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Doers of the Living Word: Gospel Ideology and the African American Womanist Novel

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DOERS OF THE LIVING WORD: GOSPEL IDEOLOGY AND
THE AFRICAN AMERICAN WOMANIST NOVEL

by

Rebecca Erin Huskey

A Dissertation
Submitted to the
Faculty of The Graduate College
in partial fulfillment of the
requirements for the
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Western Michigan University
Kalamazoo, Michigan
April 2006
In Playing in the Dark, Toni Morrison issues a charge and illuminates the challenge that she and other African American writers face in defining the self through a racially oppressive language:

Neither blackness nor “people of color” stimulates in me notions of excessive, limitless love, anarchy, or routine dread. I cannot rely on these metaphorical shortcuts because I am a black writer struggling with and through a language that can powerfully evoke and enforce hidden signs of racial superiority, cultural hegemony, and dismissive “othering” of people and language which are by no means marginal or already and completely known and knowable in my work. […] The kind of work I have always wanted to do requires me to learn how to maneuver ways to free up the language from its sometimes sinister, frequently lazy, almost always predictable employment of racially informed and determined chains. (x-xi)
For Morrison and writers such as Alice Walker and Suzan-Lori Parks, such a project is further complicated by gender. African American female self-definition eventually reaches the crossroads of racism and sexism. That such a crossroads exists is the result of linguistic strategies that have been employed to confine black women both by color and by gender. The problem that African American women writers have always faced is how to define themselves, their characters, and particularly the black female body, rather than being defined by the dominant culture or other members of their community.

This study exposes a history of rhetorical and formal experimentation that has at its roots a pro-African American womanist gospel ideology. From Zora Neale Hurston to Suzan-Lori Parks, African American women writers have been freeing up the language with the dynamic and kinetic orality of a gospel impulse. Though decidedly neither theological nor religious in nature, this impulse weaves language and bodily expression with an autonomous self and a corporate self.
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Rebecca Erin Huskey
TABLE OF CONTENTS

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS ................................................................................................. ii

CHAPTER

I. INTRODUCTION: BREAKING THE RACIAL AND GENDER CHAINS OF LANGUAGE .................................................................................................................. 1

II. MAKING IT VERSUS TAKING IT IN THE NOVELS OF TONI MORRISON ......................................................................................................................... 27

III. WITNESSES TO THE DIVINITY OF THE BODY: ALICE WALKER’S DOERS OF THE WORD .............................................................................................. 69

IV. IN SEARCH OF OUR MOTHERS’ BODIES: SUZAN-LORI PARKS’ RE-EMBODIED LANGUAGE ......................................................................................... 98

V. A DYNAMIC RECURSIVE TRADITION: NEW VOICES BLENDING WITH THE OLD .......................................................................................................... 131

BIBLIOGRAPHY ........................................................................................................... 146
In *Playing in the Dark*, Toni Morrison levels a charge and illuminates the challenge that she and other African American writers face in defining the self through a racially oppressive language:

Neither blackness nor “people of color” stimulates in me notions of excessive, limitless love, anarchy, or routine dread. I cannot rely on these metaphorical shortcuts because I am a black writer struggling with and through a language that can powerfully evoke and enforce hidden signs of racial superiority, cultural hegemony, and dismissive “othering” of people and language which are by no means marginal or already and completely known and knowable in my work. […] The kind of work I have always wanted to do requires me to learn how to maneuver ways to free up the language from its sometimes sinister, frequently lazy, almost always predictable employment of racially informed and determined chains. (x-xi)

For Morrison and writers such as Alice Walker and Suzan-Lori Parks, such a project is further complicated by gender. African American female self-definition eventually reaches the crossroads of racism and sexism. That such a crossroads exists is the result of linguistic strategies that have been employed to confine black women both by race and by gender. As many scholars and theorists conclude, the black female body in America has
long been conceived of as a site of contradictory meaning: the black female is seen as both nurse/mammy/cook and mistress/seductress/whore. The problem that African American women writers have faced is how to define themselves, their characters, and particularly the black female body, rather than being defined by the dominant culture or other members of their community.

If the problem facing contemporary African American women writers is how to wrest the language from racial and gender constraints, the solutions they explore focus on an awareness of form. This awareness of form is twofold: both the form of the text and the nature of its human characters are central to emptying received forms of their traditional associations and pushing language beyond its known limits to reshape constructs of blackness. Form is text and form is body, and these writers demonstrate awareness of both. Their intricate relationship with language allows them to not only free up the way things are written but also the terms in which readers think of themselves. Rather than using forms and ways of constructing their subjects that invite a host of familiar associations, Morrison, Walker, and Parks appropriate the forms of gospel and of fiction in meaningful ways that allow African American women control over their own texts and their own bodies. Blackness and whiteness are not reified here; rather, the focus is on the materiality of the forms of text and body. Whereas blackness is abstract, the black woman’s body is a concrete form. No longer is it a body of shame, something to be marginalized or denied; the body is to be embraced, explored, and dynamically defined and administered by the self. In defining themselves, black women authors not only take control of their texts and their bodies, they also demonstrate to readers the possibility of self-definition and its importance to the community. The hearer/reader
learns from the text in the same way that a congregant learns from a sermon or a song. The reader also participates in the expressive act much like a congregant participates in the sermon or song. This can be evidenced in bodily action and oral affirmation and/or encouragement. An expression of the gospel ideology will always contain a dynamic message applicable to both the community and the individual. Ultimately, the hearer/reader decides what to do with that message.

It is in this context that the gospel ideology becomes crucial to freeing up language. This ideology provides the impetus and the rhetorical and kinetic strategies for one to take the language and re-make it, to define one’s self and to name the terms of one’s text. This study exposes a history of rhetorical and formal experimentation that has at its roots a pro-African American womanist gospel ideology. From Zora Neale Hurston to Suzan-Lori Parks, African American women writers have been opening up the possibilities of the English language with the dynamic and kinetic orality of a gospel impulse. Though decidedly neither sectarian nor doctrinal in nature, this impulse weaves language and bodily expression with an autonomous self and a corporate self.

These writers provide models for readers in the construction of their fictional characters and the ways in which these characters use language and their bodies. There are layers of conversation about both body and language as the forms of the texts interact intertextually and intratextually. The gospel ideology is the flexible, dynamic mechanism whereby writers can participate in a tradition and participate with readers. Rather than being a prescriptive method for self-articulation, it is a mindset uniquely tailored by each individual. Its only demands are that language and the body never confine or define the
self and that the rift between body and mind/language be healed. The gospel ideology redeems both body and language from possession and objectification.

