and wants, their confrontation physically and metaphorically separates them from Serena who becomes an

object of contention. Like young Basil, whose poverty stricken mother, Mattie, was forced to live in boarding rooms of motels, Serena is also subject to economically depressed conditions that render her vulnerable to misfortune. (Her death occurs because she sticks a fork into an electrical outlet in search of a roach). Her death, which I do not believe is Ciel's fault, is the result of the same economically depressed conditions that Eugene so desperately wants to run from and from which Mattie fled. Thus, Ciel's inability to parse out spiritual healers from opportunists leaves her and her children vulnerable and unprotected from the ugliness of a vicious society.

Ciel experiences the heavy burden of the death of her children and she gives up the will to live. The psychological crisis that confronts Ciel prompts Mattie's mediation and healing. Mattie is unwilling to relinquish Ciel to the fate of the many women who perish in poverty and destitution.

[...]Mattie stood in the doorway, and an involuntary shudder went through her when she saw Ciel's eyes. Dear God, she thought, she's dying, and right in front of our faces...'No! No! No!...'she surged into the room, pushing the neighbor woman and the others out of her way...She sat on the edge of the bed and enfolded the tissue-thin body in her huge ebony arms. And she rocked...And somewhere from the bowels of her being came a moan from Ciel...Ciel moaned. Mattie rocked. Propelled by the sound, Mattie rocked her out of that bed, out of that room, into a blue vastness just underneath the sun and above time. She rocked her over

Aegean seas so clean they shone like crystals, so clear the fresh blood of sacrificed babies torn from their mother's arms and given to Neptune could be seen like pink froth on the water...past Dachau, where soul-gutted Jewish mothers swept their children's entrails off laboratory floors...They flew past the spilled brains of Senegalese infants whose mothers had dashed them on the wooden sides of slave ships...And she rocked her back, back into the womb, to the nadir of her hurt, and they found it--a slight silver splinter, embedded just below the surface of the skin...And Mattie rocked and pulled—and the splinter gave way...They left a huge hole...but Mattie was satisfied. It would heal. (102-104)

Three pertinent themes emerge from the communal womb motif reflected in the interaction between the two women: the connection between mother and child, the historic sacrifices that women have been forced to make in order to save their children's souls, and the identification of the womb as the place where Ciel's initial trauma occurs. Ciel undeniably loves her children, born and unborn, yet she is unable to protect either one of them. Arguably, Ciel does not fall into the second category of mothers because her reliance on a wayward husband impedes her independence and ingenuity. However, Mattie's intervention calls forth mothers who embody courage and fortitude, characteristics that Ciel can look to for encouragement.

Ciel's loss of her unborn child and her daughter Serena are both sacrifices to a patriarchal system that forces women in her position to forego their agency and embrace

a subjugated position. In this condition, Ciel exists in a negative state of being where Eugene defines and over-determines her being and sense of herself. Mattie's mediation removes Ciel from this dominant masculine narrative and connects her to a historical, woman-centered narrative that unveils the origins of Ciel's pain as trauma to the womb. Ciel's abortion, an act that she buries deep within her own psyche, festers in her womb and permeates throughout her body, contaminating her until she can no longer function. Similar to NuNu's mediatory role in Shola's life, Mattie functions to assist Ciel in her transition from self-imposed death to self-recognition and healing by addressing concerns of the womb. The implications for abortion and reproductive freedom become inextricably linked through Ciel's character. Ciel exercises reproductive freedom by carrying Serena to term and by deciding to terminate her other pregnancy. The loss of Serena reshapes and redefines the pregnancy that she chose to terminate, ultimately exacerbating her decision. The interrelatedness of these incidents contributes to Ciel's spiritual death. Once Mattie's ancestral, maternal embrace subsides, Ciel's body, mind, and soul reject the suffocating categories established by Eugene and societal structures, and she leaves Brewster Place, to return again only in Mattie's dream.

The limitations of Mattie's ability to mediate become apparent when Lorraine and Teresa, who move into the community and share a narrative, are identified as lesbians. Mattie's own inability to understand gay and/or lesbian identity within the black community prevents her from embracing Lorraine and Teresa and rallying the community around them. Thus, both women are left vulnerable to the vicious, destructive

nature of the undesirable aspects of the community. Lorraine's sexual orientation places her outside of the protection of Mattie's ancestral mediation unlike Kuta's physical placement within her slave community. NuNu's posthumous intervention at Kuta's womb embodies the physical manifestation of a wom(b)anist restorative potential in *Sankofa*. The act of delivering Kuta's son and his survival symbolizes the struggle and resistance of the community, and its desire to maintain a cohesive network of families. However, Lorraine's community does not accept her lesbianism and she also ridiculed by them. The women of Brewster Place shun her and gossip about her, and the gang of young men verbally and physically assault her. On the other hand, Kuta's community surrounds her during the physical assault on her womb, visibly suffering each blow with her. NuNu also stands as a witness, held at bay only by the male figures of authority, and she attends to Kuta's lifeless body. In marked contrast, Lorraine's gang-rape occurs within a circle of young men who express vehement disdain and loathing for lesbians and away from the eyes of the communal ancestor. They represent the most brutal aspect of rogue male authority and cloak their social and economic ineptitude under the cover of darkness with intimidation and rape. Lorraine's banishment leaves her prey to predators and opportunists. There is no community of women waiting for Lorraine's ordeal to end so that they may embrace her; in fact, the other women are safe in their homes. When Etta Mae comes home late after sleeping with the minister, she safely walks down the dark street and Mattie waits up for her because she knows that Etta Mae will need her. However, Mattie has no access to Lorraine and her needs and no way to counsel Lorraine

to watch for young men who lurk around preying on unsuspecting women. Mattie can only bear witness to the result of the rape—Lorraine’s madness and Ben’s murder.

Mattie’s inability to understand Lorraine’s sexual identity prevents her from mediating on Lorraine’s behalf. Select members of the community shun Lorraine based on her sexual identity and encourage the entire community to reject her. Lorraine’s social isolation from the community, with the exception of her relationship with Theresa and association with Kiswana, renders her particularly vulnerable to unmitigated verbal and physical assaults. Immediately preceding Mattie’s dream about Ciel’s return, the narrator reveals that rain and unrest fall onto the community following the rape/murder and:

greasy cooking odors seeped into damp apartment walls; cakes wouldn’t rise, and bed sheets remained clammy and cold. Children became listless, and men stayed away longer at night or came in and picked arguments to give themselves a reason they could understand for needing to go out again. (175)

Mothers and daughters also suffer from haunting “stolen dreams” that result from the malicious attack on Lorraine’s womb (176). Similar to the slaves on the Lafayette Plantation who became agitated and disheartened as a result of Kuta’s violent murder, the community of Brewster Place, particularly the women and girls, are subject to extreme emotions and terror. Lorraine’s sexual orientation makes her a target for masculine aggression because they feel threatened by their inability to control and dominate her sexually. The other women and young girls of Brewster Place understand that while they

are not targets because of their sexual orientation, they are vulnerable to sexual and physical violence because of their gender. Lorraine's exclusion from the communal womb themes of the novel and Mattie's inability to understand her sexual identity separate Lorraine from Mattie's ancestral protection and propel her into a hellacious nightmare of sexual and physical victimization. Lorraine's victimization becomes a tangible, terrifying example for the other women of Brewster Place. The vital connection that is necessary for ancestral mediation and the communal womb's restorative properties fail to be established. Therefore Mattie cannot physically rally around Lorraine even after she is gang-raped; Mattie can only dream about ways in which Brewster Place can achieve communal restoration.

Whether readers choose to interpret Lorraine's rape as the silencing of lesbians and black women or a result of the stifled manhood of black males, Naylor provides no space in her narrative for voyeuristic pleasure. Tanner is once again instructive here. "Recognizing that pain defies representation, Naylor invokes a referential system that focuses on the bodily manifestations of pain – skinned arms, a split rectum, a bloody skull – only to reject it as ineffective. . . . [T]he structured blanks that the novel asks the reader to fill in demand the imaginative construction of the victim's pain rather than the violator's pleasure" (Tanner 86). The violent rape of Lorraine reveals a depth of human decay that lurks outside the protection of the communal womb motif; one characterized by Naylor's "referential system" used to describe it. The women's refusal to accept and include Lorraine forces her outside of the community and preceding her rape she

discovers that “she had stepped into the thin strip of earth that they [C.C. Baker and his gang] claimed as their own. Bound by the last building on Brewster Place and a brick wall, they reigned in that unlit alley like dwarfed warrior-kings” (Naylor 169). The physical boundaries that establish the structure of the neighborhood do not provide a space in which Lorraine can peacefully exist. Instead, her presence in both accepted and rejected areas of the community is perceived as an overall transgression. The neighbors, specifically Sophie, reject her at the Brewster Place Block Association meeting saying “movin’ into our block causin’ a disturbance with your nasty ways. You ain’t wanted here!” and “they [C.C. Baker and his gang] only had that three-hundred foot alley to serve them as stateroom, armored tank, and executioner’s chamber. So Lorraine found herself, on her knees, surrounded by the most dangerous species in existence—human males with an erection to validate in a world that was only six feet wide” (145, 170). Naylor’s unflinching depiction cautions readers against this silencing and marginalizing of women, committed by both men and women.

Mattie’s dream also functions to reintroduce Ciel to Brewster Place as an ancestral mediator whose return heralds the emotional and spiritual renewal represented in the communal womb motif. Each detail about Ciel establishes that she has become a woman with profound insight and spiritual connection to her community despite her lengthy absence. Her return also reinforces her position in the lineage of mediators that include Eva and Mattie. The three women are joined together in a heritage of healing, and restoration of souls and communities. To begin, Ciel’s unannounced return coincides

with the community's block party, their attempt to raise money for and uplift Brewster Place. She appears in a surreal scene in which she merely walks into the neighborhood where women recognize her and embrace her as if she never left. While Mattie initially receives Ciel's presence with trepidation, praying that she is not moving back. Mattie quickly realizes that Lorraine's rape and Ben's death summon Ciel. Ciel says:

I had a dream about this street, and something just told me I should be here today...something about that wall and Ben. And there was a woman who was supposed to be me, I guess...she was light-skinned...and she had on a green dress with like black trimming and there were red designs or red flowers or something on the front...and something bad had happened to me by the wall—I mean to her—something bad had happened to her.
(179)

Ciel's newfound ability to transcend space through dreams is consistent with the characteristics that Holloway argues are present in ancestral mediators. In Mattie's mind, Ciel embodies the intuition and foresight necessary to rally the resources of the community around women and their vulnerable wombs. Ciel's telling of her own dream, which according to the narrator tells itself, reveals her self-identification with Lorraine. Ciel becomes the woman against whom the injury is committed and she must return to the site of the heinous act. Like NuNu, Ciel is called to restore the communal womb motif after it has been torn asunder. Though she does not possess the details of Lorraine's attack, her connection to Lorraine is undeniable. Immediately prior to the death of her

daughter Serena, Ciel utters the word “please” to Eugene in a desperate attempt to keep him from leaving. In that moment, Ciel believes that the only recourse she has left is begging for Eugene to stay. Lorraine’s “please” is also a plea for C.C. Baker and his gang to stop, to leave. Lorraine screams this in her mind while the gang rapes her and aloud when she kills Ben with a brick. While this comparison does not seek to equate the severity of Ciel and Lorraine’s victimization, it does attempt to show the subjugation that both women experience at the hands of the male figures that attempt to silence and exploit them. Celeste Fraser suggests that this silencing serves to reinforce masculine dominance.³⁶ Ciel does not suffer a physical rape at the hands of Eugene however her womb is literally scraped as a consequence of his selfish desires; Ciel aborts her child in order to satisfy and keep Eugene. Both women lose their agency over their wombs. This loss spiritually unites the two women and allows for the transcendent connection that crosses distance and established western ideas of temporality.

Ciel’s presence anchors Brewster Place in reality in the midst of the unreality of Mattie’s dream. At a crucial moment in the text, the role of ancestral mediator bifurcates between Mattie and Ciel; the latter grounds herself in the complexity and immediate needs of the community. When rain looms over the block party, one of the women, Kiswana, pleads to Mattie to ask everyone to pack up the food and collect money so that

³⁶ “Stealing B(l)ack Voices: the Myth of the Black Matriarchy and *The Women of Brewster Place*.” Gloria Naylor: *Critical Perspectives Past and Present*. Gates Jr., Henry Louis, and K.A. Appiah. New York: Amistad Press, (1993): 90-105.