The gospel ideology stresses independent self-expression through text and body. In terms of expression, it is dynamic, both individual and communal, both sacred and secular, and an alternative to Western binaries. Behind these expressions is a philosophy of material existence that acknowledges the pain of the past and survives in the present with faith in the possibility for the future, both for one’s own progeny and for the evolution of the community.

Even when black Americans had limited control over they way those bodies were defined, the gospel ideology was a way for them to at least figuratively assert control over their own bodies, both material and institutional. The white dominant class defined African slaves on the basis of their form, removed them from the context of their various first languages, and then forced them to use English as a limited means of expression. Despite these obstacles, African Americans developed oral and kinetic strategies, through song, sermons, and tales that in their very expression of coded and figurative freedom eluded those who confined both body and expression.

Denied literacy and robbed of freedom of expression, black slaves developed this gospel ideology and turned to their bodies as alternate means of expression. With the abolition of slavery came the destruction of the foundation that the dominant culture had used to define black Americans. While slavery provided a context in which white Americans confined and defined black Americans on the basis of physical characteristics,  

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1 Although materially owned by someone else, slaves found ways to assert control over their bodies. Dolan Hubbard explains: In contrast to the ‘free’ dominant culture, black expression begins and ends with the body. The fight for control of the body is rooted in the political. The application of lofty and legalistic ‘visible’ public documents […] had a direct impact on these ‘invisible people’s bodies and bodily movement. To console each other, members of the disconsolate corporate community resorted to those forms of communication that are elemental to mankind: dancing, singing, and speaking. (2)
freedom necessitated new definitions and contexts to confine black bodies. As a result of the new definitions and contexts devised by the white, dominant culture, black Americans’ struggle for equality was transformed into a struggle for respectability in both physical body and in text.

The body is a significant construct for this literature, both as the material body of woman and the literary text as body. Women’s bodies have always been at the center of American politics, and black women’s bodies in particular have been used to delineate oppression and stereotypes. Early theories of racial difference were based on the reported exoticisms of African female genitalia. In American Body Politics: Race, Gender, and Black Literary Renaissance, Felipe Smith catalogs the development of theories of racial difference based on reported “deformities” of the genitalia. Totalizing myths of the black female body were born out of both sexual and political motivations:

The early and continuously prurient interest in black women’s bodies during the period of European exploration and colonization in Africa and the Americas spawned insidious myths of black female sexuality that coalesced into the image of the black Venus as the essential black female. [. . .] By the nineteenth century, the idea of Africa as the world’s erogenous zone became associated as well with aberrant female sexual anatomy through Europe’s fascination with the lineal descendant of the parodic black Venus, the ‘Hottentot Venus.’ [. . .] That this cultural enhancement [manipulation of genitalia as a sign of beauty] of human anatomy would become, for Europeans, an emblem of ‘natural’ race differences was inevitable, since the enlarged vagina [. . .] gave visual
representation to the putative elasticity and incontinence of the black womb, securing the myth of a debased, feminized black female essence against which the sanctity and exclusivity of the white womb could be defined. (85-86)

Once female slaves were introduced to the North American continent, that “difference” in color and in body was used to maintain black female slaves both as sexual objects and brood mares. “Condition of the mother” laws defined black motherhood as justification for reproducing and owning an inexhaustible supply of slaves. In the postbellum world of Reconstruction, Jim Crow, and the Progressive era, attacks on the status of the black family placed the burden on the shoulders of the black woman:

Inevitably, the myth of black household dysfunction placed emphasis on the failings of black women. Patricia Morton [. . .] [shows] how this expectation of black female depravity grounded representations of black home life. Black social historians tended to agree with their white counterparts that unrestrained female sexuality was the cause of the race’s poor public image and thus the cause of its social inferiority. (Smith 91)

Furthermore, male community leaders appropriated the ideals of the white cult of true womanhood in the effort to gain acceptance and advance the race: “[T]hese men aspired – often unrealistically – to incorporate the dominant culture’s ideology of true womanhood into its social code and thereby privatize its women” (Carla Peterson 373). In turn, black women internalized these negative stereotypes, and an obsessive appetite for the instruction in care of the female body and the female’s proper role resulted in a
proliferation of literature on these topics. Slavery was thus defined and perpetuated through the black female body.

During Reconstruction, African American racial and individual self-definition was compromised by assimilation to the standards of the dominant culture. Women, especially those who exercised public roles, were forced to suppress gender concerns in favor of racial uplift because the issue of black respectability hinged upon the demonstration of chastity and virtue of black women. When these women wrote, it was often with a disembodied voice and a buried sexuality. Traditional methods of self-definition were ignored; the dynamic and kinetic energy of the oral gospel ideology did not easily translate to the pages of race literature.

Language thus confines bodies and texts of black women. They become the “mules of the world” because they are black and because they are women. Zora Neale Hurston communicates this reality through the character Janie Crawford’s grandmother:

Honey, de white man is de ruler of everything as fur as Ah been able tuh find out. Maybe it’s some place way off in de ocean where de black man is in power, but we don’t know nothin’ but what we see. So de white man throw down de load and tell de nigger man tuh pick it up. He pick it up because he have to, but he don’t tote it. He hand it to his womenfolks. De

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nigger woman is de mule uh de world so fur as Ah can see. Ah been prayin’ fuh it tuh be different wid you. (14)

External definitions made them responsible for slavery and its perpetuity, required them to do the work that freed up white women to be true women, and forced them to advance the race cause at the expense of gender equality because of their form. It is in this context that race, gender, and the body become inextricably linked to the language one uses to define form.

In the earliest extant African American literary works, we find the impulse of literacy as a key to freedom. As the concept of freedom is tied to possession and oppression of the body, the necessity for freeing up the language in order to free the body is born. It is a tradition manifested in song, sermons, personal narrative, poems, essays and fiction; it is a tradition central to the message of the narratives of Olaudah Equiano, Frederick Douglass, and Harriet Jacobs, to the jeremiad of David Walker, and the constructed personae of Francis E. Watkins Harper. And it is a tradition evident in the works of Zora Neale Hurston, Toni Morrison, Alice Walker, and Suzan-Lori Parks. However, the black person’s – and particularly the black woman’s – foray into the literary world was complicated by both whites and blacks as a direct result of the blackness of the body.