the profits will not be ruined. Instead, Mattie discounts Kiswana's interpretation in favor of her own saying "where I come from we know that clouds don't always mean rain..." (184). Mattie's inability to gauge the impending storm signals her continued disconnection from Lorraine's narrative which arguably initiated the week-long rain preceding the black party. However, Ciel answers: "I know...Oh, God, I know" (185). Ciel infuses certainty and clarity into the chaos that ensues after the rain begins while Mattie attempts to rectify the sins committed against the community by literally ripping the blood-stained bricks from the wall. The blood-stained bricks serve as the metaphorical representation of the blood that the women perceive to be on their hands as a consequence of refusing Lorraine access to the communal womb motif. Just as NuNu cried out to her ancestors for help as she mediated on Kuta's behalf, Mattie also cries out to the community saying "we gonna need some help here...it's spreading all over!" (186). Mattie understands that spiritual and social restoration will only come through the active will and actions of the community. The frightened women who have been haunted by Lorraine's rape also understand this to be true and recognize the blood-stained wall as a source of constructed oppression and banishment. In order for healing to begin, the wall and all that it represents, must come down. The insanity and mania of the moment escapes Kiswana who cannot see the 'blood' on the bricks and is unable to connect with the urgency of the women. Again, Ciel unveils a nuanced interpretation of the situation and presses a brick into her hand saying "does it matter? Does it really matter?" (187). Whether or not each woman can see the blood herself is irrelevant to the existence of the blood that has been spilled and each woman's implication in that spillage. Ciel grasps the

significance of each woman touching and claiming the sin as her own in an effort to move the entire community forward. Here the communal womb motif embraces the two women it previously abandoned with the mediation of Mattie and Ciel. In Mattie's dream, a restored Ciel returns to Brewster Place to fulfill her role as ancestral mediator and intervene on behalf of Lorraine in order to repair her and the community, but this occurrence does not take place in reality. Considering the extent to which the communal womb themes allow for exceptional conditions in temporality, I argue that Mattie's dream serves as a premonition of what is to come for Brewster Place. Ciel stands for hope and possibility, restoration and the potential for wholeness.

Naylor's novel in seven stories appears to suggest that a woman-centered community anchored by an ancestral mediator can only survive when the women unite together to work towards the uplift of all parts of the community. The communal womb motif becomes dependent on the collective effort of the women to improve, nurture, educate, and advocate on behalf of each other. However in the original sense of womanism, within this tapestry of female voices there remains space for men. Brewster Place's communal womb motif does not exclude the men in the community who desire to uplift their lives and the lives of those around them and in several instances we see women expressing the desire to build nurturing relationships. Considering the communal womb as thematic matrix within *The Women of Brewster Place* allows for a nuanced reading of the way in which Naylor privileges gender equality and challenges the construction of female sexuality, maternity, and identity. While this may seem to be a

contradictory statement, the gender equality that the communal womb motif gestures toward reflects a cohesive gathering of resources and the spiritual, physical renewal of the women. Naylor's novel leaves open this possibility saying "they [the colored daughters of Brewster] ebb and flow, ebb and flow, but never disappear" and they hold tight to their dreams (192). The importance of an ancestral mediator that intercedes to maintain the integrity of the communal womb motif supersedes Brewster Place's slow and impending death and furthers the dialogue about women's health issues in literature and the way that some black women writers wrestle with this representation. *The Women of Brewster Place* lifts the veil that covers the abuse that women's wombs endure as a consequence of socio-economic structures that oppress and victimize both women and men of color. It becomes the 'blood-stained brick' that readers and scholars must acknowledge so that we might grasp and advance the goals of womanism.

The Communal Womb Motif and Karla Holloway's "The Idea of Ancestry" in Gayle Jones' *Corregidora*

Published approximately seven years prior to *The Women of Brewster Place*, Gayl Jones' *Corregidora* (1975) addresses the effects that a traumatic genealogical narrative has on the wombs of women within a family. Similar to *Sankofa*, the injury that initiates the appearance of the communal womb motif in the text. However, the ramifications are actively passed down through subsequent generations of free women. The *Corregidora* women's legacy of forced prostitution at the hands of their Portuguese slave owner Corregidora and the burning of the official slave documents that details their abuse, forces the marginalized women to physically create generations so they can orally pass down their narratives. The commodification of the womb by Corregidora and the communal responsibility that the women place on their descendents creates communal womb themes that are wrought with forces that ultimately attempt to destroy it. The ancestral mediation that intervenes on behalf of Ursa Corregidora does not result in her wholeness but rather the possibility of wholeness, facilitates her reconciliation to her deceased foremothers, her mother, and herself. "Gayl Jones' *Corregidora* is full of ancestral presence in the characters of Great Gram and Gram, outraged mothers, and maternal forebearers of the narrator Ursa. Retelling the *Corregidora* story is a form of healing for Ursa who must recover from a beating at the hands of her husband—a beating which causes her to lose both her unborn child and her future ability to 'make generations'" (Braxton 306).

A number of critical responses to *Corregidora* inform my wom(b)anist readings of the text. In an essay entitled “Strategies of Subversion: The Deconstruction of Madness in *Eva’s Man*, *Corregidora* and *Beloved*,” Clara Escoda Agusti juxtaposes *Corregidora* with another of Jones’ novels, *Eva’s Man* and with Toni Morrison’s *Beloved* so that she might explicate the “persistent images of female madness in the form of hysteria, violence or silence” (Agusti 29). Agusti is invested in potentially subversive themes within each of these novels that wrestle with patriarchal perspectives on female madness. I submit the communal womb motif as another example of the subversive narrative strategies operating within *Corregidora*. According to Agusti: *Corregidora* explores the effects of both present and inherited oppression in the black female psyche, focusing on the psychological pain of the protagonist, it takes a further step in suggesting how violence and irrationality might be overcome, and black, female desire and identity might be uttered in its own terms” (Agusti 30). In a similarly significant connection to my discussions of communal womb themes in *Corregidora*, Ashraf Rushdy constructs a womanist reading of the novel in his essay entitled: “Relate Sexual to Historical: Race, Resistance, and Desire in Gayl Jones’ *Corregidora*. According to Rushdy, the narration of slavery in the novel “constitutes an act of intersubjective communion, the creating of a sensibility that the hearer is an equal sharer in the story to the degree of being as involved in its events as the teller, of believing oneself to have lived out what another experiences” (Rushdy 273). Not only does Rushdy harken back to my interpretation of Walker’s womanist definition – especially the exchange between “Mama” and the child regarding the slave-like flight to Canada – but his sense of “intersubjective communion” and the

experiential relationships between tellers and hearers dramatically underscore the role of the ancestral mediator in the communal womb motif.

For the purpose of this chapter, I will primarily engage Jones' *Corregidora* in relation to Karla Holloway's Idea of Ancestry and argue that the Corregidora women create a complicated communal womb narrative in direct response to the debilitating narrative of incest and rape established by their slave owner Corregidora. The narrative presence and influence of ancestral mediators, Great-Gram, Gram, and Ursa's mother Irene, create tension around the communal womb motif that challenges Ursa's self-identification and exploration as well as her inner-peace and wholeness. Thus, for the Corregidora women, the role of ancestral mediator is as Ashraf Rushdy argues a function of "intersubjective communion" in which their slave narratives "[are] the site of both enabling and constricting intersubjective relations."³⁷ The Corregidora women complicate the concept of the communal womb with their desire to pass on orally the traumatic details of prostitution and incest. The act of passing on information itself is not the complication but the negation of the women's individual narratives and self-development for the sake of maintaining the Corregidora narrative is. However, they do not contradict or negate the basic premise of my wom(b)anist reading—the idea that the womb is the central thematic matrix that select black women writers utilize to explore and critique literary and historical representations of black women's wombs.

³⁷ Rushdy's "Relate Sexual to Historical": Race, Resistance, and Desire in Gayle Jones's *Corregidora*" considers the relationship between the narratives of slave ancestors and their descendents and the way in which these narratives become shared experience (277).

The communal womb motif in Jones' *Corregidora* centers on the violent episode that results in the removal of Ursa's womb. Each plot line and/or narrative trajectory in *Corregidora* intersects with or is otherwise connected to Ursa's forced hysterectomy. On the one hand, this scene indicates the essential understanding of Ursa's relationship to Mutt. Mutt's possessiveness over Ursa's sexuality, in the particularly violent act of pushing her down the steps, renders him as a modern day version of Corregidora. For readers, Ursa's relationship to Mutt is a reflection of the relationship her ancestors had to Corregidora. Ultimately Ursa's decision to leave Mutt at this point in the narrative has much more to do with her sadness about her inability to "make generations" (i.e. fulfill the oral legacy of the Corregidora women) than about Mutt's sexual violence towards her or any of the actual inner workings of their relationship. Jones juxtaposes Ursa's marginalization that results from the loss of her womb with that of the lesbian women who attempt to facilitate her healing process. Ironically, Ursa's healing process is facilitated by women who identify with the figurative loss of their wombs and an abiding disconnection from their own sexuality. Cat attempts to identify with Ursa and says "You don't know what it's like to feel foolish all day in a white woman's kitchen and then have to come home and feel foolish in the bed at night with your man...I wanted to be able to come home to my own bed and not feel foolish. You don't know what that feels like" (64). Ursa does in fact know what it means to feel this way before and after the loss of her womb so that the inadequacy that Cat expresses about her sexuality and resulting marginalization become a shared experience.

After Ursa's physical body heals she mentally journeys into her past to recall the wom(b)anist narratives of making generations: "...the important thing is making generations. They can burn the papers but they can't burn conscious, Ursa. And that's what makes the evidence. And that's what makes the verdict" (Corregidora 22). For Ursa and for the narrative itself, making generations reflects the confluence of ancestral mediation and the communal womb motif as central to the Corregidora women's narrative. The history of the Corregidora women's pain, incest, and exploitation requires an oral imperative so that the transmission of their stories cannot be contaminated or destroyed by history's written record. The tension between oral and written history is highlighted in the concepts of making generations, Ursa's singing of the blues, and the ways in which Ursa's ancestors used oral sex to subvert the hierarchy brutally maintained by their master. The fact that Ursa realizes this agency through oral sex (and the vulnerability that is there) is captured in the ultimate scene of the novel, not between Ursa's ancestors and their slave masters but between Ursa and Mutt.

Ursa's singing of the blues, and Mutt's anxiety about her life as a performer, are the precursors to his violent act against her. Mutt's inability to possess her and shape her oral narrative drives him insane and ultimately ends in the destruction of her womb. Although the singing of the blues is a predicate to the loss of her womb, it is also the response to the loss and the way in which Ursa is able to recover from the fact that she will be the last of the Corregidora women. The singing of the blues is also the means by which she interprets and articulates the Corregidora narrative. Ursa tells her mother:

“Then let me give witness the only way I can...Everything said in the beginning must be said better than in the beginning,” and “Yes, if you understood me, Mama, you’d see that I was trying to explain it, in blues, without words, the explanation somewhere behind the words. To explain what will always be there” (Corregidora 54, 66). Ursa’s singing represents a wom(b)anist act of agency that helps to form the communal womb motif of the text in which she uses her voice to shape her familial narrative and resist the dominant construction of her sexuality by Mutt/Corregidora.

The pivotal ‘push’ scene exemplifies the interconnectivity of the Corregidora narratives, wom(b)anism, the oral tradition, and the communal womb motif . In this one particular moment, Ursa’s history, present, and future converge and stall based upon one violent act carried out by Mutt who sometimes exhibits attributes of Corregidora himself. Even without revisiting Ursa’s distant history, the scene of Mutt pushing her down the steps is a powerful signifier of the abusive relationship between Ursa’s mother and father. Ursa’s mom reflects:

He was staying at some boarding house up in Cincinnati. I hadn’t heard from him, and then he sent me this money. No letter, just this money and his address on the outside...He knew when he sent that, I be up there. I was up there...I went in and closed the door, He turned on me and first thing he said was, “Bitch.” He said it again. “Bitch”...“Money’s not how I helped you. I helped you that night, didn’t I?” He held my arm. “Didn’t I?” “You’re hurting me.” He squeezed tighter. I kept trying to get away,

but then he started slapping me, just slapping me all over the face. One time it was like he was going to go for some place else, like he was going to go straight for my cunt, or my belly, or some place like that, but then he stopped himself, and just kept slapping me all over my face, twisting me, and slapping me all over the face...But all of a sudden he just stopped...He just let me go on to the door, then. Or I thought he was going to let me. He kept looking at me like he was hurt, and then when I tried to get around him to the door, he stood aside. But then all of a sudden he grabbed my pants. He grabbed them and the elastic broke...He just stood looking at me, like he was real, real calm now, and then all at once the evil come back, and then he said, "Get out"...He said, "Go on down the street, lookin like a whore. I wont you to go on down the street, lookin like a whore[...]". (118-121)

Ursa's ability to normalize Mutt's abusive behavior is an indirect result of the normalizing of abuse in the relationship between her mother and father as well as between her foremothers and Corregidora. Like the oral narrative, this legacy of physical and verbal abuse passes down through the Corregidora women.

In the section of her text entitled "Mediated Wholeness," Holloway states that certain black women writers do not necessarily provide positive outcomes or "wholeness" for their heroines. Sometimes, through ancestral mediation, a space is opened that allows the heroines to spiritually reconnect with their ancestry (116-17). This

space enables Ursa to unveil the secrets of her mother and great grandmother which initiates her journey towards understanding herself as a woman though it is clear from the ending that she cannot yet visualize this. Ursa says: “I held his ankles. I didn’t know how much was me and Mutt and how much was Great Gram and Corregidora—like Mama when she had started talking like Great-Gram” (Corregidora 184). Ursa’s inability to detach from her familial narrative exposes the ways in which the Corregidora women’s lives rupture as they attempt to wrestle with their fractured histories. Holloway further identifies this fracture as a more accurate representation of black women writers’ literature and asserts that “because women’s cultures of the diaspora are fractured by history, the creative literature of African-American women has revised its form of documentation;” thus travel between past and present worlds becomes plausible, necessary and acceptable (122). Throughout the text Ursa asserts that each Corregidora woman who tells the story of the Portuguese slave owner becomes the living embodiment of the one who lived through the experience. It is as though each woman always existed. The women lose their own identities when they are in the act of retelling so that time and place collapse. Each life merges into one until there is no differentiation between the generations. Ursa states:

“Corregidora. Old Corregidora, the Portuguese slave breeder and whoremonger. (Is that what they call them?) He fucked his own whores and fathered his own breed. They did the fucking and had to bring him the money they made. My grandmamma was his daughter, but he was fucking

her too. She said when they did away with slavery down there they burned all the slavery papers so it would be like they never had it.”