Slavery, segregation, sexual abuse, and injustices of all kind were rationalized and justified on the purported difference found in the black female body. Black women in a public role were thus faced with the challenge of fulfilling their mission at the risk of losing their femaleness and respectability merely for placing their bodies in the public eye. What resulted, particularly in the literary arts, were conventional rhetorical
strategies calculated to replace the body with an empowered voice. The disembodied voice is present in early autobiographical writings by Zilpha Elaw, Julia Foote, and Harriet Jacobs, as well as in postbellum and Progressive era literature by Francis E.W. Harper and Charlotte Forten. These women all cite a calling that is an apologia of sorts for placing themselves in the public sphere, and there is a fascinating relationship here between the body and the creator of the linguistic act. Carla Peterson locates the origin of this phenomenon in the Judeo-Christian tradition: “[G]od authorizes man to divest himself of his body and seek power through the making of material artifacts, including language; in Christian interpretations of death, finally, the resurrection of the soul privileges the verbal category over the material by endowing man with an immortal voice” (387). These women relied on specific rhetorical forms of the church to nearly obliterate their presence in bodily form. But this was not done as an act of passive submission to the ideology; rather, these women sought to call attention away from their bodies as linguistic creators and focus attention on altering the ideology. Peterson claims that this “self-marginalization” was done in the effort to both challenge and gain entry into the institutions that had barred black women. The black women writers of this era had been conditioned to believe that the body was a problem, that it in fact hindered their work, and that the only way to overcome it and the stereotypes on which race difference had been constructed was to prove to the dominant culture and black patriarchal leaders that black women could be respectable.

On both sides of the color line, black form was inscribed by desires for respectability and acceptance. Among the ways to attempt parity with perceived notions of white respectability was through literacy. Both a politically and emotionally charged
issue, literacy indicated knowledge and thus power. However, power had to be curtailed as a powerful black population was certainly perceived as a threat to the volatile political environment of the newly emancipated nation. Power was held in check by the dominant ideology of morality and respectability. As the black female body had been exoticized, black women’s chances for respectability and acceptance rested with emulating white, Victorian morality. Felipe Smith articulates the precarious position that the desires for freedom and equality through respectability put the black writer in:

In the early days of the literary reimagining of black America, many writers contributed to a developing ethos. The ‘color line’ narratives of Harper, Hopkins, and Chesnutt had made the ‘marriage plot’ central to the literature of ethnic preservation [. . .] Only by choosing the rehabilitated ideal of black womanhood, the domestic Madonna, would that hero overcome a crippling ‘double-consciousness’ undermining black collective striving for inclusion in America and thereby go on to articulate the indispensable African contribution to world civilization. (339-40)

Combining power with knowledge to empower black Americans only to the point of respectability limited their literary output to novels of moral instruction and the cautionary tale. While these both qualify as forms received from a white, legitimised literary tradition, they differ from other received forms in intent. The intent of the cautionary tale and the novel of moral instruction was both to promulgate a Washingtonian approach to racial uplift and to demonstrate to white America that emancipated blacks were capable of assimilation and respectability. In noting the foray of African American writers into the realm of the conduct manual, Claudia Tate
elucidates this connection: “[These writers] regarded bourgeois decorum as an important emancipatory cultural discourse” (4). She later indicates the aims of “race literature” were to “instruct black people in all areas of social development and inform white people of racist ideology” (83). Carla Peterson suggests, however, that such writing by women differed significantly from that of men:

Watkins Harper, Forten and Jacobs appropriated the sentimental discourse that had entered and permeated white women’s culture by way of the eighteenth century European cult of sensibility in order to invoke figures of sentimentality [. . .] that would excite the readers’ compassion and move them not to emotional consumption but to productive action. [. . .] [I]n becoming increasingly involved in the already existing national organizations of black men and white women while gradually creating institutions of their own, they hoped to appropriate new forms of social discourse that would help them further their work” (389).

Inscribed by form and by body, African American women writers had to first negate stereotypes and demonstrate respectability – and therefore legitimacy -- before they could break the racial and gender chains of language.

While the evidence of the gospel ideology is most obvious in the literary tradition, its genesis can be found in other expressive elements of African American culture. In *Blues Ideology*, Houston Baker, Jr. cautions readers and scholars against categorizing all distinct African American cultural expressions as literary. What is perhaps most freeing in his exploration of African American expressivity is the indication of extra-literary, interdisciplinary avenues, or as he puts it, “[E]xpressive culture cannot be confined
exclusively to a symbolic domain” (109). Not only does this view liberate African American expression from the confines of the dominant culture, it also recasts the development of these expressive elements as interactions with culture rather than as survival responses. We can then see these elements as tradition themselves instead of as a mere stimulus and response relationship with white America.

Traditional expressions of the gospel ideology are rooted in the black church and gospel music. Form here is as important as ideology, for in their genesis and evolution the church and gospel music have been forms that African Americans could control with relatively little white interference. In a conscious effort to gain control of, that is, define for themselves and administer at their will both their bodies and their texts, contemporary African American women writers look to both the evolution of and the expression of the tradition of the gospel ideology.

Although the white dominant culture first excluded and then attempted to control black involvement in religion, the black church emerged as a relatively autonomous and often subversive institution. And although sexism within the black church historically circumscribed the public roles of women, the gospel ideology is firmly rooted in the church and finds some of its earliest expressions there. Not only is there a tradition of the gospel ideology in the black church, the expression of it in African American women’s

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3 The culture of gospel provides a vital framework through which to understand the work of these contemporary authors. As Werner observes, it “provides a foundation for African-American artists’ explorations of new possibilities for self and community” (xxii). The bases for these possibilities are significantly rooted in the black church: “[T]he black church – the institutional space furthest removed from the attention and mediation of whites – religious music and speech allowed African-American communities to develop appropriate expressions for their experience with relative autonomy” (xxii). Furthermore, while this impulse “resists [. . .] the oppositional structures of the European-American analytical tradition” it offers the “possibility of universal salvation while providing an institutional setting for the communal affirmation of individual experience” (xxii). Elsewhere Werner asserts that gospel music has “evolved along with the surrounding culture” and “asserted the ultimately moral connection of political and cultural experience” (212). He identifies two basic themes of the gospel impulse: “[T]he full responsibility of the individual, understood as a part of a larger community and tradition, for his or her identity, and the inadequacy of received tradition [. . .] as a basis for self-knowledge or social action” (222). Werner completes the definition in his discussion of the jazz impulse. The components of the gospel impulse in action are described in sacred terms: “[T]he burden, bearing witness, the vision of (universal) salvation” (269).
writing can be traced to the metaphoric language and the conventions of the church. As Craig Hansen Werner points out, however, one should not confuse the “impulse” with a theology or set of practices:

This sense of gospel as the source of alternative premises, as an entry into the fullness of life that provides the energy for all moral and political action, helps explain why gospel, although clearly grounded in Afro-American experience, by no means limits consciousness; it is compatible both with the secular realism of the blues impulse and the synthetic multiculturalism of the jazz impulse. In addition, it is important not to confuse the gospel impulse with the ritual of Afro-American churches that [. . .] can be corrupted by personal hypocrisy in the service of institutional power. [. . .] [T]he constituting sensibility is of far greater importance than its specific form; insistence of specific forms of articulation is in itself a profound violation of the gospel impulse. (221)

The influence of the church in the literary expression of the gospel impulse, then, can be seen as an influence of the spirit rather than the letter of the law.

While the black church demonstrates the development of the gospel ideology, it also demonstrates the sexism and resistance that black women face. Evelyn Brooks Higginbotham views the church as a site of multiple discourses, dialogic in nature, and as a dynamic, developing result of the interaction of men and women. For years, black women have had to negotiate the strictures of both racism and sexism, often feeling forced to relinquish the fight for gender equality in deference to the fight for racial equality. This struggle is evident in women’s writing, from *Maud Martha* to *The Women*
of Brewster Place; from The Street to Sula. Though churchmen attempted to mute voices, curtail their public roles, and create a separate and unequal sphere for black women, Higginbotham identifies a movement of resistance among black churchwomen. Additionally, she identifies exactly what this discourse and movement of resistance adds to the gospel ideology: “It gave to black women an individual and group pride that resisted ideologies and institutions upholding gender subordination. The movement gave them the collective strength and determination to continue their struggle for the rights of blacks and the rights of women” (203). It is this facet of the gospel ideology that fuels the impulse of Morrison, Walker, and Parks to advocate for control of voice and of body in the interests of community healing.

The means of expression central to freeing up the language and re-visioning received forms includes rhetorical strategies found in the African American vernacular tradition and churches as well as kinetic expressions found in gospel. In addition to masking and troping, the African American strategy of Signifyin(g) is used to create new meaning for old associations. To say that a writer Signifies is to indicate a method of textual revision; when one Signifies, one empties the original signifier of meaning and remakes meaning through unique vernacular strategies. This is not to suggest that these writers are bound to a rigidly prescribed method. Rather, they are a diverse group who, in their very diversity, speak to the opening up of form and language and the intensely individual of reshaping these forms.

In The Signifying Monkey, Henry Louis Gates, Jr. provides a well-known, useful discussion about “Signification” (a black linguistic sign) and “signification” (a standard English sign). He describes the relationship between the two as a “relation of difference
inscribed within a relation of identity” (45). The disruption of the nature of “signifying” and the replacement by “Signifyin(g)” is metaphoric: the way that the black vernacular sign comments on the standard English sign reflects what happens in the process of Signifyin(g). Gates explains the meta-discourse operating here: “If the signifier stands disrupted by the shift in concepts denoted and connoted, then we are engaged at the level of meaning itself, at the semantic register. Black people vacated this signifier, then – incredibly – substituted as its concept a signified that stands for the system of rhetorical strategies peculiar to their own vernacular tradition” (47). He further identifies Signifyin(g) as “a metaphor for textual revision” (88). Signifyin(g) to Gates is a trope of tropes, and in keeping with this concept, “Signifyin(g)” and “signifying” will be used as Gates defines them to denote the difference in these homonyms.

The notions of appropriation and Signifyin(g) are particularly weighty in challenging form and language. When these contemporary writers appropriate form it is in specific critique of the “sinister, frequently lazy, almost always predictable employment of racially informed and determined chains” (*Playing in the Dark* xi). The results of such appropriation and Signification are critique and alternative for the text and for the body. As Dolan Hubbard points out, although black bodies were possessed by owners, their bodies became their only means of artistic expression. The body acts as both expressive instrument and form in this project. Signifyin(g) here demonstrates constructs that do not supplant identity and individuality, do not reinforce an oppressive and/or repressive ideology, and do not privilege one race, class, or gender over another.

In addition to providing a model for autonomy and self-definition, the black church also provides a set of metaphors and conventions that are integral to the project of
these writers. Within this metaphoric language we can see the gospel ideology at work. Furthermore, these metaphors and conventions demonstrate both how a form can be used to re-vision an ideology and an ideology can be used to re-vision a form. The black church would not be the autonomous, creative, and dynamic entity it is without the language, and the vernacular language would not be the fluid, metaphoric, self-affirming form that it is if it had not been used to appropriate and re-vision the Christianity of the dominant culture. Specifically, scriptural heroes, Old Testament prophecy, and the conversion experience – hallmarks of white Christianity – are reinvested with unique meanings of black experience and liberation in the very effort of appropriating, defining for themselves, and administering the church.

A number of metaphors and rhetorical conventions are taken from the expressive form of the black sermon. Houston Baker, Jr., refers to the black preacher as “the master of metaphor in the Afro-American community” and lists among his host of oratorical skills, “verbal arpeggios, [. . .] cascading adjectives, and [. . .] rhythmic repetitions” (“Belief” 7). These strategies -- from the arpeggios, the “sounding of a chord one after the other in rapid succession, rather than simultaneously” (Encarta Dictionary) -- to the flow or succession of words that describe a thing, to the musical circularity of repetition for the sake of feeling and emphasis are central to the ways in which Morrison, Walker, and Parks create individual possibility for language. But the influence of the black sermon on this ideology is not limited to the kinetic and tactile dimensions of language; the black sermon is a metaphor in and of itself that conveys the creative possibilities of language and the spiritual freedom historically associated with the church. Dolan Hubbard defines the black sermon as a “triumph of aesthetics” in the context of African
American literature. He further suggests its importance as creative impulse in the symbolic domain:

[T]he black sermon as symbolic language must affirm something. This affirmation finds expression in the community’s continual engagement with what it means to be human, which is inseparable from the meaning of reality. Black people continue to grapple with what it means to be black in the West, to engage the twin problem of articulating the self and imagining freedom, and to question the position of blacks in capitalism. In the context of a black American narrative code, black American fiction writers recover the sermon as repressed formalism. (145) [Hubbard’s emphasis]

Hubbard then asserts that through the grammar of the sermon and the ritual expression, the preachers create a “discourse of difference” that locates existence in a search for wholeness that “lead[s] horizontally back to Africa and vertically upward to Heaven” (146-7). For the African American writer, the sermon is at the center of his/her rhetorical strategies: “In that it reflects and affects a set of particular psychic, social, and historical needs, the black sermon, at its best, stands as a central proof text in the construction of African American social reality” (147). The sermon thus lends both expressive and metaphoric elements to the gospel ideology.