“Who told you all ‘at?”

“My great-grandmama told my grandmamma the part she lived through that my grandmamma didn’t live through and my grandmamma told my mama what they both lived through and my mama told me what they all lived through and we were suppose to pass it down like that from generation to generation so we’d never forget. Even though they’d burned everything to play like it didn’t never happen[...]”. (9)

The matrilineal ancestors in *Corregidora* orally reproduce the painful history that mentally enslaves them in order to reclaim the lives, sexuality, and humanity that is lost to a sexually and socially prejudiced patriarchal structure practiced by their former slave owner. *Corregidora*’s vile actions that manifest as prostitution and incest, exemplify the antithesis of the communal womb motif. If we consider the *Corregidora* women’s act of orally reproducing history via a wom(b)anist interpretation, then *Corregidora*’s financial gain and perversions are an egregious affront to the womb. The basic premise of wom(b)anism establishes that there must be a critical examination of literary and historical representations of the womb in which the communal womb motif is central and thematically significant. The physical and spiritual corruption of the womb that *Corregidora* engages in serves to place it in crisis which results in the women’s counter-narrative. Theologian and scholar Katie Canon states:

The Black female community connects the entire range and spectrum of Black suffering to the history of this country, a history grounded in slavery, a history whose purpose and intent is denying Black people their full humanity. Suffering primarily arises from the inevitable trials and tribulations that come with being Black and female in a society that despises both. (91-92)³⁹

As was the case with black female bodies in slavery, the Corregidora women did not have agency over their sexuality.⁴⁰ Corregidora's forced prostitution and incest serves as a particularly heinous example of the disregard slave owners had for their female slaves. We can draw a parallel here to Gerima's Shola and Kuta whose sexuality was used against them (one raped, the other beaten to death while pregnant). While a slave revolt occurs in *Sankofa*, Corregidora's phallogentric abuse of power results in the continued sexual manipulation and degradation of his female slaves, generational disregard for his children, and the erasure of the documents that bear witness to the sins of the father (which legally removes the evidence of his "genital fantasies") (Corregidora 59). The women act like a microcosm of the African American community, orally passing on the worst transgressions while simultaneously transforming them into the means through which a terrible history might be shared.

³⁹ Canon, Katie. *Katie's Canon: Womanism and the Soul of the Black Community*. New York: Continuum, 1995.

⁴⁰ Scholars Hortense Spillers, bell hooks, and Patricia Hill Collins confront issues of black female sexuality originating from slavery.

The Corregidora women follow the African diasporic tradition of orally transferring history that refutes the written record and position themselves as “the originator[s] of women’s alternative voice[s]...transmitter[s] of memory” (Hochberg 2). We see this challenge to the oral record in *Corregidora* when Ursa contests the truth of Great Gram’s account of sexual violence perpetrated against the Corregidora slave women. When Ursa asks her, “you telling the truth, Great Gram?” she slaps her across the face reinforcing the historical narrative. She says:

When I’m telling you something don’t you ever ask if I’m lying. Because they didn’t want to leave no evidence of what they done—so it couldn’t be held against them. And I’m leaving evidence. And you got to leave evidence too. And your children got to leave evidence. And when it come time to hold up the evidence, we got to have evidence to hold up. That’s why they burned all the papers, so there wouldn’t be no evidence to hold up against them. (14)

Holloway also engages this concept in “Mediated Voices.” This section of Holloway’s text provides an in-depth examination of the way Jones, Marshall, Naylor and Shange use voice (i.e. the oral tradition) in their texts to create and engage history and mythology. Holloway states “the woman-centered ideology in African and African-American women’s literature places with women’s creative powers both the ability to create life and the ability to tell – to reveal the quality, dimensions and history of living” (132). Holloway uses this argument to examine the oral narratives presented in *Corregidora* and

Praisesong for the Widow and the way these narratives are challenged by written history.

In the latter novel, Marshall's main character Avey (Avatara), who is spiritually and culturally lost, is haunted by the childhood memory of questioning her great-aunt Cuney about the validity of the story of the Ibos. As a child, Avey spent part of the summer with her great-aunt who would ritualistically walk her down to the dock and tell her the story of the Ibos. According to Aunt Cuney, the Ibos were stolen from Africa and brought by slave ship to America. Upon exiting the ship and looking out on the new, unknown world and their white enslavers, they turned back to the water and walked across it to return to Africa. Every summer Aunt Cuney told Avey the story of the Ibos until one summer Avey asks "But how come they didn't drown Aunt Cuney?" (Marshall 39) In response to Avey's challenge of this oral narrative, Aunt Cuney argues that the written record, in this case the Bible, does not have to prove itself true; "did it say Jesus drowned when he went walking on the water in that Sunday School book your momma always sends you with?" (Marshall 40)

Great Gram and Aunt Cuney privilege oral history over written history and they attempt to reinforce the validity of this manner of passing on information. NuNu also reveres history as told by her ancestors and presents this form of storytelling as Truth, while refuting the written record of the Bible and the teachings of the Catholic Church in the film, *Sankofa*. Finally, Mattie embraces this type of shared history by physically and spiritually invoking the past experiences of female ancestors and passing them on through a laying on of hands. Aunt Cuney, Great Gram, Gram, NuNu, and Mattie all reconstruct

historical narratives that revive their ancestral matrilineage and empower successive generations. For Great Gram, the importance of telling her story also arises from the erasure and alteration of the maternal position for slave mothers. According to scholar Clara Escoda Agusti, the black female body is “stamped” and marked by “slavery’s patriarchal system” so that slave women have no claim to their bodies or their children.⁴¹

For the Corregidora women this means that their slave owner has the right to prostitute the mothers and daughters, rape and father children with his own daughters, and punish them for resisting his sexual desires. Great Gram tells Ursa a story about Corregidora that exposes the depth of his possessiveness over his “gold pieces” in which he has his underlings hunt down a seventeen-year-old black youth who dares to talk privately with Great Gram. Corregidora’s jealousy prompts him to rape Great Gram while verbally reinforcing his authority over her. Great Gram subverts the dominant patriarchal structure by creating a counter-narrative to Corregidora’s, thus removing his claim on the wombs of her descendents. Great Gram’s determination to define herself and exist outside of Corregidora’s power refutes the historical dominance that white men exerted over their female slaves and later black women in general.