One such metaphor is the prophetic tradition. Again, this tradition is a testament to the creative impulse and an early desire in African American history to strip bare and reconfigure language. Cornel West locates the roots of the African American prophetic tradition in the black church. The impulse to appropriate European-American Christianity, he asserts, is borne out of the dominant culture’s social situation:
[The appropriation is] an attempt to make sense out of a meaningless and senseless predicament. [...] Afro-Americans became more and more attracted to religious dissenters in American culture. White Methodists and especially white Baptists seized the imagination of many black slaves for a variety of reasons. First, black people found themselves locked into what Orlando Patterson has coined “natal alienation”; that is, the loss of ties at birth in both ascending and descending generations. Hence, they experienced a form of social death as dishonored persons with no public worth, only economic value.

(1042)

West further asserts that these dissenting denominations provided African Americans with a sense of “somebodiness” and a “personal and egalitarian God who gave them an identity and dignity” (1042). This sense of humanity and identity that the gospel ideology provides is evident in the impulse toward self-articulation in such novels as Beloved, The Color Purple, and Getting Mother’s Body. West identifies further identifies the connection between language and the body that is found in the black church. He aptly labels the combination of oral expression with physical expression “kinetic orality” and lists the following elements as activities promoted by the church:

[T]he fluid and protean power of the Word in speech and song along with the rich Africanisms such as antiphonality [...], polyrhythms, syncopation, and repetition; the passionate physicality, including the bodily participation in liturgical and everyday expression; and the combative spirituality which accent a supernatural and subversive joy, an oppositional perseverance and patience. (1043)
According to West, this setting is the “crucible” for unique African American cultural products including spirituals, blues, jazz, and literature. Perhaps what is most important to the identification of the church as one side of the root system of the gospel ideology is West’s declaration that a certain type of language can be traced to the black church: “Black Christian discourse became the predominant language wherein subversive desires and utopian energies of Afro-Americans were garnered, cultivated, and expressed” (1043). It is this notion of the spirit behind the ideology, rather than a shibboleth to sectarian theology, that is crucial to the project of re-vision.

Whether or not there is a Christian or sectarian element to these texts, they frequently employ the construct of the conversion experience. This conversion experience developed out of both the Great Awakenings and the African American conversion narrative. It has been translated into secular literature as traditional conversion experiences as well as into the process whereby one comes to understand the self. In terms of contemporary African American women writers, the use of the motif of a conversion experience speaks to the impulse to create one’s own definition of self in a culture that repeatedly attempts to rob black women of that privilege. In her book *Conversions and Visions in the Writing of African-American Women*, Kimberly Rae Connor argues that the conversion experience is a convention that recalls a cultural legacy integral to articulations of self in African American women’s texts:

As inheritors of this ‘enhanced world’ [attributed to poet Jay Wright], contemporary black women writers are attempting to unravel the historical and cultural threads that make up their inheritance and to reinterpret the past from the perspective of what their own needs suggest. [. . .] By retaining a historical
memory of what was ‘given,’ the ‘miracles’ these women make are themselves and the personages they create – women who have found a locus for their identity and achieved a depth of self-acceptance largely through an awareness of their cultural identities and an appreciation of the religious faith that was so strongly expressed by black women throughout their history in America. (2)

Connor later asserts that the conversion experience indicates a “whole-soul recovery of a sense of self” that includes integration into “a history, a community, or a tradition” (4). Thus, the conversion experience becomes not only a means to articulate the self, but the requirements of the tradition reinforce the individual’s place in the world, or an antiphonal mode of existence. Quite simply put, the church is such a vital element of the African American community that its rhetorical contributions, in whatever form they might take, symbolize a history of resistance and work with language endemic to the gospel ideology.

While the evolution of the black church demonstrates subversion and a move toward autonomy away from a white Christianity as a model to emulate, gospel music emerged in the twentieth century as the unique product of both acculturation and affirmation. As the black church provides expressions of both the traditions of Signifyin(g) and re-vision, gospel music is an expression of these same traditions in nature and in specific elements. The dynamic nature of gospel music, its improvisatory nature, the connection between body and language, and the articulation of self within a communal context are translated by Morrison, Walker, and Parks into a literary context.

A gospel song is never the same song twice, yet in theme and execution, it is familiar to soloist and congregation. Improvisation is a key feature of gospel music.
Lawrence Levine notes this as one of the distinctive elements of the form: “Each rendition was a new creation. Gospel singers produced what jazz musicians referred to as ‘head arrangements’ proceeding from their own feelings, from the way in which ‘the spirit’ moved them at the time” (186). This improvisation encourages singer and hearer to make the song one’s own. In terms of the literary project this is perhaps the most significant contribution of musical expression to the gospel ideology; not only does the singer demonstrate that the song can be altered to suit one’s situation in order to control one’s own definition and articulation of self, but the hearer is also shown the possibility of self-definition for herself. As the narrator of Morrison’s Jazz realizes in conclusion, the point all of this Signifyin(g), improvisation, and possibility that occurs in the process of freeing up the language is to define the self for the self. She calls attention to the readers’ hands holding the text, and reminds them of Alice’s earlier advice to Violet. Rather than simply accepting a form “taking it,” make your own, remake the received one: “But I can’t say that aloud; I can’t tell anyone that I have been waiting for this all my life and that being chosen to wait is the reason I can. If I were able I’d say it. Say make me, remake me. You are free to do it and I am free to let you because look, look. Look where your hands are. Now” (229). While acknowledging the form, the receiver must make it her own.

If Morrison, Walker, Parks, and their contemporaries are engaged in an antiphonal project, consciously or unconsciously, with each other’s work, they are also talking to earlier books, Signifyin(g) on them. This includes both form and specific texts on both sides of the color and gender lines. It begs the question, though, of at what point was the gospel ideology adopted so that the voice was re-embodied. We can perhaps first see the
impulse in Zora Neale Hurston’s *Their Eyes Were Watching God*.4 Whereas the writers Peterson lists adhered to conventions of self-marginalization, veiling the body, the disembodied voice, and the cult of true womanhood for the advancement of the community, Hurston’s Janie Crawford goes through a process whereby she acknowledges and embraces her body, defines for herself how she will live, and finds her voice, in turn advancing the community one hearer at a time. In the Afterword of *Their Eyes Were Watching God*, Henry Louis Gates, Jr. identifies Hurston as the “literary foremother” of these contemporary writers because, among other things, she uses language to create a tradition of the empowered black female self: “In a tradition in which male authors have ardently denied black literary paternity, this is a major development, one that heralds the refinement of our notion of tradition: Zora and her daughters are a tradition-within-the-tradition, a black woman’s voice” (200). While Gates is correct in identifying Hurston as the literary foremother of Morrison, Walker, Parks, and others, he is guilty of devaluing the significance as a “tradition-within-the-tradition” of black literature. The works of these women are not to be compartmentalized, or circumscribed by a neat definition; they are fluid in nature, in conversation with each other, and most importantly they are not relegated to a corner of a figurative bookstore. These women are involved in a project that rushes beyond any boundaries of genre or category and permeates the community and all expression.

At the end of *Their Eyes Were Watching God*, Pheoby tells Janie that just listening to her has made her grow, that she is no longer satisfied with herself. If Pheoby

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4 In acknowledging Hurston’s influence on later writers, Barbara Christian also highlights the limitations on these writers: “In general, though, most novels published before the 1950s embodied the tension between the writers’ apparent acceptance of an ideal of woman derived from white upper-class society and the reality with which their protagonists had to contend. And most seemed to be written for an audience that excluded even the writers themselves” (237). Hazel Carby, Barbara Epstein, Paula Giddings, and Claudia Tate offer further enlightening sociohistorical analyses on the politics and forms available to African American writers, particularly between the periods of Reconstruction and Modernism.
had done nothing else, her own personal growth would have been insufficient; Pheoby would have been a mere hearer of the word. In order for the gospel ideology of the freed body to spread and take effect, hearers must also be doers of the word. Janie continues:

‘Course, talkin’ don’t amount tuh uh hill uh beans when yuh can’t do nothin’ else. And listenin’ tuh dat kind uh talk is ju’ lak openin’ you’ mouth and lettin’ de moon shine down yo’ throat. It’s uh known fact, Pheoby, you got tuh go there tuh know there. Yo’ papa and yo’ mama and nobody else can’t tell yuh and show yuh. Two things everybody’s got tuh do fuh themselves. They got tuh go tuh God, and they got tuh find out about livin’ fuh themselves.’

(192)

Being a doer of the word means experiencing it for yourself and then sharing your testimony, taking a form and re-making it. In Doers of the Word, Carla Peterson identifies the implications of this phrase for African American women:

Adapting a verse from the Epistle of James to describe their self-appointed cultural mission, they [nineteenth century African American women preachers, speakers, and writers] thought of themselves as ‘doers of the word.’ In invoking themselves as such, these women recognized the extent to which their efforts to ‘elevate the race’ and achieve ‘racial uplift’ lay not only in their engagement in specific political and social activities but also in their faith in the performative power of the word – both spoken and written. For these and other activists [. . .] speaking and writing constituted a form of doing, of social action continuous with their social, political and cultural work. (366)
As a doer of the word, Pheoby tells the story to the community so that they might also grow.

In breaking from the tradition of the disembodied female voice as a textual model for respectability and uplift, Zora Neale Hurston took a form and Signified on it. The African American women’s novel was thus opened up to new possibilities, to individual expression, and to acceptance of the body. As she created a new tradition, she also issued a call to which many subsequent African American women writers have responded. Toni Morrison, Alice Walker, and Suzan-Lori Parks thus engage in a conscious project of call-and-response, of making their books talk to each other as well as books that have served to reify chains of language, of Signifying on each other in theme, language, and form. When these books talk to each other, they participate in the spirit of community inculcated by the gospel ideology. Through attention to form, the books offer an individual expression within a tradition. When they Signify on forms that have oppressed and defined them, they expose the danger of the form as received and then free it up with the dynamic and kinetic orality of gospel.

At the same time these books Signify on textual form, the corporeal bodies within sing in acts of gospel expression. Without the bodies, the message would not be the same. In fact, the message might remain inexpressible. There is a link here between development of gospel music and expression through kinetic orality. Gospel music developed as a form of worship in the Sanctified church. At the same time that classically arranged spirituals were sung in the uplift and restraint-minded, education-focused black denominations, gospel music took shape from the tradition of ecstatic worship and vernacular music of the slavery era. The essence of sanctification is that the
Holy Spirit dwells within the body of the believer. There is corporeal interaction between human and divine; the body thus becomes a vessel for divine expression. In exploring the development of gospel music in the Church of God in Christ, Jerma Jackson draws the connection between expression and the body:

The close relationship between music and worship reflected how members of the Church of God in Christ regarded religion as a corporeal experience in which the physical and emotional reinforced each other. As parishioners spoke in tongues, considered the most sacred divine gift, they made external an experience that was private and internal and in the process helped generate a community. (21)

While the singing bodies of these books are not relaying a message from a divine being, they are expressions of the divinity of the human body. Attention to the body is necessary to convey the message, to re-vision the body, and to articulate a complete self through language that is unfettered by racial and gender chains.

While Morrison, Walker, and Parks demonstrate how the body and language can be unified to re-vision language and express an autonomous self, they are also concerned with the communal self and the community. Within these texts are included models of positive and negative communities, characters who shape community, and communities that shape characters. Though the concept of community is central to any discussion of African American literature, this study considers how community is shaped one hearer at a time. We can find this concept articulated by Janie and Pheoby at the conclusion of Their Eyes Were Watching God, but we can find the origins in the gospel ideology. In sermon and in song, every message has the potential to touch hearers in unique ways. It
is left up to the hearer to decide what he/she will do with that message. But ultimately, testifying and witnessing, spreading the “good news” of the gospel has at its core a concern for the communal body comprised of individually expressed bodies. The concern for the communal body in these texts, then, is how to reach the communal body through attention to individual form.