Scholar Madhu Dubey also points to the disruption of maternal and parental rights of slaves as a contributing source of generational and cultural “rupture” and asserts that

⁴¹ Agusti wrestles with the representations of psychosis in the black woman as a societal construct. She deftly argues that the black woman is placed in opposition to the white male, patriarchal structures, and the nuanced language that allows for self-expression and definition. She concludes that black female sexual desire and acceptance must destabilize the oppressive language of patriarchy and sexism in order for black women to define and empower themselves.

black women writers must recreate and piece together this history (Dubey 247). In her article “The Matrilineal Metaphor of Tradition,” Dubey revisits Alice Walker’s literary and cultural search for Zora Neale Hurston that serves as an example of black women writers’ dedication and desire to unearth their ancestral foremothers and “overcome a history of cultural disinheritance by means of a familial fiction of origin and connection” (247). Like Walker, Ursa also searches for her maternal history, one that exists outside of the *Corregidora* narratives and that has been kept from her. Ursa’s attempt to unveil her mother’s and Great Gram’s personal stories and place them within the larger history of the *Corregidora* women signals her movement towards communal restoration.

However, as Holloway suggests, the presence or invocation of an ancestral mediator does not always signal the onset of a positive intervention. Ursa’s initial wom(b)anist detachment occurs at birth as her matrilineal ancestors sever her from self-identification and individuality in order to preserve the family’s history. As a result, Ursa never possesses her own womb and does not have an original narrative from which she can form an identity. She is one of *Corregidora*’s women despite never meeting him or living through what her foremothers experienced. Ursa states: “I am Ursa *Corregidora*. I have tears for eyes. I was made to touch my past at an early age. I found it on my mother’s tiddies. In her milk...” (*Corregidora* 77). Ursa’s disconnection from her own womb hinders her from interacting with men and engaging in healthy relationships. Therefore she maintains an emotional distance from them. Ursa’s womb becomes the space for conflicting forces that inhibit and challenge her ability to define herself as a

woman. Unlike Mona/Shola and Ciel, Ursa's communal womb crisis stems from and resolves via the interventions of her ancestral mediators.

Ursa's second and equally damning crisis in the communal womb motif results from her husband Mutt's attack, born out of jealousy and possessiveness. Mutt pushes Ursa down a flight of stairs causing her to miscarry their child and lose her womb. Ursa's inability to conceive and the loss of the child that could have continued the Corregidora narrative further alienates Ursa from self-identification and acceptance. In one of several inner-dialogues between her and Mutt, Ursa reflects:

“What do you feel?”

“As if part of my life's already been marked out for me-the barren part.”

I lay on my back, feeling as if something more than the womb had been taken out. (6)

This loss challenges Ursa to redefine her place as one of the Corregidora women. Ursa's existence, without this oral narrative as her anchor, allows for the emergence of the communal womb motif so that the Corregidora history no longer solely functions to reproduce what was destroyed. The removal of Ursa's womb allows for her separation from an identity that merges with her ancestors in an unhealthy erasure of personal agency. Ursa becomes detached from an inherited lineage of pain and victimization and wrestles with her own choices and emotions that she continues to express in her singing of the blues.

Holloway argues that: “the idea of ancestry revises the histories that it reenacts through its intimate mediation of history and memory” (122). The women who the written record and history marginalize are empowered and central in these texts. The ancestral mediation, presence and voice permeate throughout these texts and language is destabilized to include metaphors and symbols specific to the cultural, spiritual and physical recovery of women within the texts. Ursa immerses herself in singing the blues and creates her own interpretation of the stories told to her by her mother, Gram, and Great Gram. She struggles to embrace the familial narrative in a way that does not erase her individuality that results in her transforming the pain of the Corregidora legacy into song. However, Ursa’s relationship is over-determined by the way in which her ancestors interact with Corregidora. This manifests as Mutt’s re-enactment of Corregidora’s sexual possessiveness, which in turn, leads to Ursa’s hysterectomy and the sexual act that severs the ties between Corregidora and Great Gram but unites Mutt and Ursa. Mutt’s anger stems from Ursa’s ability to express the pain and sexual frustration of women, which attracts other men. Like Corregidora, Mutt doesn’t want any other man “messing” with his woman and attempts to control her sexuality and her womb (Corregidora 3). His actions do result in the loss of her ability to retell the Corregidora narrative but perhaps more importantly this loss removes her from existing as one of Corregidora’s women so that Ursa reclaims her own voice and renders her own version of her ancestor’s plight.

Ursa further solidifies her physical and mental detachment from the Corregidora narrative by seeking the truth from her mother about the personal story that she created

with Ursa's father. While Irene does not experience a healthy relationship herself, her marriage temporarily separates her from the Corregidora narrative, creating a space for her to grow. Each of the Corregidora women (except Gram) has a separate narrative that they keep from the other women. Although Irene can't embrace this detachment or Ursa's father and alter the trajectory of the family, her actions do suggest the possibility of transcendence. The revelation Irene provides serves as the catalyst for Ursa to reconsider her own failed marriages and her unacknowledged feelings as Irene creates a personal space in which Ursa can begin to grow.

The struggle to pass on personal and familial narratives becomes victory for the survivors and has the potential to be transformational. The anti-communal becomes communal and the tragedy of Corregidora's slavery, prostitution, and incestuous desires dies with Ursa's loss. Ursa is no longer capable of passing on the complicated familial narrative that dominates the women's lives thus gaining a space in which communal and self-restoration can begin to occur. In Ursa's pursuit of wholeness, Irene and Great-Gram's personal stories become communal thus creating a space of healing for all of the Corregidora women. This moment between Irene and Ursa mirrors the one between NuNu and Shola in which NuNu tearfully acknowledges her place in the abusive slave institution. As a result of NuNu's confession, Shola is able to understand her role in the same institution and gain strength and hope from NuNu's example. As Holloway affirms however, restoration does not always look like wholeness. Therefore, just as Shola achieves restoration through the loss of her life, Ursa reaches the potential for restoration

only through her hysterectomy. While Ursa does not return to her community whole, her knowledge of her foremothers allows her to reconsider herself separate from the Corregidora women.

This particular example pushes the meaning of the womb to the forefront of this project. In many ways, the communal womb motif fundamentally relies upon traditional definitions of the womb as the organ in which human life gestates and is born into reality. The communal womb motif contains this meaning while at the same time it encapsulates the figurative sense with which I interpret, critique, and engage passages and narratives that feature the womb. Although I acknowledge that these kinds of wom(b)anist readings must avoid the pitfalls of the objectification and fragmentation of the female body, each of the communal womb motifs glossed in this thesis have access to both the traditional meaning of the womb and the figurative meaning which directly wrestles with issues of the black female body. Jones' figuration of Ursa's hysterectomy gestures directly toward the fact that history for the Corregidora women is passed on through the womb. Once Ursa's womb is removed, her capacity to "make generations" and to transmit her family's history is removed with it. This important component of the communal womb motif in *Corregidora* is symbolic of the ways in which it imbricates the physiological sense of women's bodies with the cultural, historical, and literary sense of the womb that figures into my wom(b)anist readings that excavate communal womb themes.

In her final section of Chapter 6, "Mediated Places," Holloway asserts that black women writers place their narratives in spaces such as dead end streets, islands, dark

night clubs and psychiatric wards to decenter the traditional (w)holistic expectations of literary place (136). Holloway also states that: “in a rejection of conventional historiography, feelings are proven more durable and trustworthy than history” (137). The removal of the black heroine and community from a larger, traditional narrative and their placement in a marginalized space generates a resistance to an accepted, exclusionary narrative. This marginalized space also allows for the collapse of time and place which substantiates the recovery of the ancestral mediator. Using Naylor’s *Mama Day* to wrestle with the collapse of time and place, Holloway explicates the ancestral lineage of the main character, Miranda (Mama Day), who is a healer, conjure woman, spiritual guide and mediator and the setting of Willow Springs as an island between Georgia and South Carolina. Naylor allows Miranda, the great granddaughter of Sapphira Wade (considered to be the reincarnation of a mythical goddess), to navigate between the spiritual and the physical, the past and the present, the real and the imagined when she visits Sapphira Wade’s house, called “the Other Place” (*Mama Day* 122, 138-39). Like *Mama Day*, *The Corregidora* women also embody multiple marginalized spaces including *Corregidora*’s Brazilian slave plantation, dark night clubs, bars, and second rate hotels, and a small southern town that time seems to forget (*Corregidora* 104). The women travel through time in order to bear witness to *Corregidora*’s perversions, retelling and reliving the experience as their own.

Holloway states that “these works make it clear that these ancestral women’s lineage is inhabited by women of the African diaspora,” and the process of creating a

woman-centered text necessarily involves the invocation of this ancestral lineage (139-40). *Corregidora* necessarily depicts and confronts some of the historically overlooked challenges specific to black female slaves in the Brazilian slave system, which included prostitution. Holloway's text continues the argument that black women writers are immersed in a larger dialogue that includes culture, tradition, and ancestry that is uniquely African and African-American. They are also advancing this argument by establishing a framework that illustrates the way in which black women writers are already engaging in this practice. Through this collective invocation and mediation, cultural memory and place of origin connect black women and black women writers to a rich tapestry of diasporic Ancestral women (140). Thus, critical approaches such as my wom(b)anist readings of certain texts, can engage in the examination of specific aspects of the historical and literary representations of black women.

While *Corregidora* initially appears to contradict and challenge the communal womb motif and my wom(b)anist interpretive approach, Jones's text is in fact a stellar example of both because it centers on the womb as a thematic matrix. *Corregidora* captures the significance of the ancestral mediator's intervention, negatively or positively, upon the womb, and the consequences the woman must face when she wholly submits to any dominant narrative (created by her ancestors or oppressive institutions). In Ursa's case, she must contribute to her familial history while discovering and claiming agency over her own story. The loss of her womb creates a space for her to unveil her foremother's personal stories, ones that act as the catalyst for a potential communal

restoration built on women who attempt to assert agency over themselves. *Corregidora* exposes the “rupture” that Dubey argues occurs as a result of the erasure of slave’s parental rights and suggests that the inheritors of slave narratives are as responsible as their ancestors for creating and maintaining an oral history. *Corregidora* also reveals the unpredictability of ancestral mediation in that the invocation of and reliance upon ancestors entails wrestling with all of the historical and personal perspectives that they offer. Thus, *Corregidora* as a wom(b)anist text subverts the construction of the womb and the black woman as sexual and proprietary objects through the removal of the womb and a deliberate deconstruction of black female sexuality. Finally, *Corregidora* underscores the significance of why black women must write and problematize depictions of black female sexuality and maternity. Canon states:

African American women’s literature records the narrative events that are most recognizable in the lives of the Black community, which in turn enables womanist scholars to retrieve judiciously the complex series of ethical moves, thus helping the community as a whole to conserve what has survived from the past and release what may shape the present and the future. (76)

Canon, Jones, and Holloway all acknowledge the significant role that black women’s literature plays in advancing the dialogue and critical engagement of the black woman and the black community as subjects. Jones successfully illustrates that the process of moving black women from the margins to the center, as bell hooks suggests, sometimes

necessitates deconstructing a literal hysterectomy and an historicized metaphorical womb in order to unpack layered ancestral narratives.

Conclusion

I have borne thirteen chillen, and seen ‘em mos’ all sold off into slavery,
and when I cried out with a mother’s grief, none but Jesus heard-and ar’n’t
I a woman?⁴² (Sojourner Truth)

Sojourner Truth’s question about the condition of the black female prompted my study of the womb as a theoretical construct and refrain that occurs in select African American women’s literature. Authors like Gayl Jones, Gloria Naylor, and Toni Morrison engage the appearance of the womb as an oppositional presence that is in conflict with race, gender, sexuality, and socio-political structures. The communal womb motif is a framework through which many of these literary conversations or dialogues can be glossed and interpreted. Within these pages I have only selected and engaged a limited amount of these instances. This small sample of the communal womb presence in literature is certainly not exhaustive but it is my humble attempt to provide a working sense of the exegetical imperative that this literary refrain generates.

As previously mentioned, the examination of the works of Toni Morrison further enhances discussions of the communal womb motif. In addition to the scene in *Beloved* where Baby Suggs wraps Sethe’s womb, Morrison returns to the scene of the communal

⁴² In 1863, feminist Frances Dana Gage wrote her account of Truth’s speech from the 1851 Women’s Right Convention in Akron, Ohio which included the previously unmentioned refrain “and ar’n’t I a woman?” Painter, Nell. *Sojourner Truth: A Life, A Symbol*. New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 1996.

womb in several of her other works.⁴³ In *Paradise*, Consolata becomes a spiritual healer in the lives of the young women living in the Convent. She guides the young women through an exercise in which they lay naked on the floor while she draws their outlines around them. They must fill those empty templates with pieces of their lives and emotions. The template serves as a metaphor for the womb and the inscription of vital facets of each woman's life. Once such facet for this community of women are the baby's they will ultimately birth. In *Tar Baby*, Jadine is confronted with the presence of black women while she is making love to Son. They watch her, and bear their breasts to her as well as each other. One woman holds out three eggs. The women challenge Jadine to embrace a type of womanhood that she has evaded and denounced, one that centers on the womb.