Although diverse in their methods and their means, these African American writers are all engaged in the process examining the constructs of blackness inscribed by racially informed language. Part of this process is designed not only to “free up” and offer alternatives for individual signifiers, but also to Signify on traditional forms and create new meaning for them. This process engages the text as form and the body as form, not to reinscribe African American women, but to offer a contemporary version of the gospel ideology whereby women can acknowledge and administer their own forms. As Hortense Spillers declares, “Traditions are not born. They are made” (250). These writers offer text as a form of mirroring in which the subject and reader can say to herself “Make me. Remake me.”
CHAPTER II

MAKING IT VERSUS TAKING IT IN THE NOVELS OF TONI MORRISON

Toni Morrison has commented on her own work that she breaks from a tradition in African American literature wherein the writers feel compelled to explain their use of language within the work. Without a doubt, readers outside of the African American community and those unfamiliar with African American Vernacular English face struggles in deciphering, let alone catching, the instances where Morrison’s characters Signify. There are no narrators translating such questions as “What you opening your nose for?” (Song of Solomon 102), no characters attributing song lyrics that have slipped into their vernacular, no ancestor figures explaining Africanisms. Furthermore, the reader has to constantly be engaged with constructing the story as characters’ consciousnesses reveal more “rememories.” This does not suggest, however, that Morrison’s fiction is impenetrable, is only for an African American audience, or that it has no plot. Rather, bringing the reader along to experience the gospel ideology through the process of meaning making is one of the hallmarks of Morrison’s voice.

In fact, Morrison has clearly stated that this is the goal of her writing: “My writing expects, demands participatory reading. [. . .] We (you, the reader, and I, the author) come together to make this book, to feel this experience” (Tate 164). Unlike traditional European modes of storytelling in which readers and hearers are captive audiences, Morrison creates her own mode of storytelling in which a community is made, where the storyteller is not the supreme authority, and where the readers and hearers join in telling
the tale with both their bodies and their language. This mode calls into question all received forms of written literature and the ways language is used in them. In her use of the gospel ideology to create new forms, Morrison forces the reader to make the text rather than take it. Through this participatory act, and by holding the text in one’s hands, the reader and the text merge, and the reader feels with each novel the experience of making one’s own form rather than taking the oppression of received forms.

Morrison calls to the reader to respond with possibility by insisting on a conscious participation in the textual act with both the body and language. Reading is both a recursive process and an act of re-memory. While each text can be read individually, knowing her other texts and how they talk to each other reveals how she has developed themes to create possibility for loving the body and language. Ambiguity is one of her key rhetorical strategies for suggesting possibility through the actions of characters and the things they say. Her demands for the reader to participate in making and remaking meaning implicitly make the reader both painfully and pleasurably aware of his or her own body as the characters experience these sensations.

Toni Morrison focuses on restructuring language and identity so that the individual black body can be loved. She redeems blackness from the role of other and from the projection of white self-hatred onto the black body. On the other hand, she does not propose an opposing ideology whereby self-worth and individual pride is grounded in color. In fact, that ideology has some rather insidious roots in the white/black, self/other construct. To have an identity defined by color is to participate in bound language and reify its chains; in Morrison’s gospel ideology one must improvise with language and with bodily action to re-vision the possibility of self-definition.
From Denver, who moves her body out of her mother’s corporeal mark and into the possibilities of the community, to Billie Delia/Cato of *Paradise*, who moves herself from the inscribing isolation of Ruby to the clinic in Denby where she makes her own life, Morrison ceaselessly reminds the reader of the connection of the body’s position to the potential for possibility. Next to *Song of Solomon*, *Paradise* is the novel that most explicitly draws a connection between corporeal position and possibility. While some critics and scholars view the conclusion of *Paradise* as a foray into the realm of utopias that leaves the reader with an unsatisfying conclusion, Morrison brilliantly combines the themes of her oeuvre with the traditional African American rhetorical strategy of indeterminacy and the quantum mechanics principle of indeterminacy (or Heisenberg or uncertainty principle) to suggest the possibility for levels of perceived existence.

In his uncertainty paper published in 1927, physicist Werner Heisenberg asserted several things about the relationship between particles, time, and momentum that have far-reaching philosophical implications. These implications extend to the present consideration of time and place in *Paradise*. Heisenberg declared that concepts such as bodies do not exist until we observe them, that “[T]he ‘path’ comes into existence only when we observe it” (http://www.aip.org/history/heisenberg/p08c.htm). Furthermore, he argued that pinpointing an exact location or momentum results in indeterminacy: “The more precisely the position is determined, the less precisely the momentum is known in this instant, and vice versa” (http://www.aip.org/history/heisenberg/p08.htm). One last assertion of Heisenberg’s has profound import for reading the conclusion of *Paradise*, for it disrupts our notions of linear time and cause-and-effect relationships: “In the sharp formulation of the law of causality – ‘if we know the present exactly, we can calculate
the future – it is not the conclusion that is wrong but the premise” (http://www.aip.org/history/heisenberg/p08c.htm). These assertions in Heisenberg’s paper – principles that are now accepted in quantum physics – inform Morrison’s discussion of the position of bodies in time and space.

The clearest indication that Morrison is writing about an alternate plane of existence – one that disrupts our notions of “paradise” in particular – is the question of where do the convent women go after they have been massacred. There are no bodies, and the people of Ruby, though baffled, are in some respects relieved that no physical evidence lingers. Rev. Richard Misner and Arnette who were out of town at a civil rights rally at the time of the massacre, go to the Convent in an attempt to reconstruct what had happened:

Richard and Anna doubted the convenient mass disappearance of the victims and, as soon as they got back, went to look for themselves. Other than a sparkling white crib in a bedroom with the word DIVINE taped to the door, and foodstuffs, there was nothing recently lived-in about the place. [. . .] Sargeant’s cornfield the only human touch. Richard barely glanced at the cellar floor. Anna, however, examining it as closely as her lamp permitted, saw the terribleness K.D. reported, but it wasn’t the pornography he had seen, nor was it Satan’s scrawl. She saw instead the turbulence of females trying to bride, without being trampled, the monsters that slavered them. (303)

Here is a comment about ambiguity and perception. The nature of the perceiver, however, impacts the interpretation. Where the men of Ruby were looking for someone
to blame for the problems in their town, they saw evil in the convent women. Where Richard and Anna – two people who have made their own definitions and are not stuck in external constructs – want to truly observe what happened, their commitment to making it rather than taking it affects what they perceive. In fact, they alone are able to see the thing that explains the disappearance of the women’s bodies:

It was when he returned [...] that they saw it. Or sensed it, rather, for there was nothing to see. A door, she said later. “No, a window,” he said, laughing. “That’s the difference between us. You see a door; I see a window.” Anna laughed too. They expanded on the subject: What did a door mean? what a window? focusing on the sign rather than the event; excited by the invitation rather than the party. They knew it was there. [...] And they laughed some more as they drove along, trading pleasant insults about who was a pessimist, who an optimist. [...] Anything to avoid reliving the shiver or saying out loud what they were wondering. Whether through a door needing to be opened or a beckoning window already raised, what would happen if you entered? What would be on the other side? What on earth would it be? What on earth? (305).