Gloria Naylor's *Mama Day* serves as another example of a text that would benefit from examination of the concept of the communal womb. *Mama Day* is an archetypal ancestral mediator who within the narrative channels all of her ancestors and functions as a communal figure that is a repository for the sea-island community's history. She is also the consummate interventionist in the lives of the main character and other women in the narrative. For Bernice, *Mama Day's* intervention involves the surreal use of a chicken egg to impregnate her infertile womb. For Cocoa, *Mama Day* facilitates the ultimate sacrifice of Cocoa's husband in order for her to holistically come to terms with her

⁴³ Professor Morrison distinguishes between a work and a text by suggesting that readers and audiences return repeatedly to works and in subsequent readings these works yield additional interpretive possibilities.

history as it is manifest in the lives of her ancestors and the experience of her family in that region in that time.

Yet another instance of the communal womb motif in black women's literature is Paule Marshall's *Praisesong for the Widow* where Avey is visited by her ancestor in order to rectify her disconnection from her cultural past. Avey is pregnant with her third child, the other two are 5 and 2. In a desperate attempt to reclaim her womb, she wages an attack on it to abort her unborn child. Ultimately, she is unable to give herself an abortion and is forced to carry her pregnancy to term and deliver. The space in which she attempts to induce an abortion is connected to her African ancestors; the Ibo's who walked on water back to Africa in the face of slavery.⁴⁴ She literally stands on a floor that recalls that history for her.

One powerful current example is a lyric from Jill Scott's "Hate on Me." In the lyrics for this song, Scott engages in hyperbole in order to confront a nebulous set of opponents and haters for whom she can never do enough and to whom she addresses a series of challenging lyrics. Jill Scott sings the following: "I wonder if I gave you diamonds out of my own womb would you feel the love in that or ask why not the moon?" By addressing her community of listeners and suggesting that an offering of precious gems from her womb would be inherently insufficient, Jill Scott instantiates

⁴⁴ I mention this in Chapter 3. This narrative is also pertinent to *Sankofa* and the historical narratives central to *Mama Day*.

herself in the themes of the communal womb discourses and by extension the literary genealogy of black women writers.

Alice Walker's body of work presents too many instances to name here. Briefly consider scenes from *The Color Purple*, the polemical affront to female genital mutilation in *Possessing the Secret of Joy*, or the holistic revision of western history in *The Temple of My Familiar*. These works, complimented by Walker's personal commitment to womanism (the term from which wom(b)anism is derived) underscore Walker's role as an essential narrator of the communal womb motifs. Clearly a full exegesis of the communal womb themes in black women's literature is beyond the scope of this master's thesis, however, the sheer litany of examples should give readers pause and invite scholars to join the critical discourse that these scenes warrant.

In the epigraph above, Sojourner Truth is allegedly quoted as lamenting the loss of over a dozen of her own children to the institution of American slavery. That human beings were treated as chattel and that babies were regularly considered to be products (i.e. objects) of the black women's womb points to the ways in which black women's bodies were fragmented, objectified and commodified via the peculiar institution. Whether Truth's quote is exact or not does not obscure this particular fact and the resonance of her words and the rhetorical question goes to the heart of my discussions within this wom(b)anist thesis. To wit, what are the ways in which black women's literature responds to and wrestles with Sojourner Truth's pain, as it is manifest in this alleged quote? Moreover, in what ways do the thematic iterations of the communal womb

attempt to recover the humanity of black women by capturing the bodily space that was so readily objectified?

One central challenge in this thesis is my efforts to read literary passages centered on the womb without reproducing the same kind of fragmentation that was so prevalent during the institution of slavery. One conclusion that emerges from these humble attempts to capture the communal womb in black women's literature is that the literary voice, through characters and narratives, contests the objectification and fragmentation of the black women's body at the very place (the womb) where the most criminal and heinous acts of objectification were committed during the institution of slavery. The communal womb motif then is a form of reparation. It is a literary attempt to repair the awful and deliberate destruction of the black woman's body. That Jones, Marshall, Morrison, Naylor, Scott, Truth, Walker and others repeatedly return to the womb is a powerful suggestion of the critical import of repairing these transgressions through passages, narratives, and characters that spotlight the 'scene of the crime'.

Another conclusion that emerges from these pages is the fact that these communal womb reparations are not necessarily valued as positive or negative engagements with the community, with black women, or with black women's bodies. Instead, black women writers present opportunities for readers to wrestle with the history of wom(b)anist experiences. This is an imperfect and extraordinarily complex enterprise. Some of the most potent evidence of this complexity is realized in multiple scenes of Gerima's *Sankofa*. In so many ways, *Sankofa* visualizes histories that have not been depicted in

literature. NuNu's role as ancestral warrior and mediator constructs a triumphant figure through which the womb is de-objectified and the salvation of a life from a dead womb represents the ultimate reparation and reclamation of which the communal womb motif is capable of demonstrating. At the same time, this thesis forces readers to juxtapose a triumph of NuNu's courage and amazingly adept ancestral mediation with the pain and disgust of Gayl Jones' *Ursa Corregidora*. For Ursa, there is virtually no escape from the oppressive objectification of black women's bodies, transmitted from one generation to the next. Ursa's womb is effectively destroyed by her husband who although African American is also a proxy for Ursa's incestuous slave-owning ancestor who also happened to be a pimp. Ursa's narrative is an important counterpoint to NuNu and Shola/Mona's narratives because it helps to unveil the range and nuance of the communal womb thematic discourses.

Another interesting conclusion to consider is the role that genre plays in the capacity to depict the communal womb motifs. What happens to these experiences and images across film, television, history, autobiography and other forms of literature? Thus *Sankofa* features a visual explicitness that simply is not possible in the televised version of *The Women of Brewster Place*. The gang rape of Lorraine is nearly unreadable in the literary version of *The Women of Brewster Place*; however, the televised version of this same narrative is ill-equipped to represent this particular scene due to constraints of the television format itself. Thus, in this particular instance, the ability to repair transgressions is somewhat limited. These differences and distinctions are not always

limitations nor are they always generated through differences in genre. For example, the passage from *Beloved* (glossed in my introduction) takes an approach that is distinct from the womb healing passages in *Corregidora*. Likewise, the ancestral mediation in Paule Marshall's *Praisesong for the Widow* functions in ways distinct from the ancestral mediation provided by Mama Day in the novel of the same name. Again, not all of these complexities, distinctions, and nuances are detailed in this thesis but the minimal range of the texts glossed here suggests the multifaceted nature of these concepts. This thesis functions primarily as a call to readers, writers, listeners, and viewers to critically engage these scenes. I sincerely hope to generate genuine interest in the critical dialogues that must continue in and around the following concepts or themes: womanism, wom(b)anism, ancestral mediation, and the reparation oriented capacity of the communal womb motif.

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