Morrison’s answer is not a utopia. The novel ends with a mother figure Piedade (piety) singing to the disconsolate. It appears at first to be paradise as we have become accustomed to defining that word, but Morrison makes this much clear that it is earth. Morrison recasts “Paradise,” as being “down here.” It is not perfect, and it is not the end of life. It is perhaps what is through that door or window that Rev. Misner and Arnette perceived in the garden at the Convent: “There is nothing to beat this solace which is
what Piedade’s song is about, although the words evoke memories neither one has ever had: of reaching age in the company of the other; of speech shared and divided bread smoking from the fire; the unambivalent bliss of going home to be at home – the ease of coming back to love again” (318). It is an alternate plane of existence, a place of rest for the weary and disconsolate. It is a place of individual and communal re-memory, where the body and language are re-made so they can minister to others in the same way: “Another ship, perhaps, but different, heading to port, crew and passengers, lost and saved, atremble, for they have been disconsolate for some time. Now they will rest before shouldering the endless work they were created to do down here in paradise” (318). What on earth would it be? On earth would be both paradise and hell, the possibility depends on what one makes of it.

Some of the women go back to the places of their pain. They are armed women, like the women in *Jazz* and like Hagar in *Song of Solomon*, but on some level they make the people from their pasts aware of their presence. Like Heisenberg who was troubled by the premise that knowing the present will determine the future, Morrison suggests that not pinpointing where these women are either through language or corporeal position is precisely her intent. For in this indeterminacy, she frees their bodies and their definitions of self from inscription and thereby suggests possibility. The reader, as participant in this act, is then encouraged – but never determined by an external force – to make new forms for his- or herself.

Part of the process of making new forms involves talking to the forms of tradition. Morrison deftly engages in conversation not only with African American literary traditions, but also with Anglo-American male literary traditions. Most notably,
Morrison appropriates the style, structure, and specific scenes from the work of William Faulkner and empties them of the authority that stifles African Americans – particularly women – from articulating identity.

When her novels talk to those of Faulkner, Morrison inverts the self/other relationship that has existed between white identity and the African American presence. In “Romancing the Shadow,” Morrison defines this relationship and provides some insight into why she Signifies on these literary giants:

I want to suggest that these concerns – autonomy, authority, newness and difference, absolute power – not only become the major themes and presumptions of American literature, but that each one is made possible by, shaped by, activated by a complex awareness and employment of a constituted Africanism. It was this Africanism, deployed as rawness and savagery, that provided the staging ground and arena for the elaboration of the quintessential American identity. [. . .] Eventually individualism fuses with the prototype of Americans as solitary, alienated, and malcontent. What, one wants to ask, are Americans alienated from? What are Americans always so insistently innocent of? Different from? As for absolute power, over whom is this power held, from whom withheld, to whom distributed? Answers to these questions lie in the potent and ego-reinforcing presence of an Africanist population. This population is convenient in every way, not the least of which is self-definition. (44-5)

Morrison then identifies four topics that she will critically investigate: the “Africanist character as surrogate and enabler,” the way that an “Africanist idiom is used to establish
difference or, in a later period, to signal modernity,” how an “Africanist character is used to limn out and enforce the invention and implications of whiteness,” and “the manipulation of the Africanist narrative (that is, the story of a black person, the experience of being bound and/or rejected) as a means of meditation – both safe and risky on one’s own humanity” (53). In “Black Matters,” she proposes an examination of “what racial ideology does to the mind, imagination, and behavior of masters” (12). While Morrison critically investigates these topics throughout Playing in the Dark, it is in her novels that she rewrites the way in which whiteness has appropriated the black form to articulate identity.

One of Morrison’s most ingenious intertextual conversations is found in Jazz. Here she explicitly creates new meanings through appropriating both form and themes found in Absalom, Absalom! and Light in August. These novels are particularly important to Morrison’s remaking of form and inversion of blackness as the other that makes whiteness what it is not, for it is in these novels that Faulkner explores the invisible blackness of visibly white men. The ambiguity in both Faulkner’s style and subject matter is a marker of modernity. Although he presents a critique of whiteness where identity demands clear racial identity and separation, the Africanist presence always suffers and his society remains unchanged. Furthermore, his ruminations on the effects of racial ideology are limited to defining whiteness. Morrison, however, demonstrates that racial identity is not a foregone conclusion.

In Jazz, it is clear that Violet and Joe are unaware that it is in the tale of Golden Gray that their pasts intersect. True Belle, Violet’s grandmother, is witness to the white Vera Gray’s affair with a field slave and accompanies her to Baltimore when she is given
money and turned out of her father’s home for being pregnant. Vera names her child Golden Gray and, though she is a self-avowed abolitionist, maintains her claim on True Belle and raises her child to believe he is white. Golden Gray is a construct that allows the narrator to partake in the project of Quentin Compson and Shreve McCannon in *Absalom, Absalom!*: to encounter blackness that is not physiologically apparent and to explore what happens to the psyche when expectations about the self are overturned.

When he finds out his father is black, what his name is, and where he once lived, Golden Gray sets out to kill his father – if we can believe what the narrator tells us. On his way to confront his father, he encounters a wild pregnant woman – who happens to be Joe’s mother -- in the woods, who in her fear of him, runs into a tree and knocks herself unconscious. In her descriptions of Gray taking the woman’s body to his father’s house, the narrator makes such comments as “I like to think of him that way,” (150), “He is avoiding her, I know,” (152), “No one is looking at him, but he behaves as though there is. That’s the way. Carry yourself the way you would if you were always under the reviewing gaze of an impressionable but casual acquaintance” (153), and “I know he is a hypocrite; that he is shaping a story for himself to tell somebody, to tell his father, naturally” (154). As she describes Golden Gray, he has happened upon the black female body and thought to use her as “lance and shield.” The narrator then claims Golden Gray will have to be his own lance and shield, calling on courage to “meet the black and savage man” who is his father and an absent presence (160). And just as the reader pictures Golden Gray as *Absalom, Absalom!*’s dubious Charles Bon, a white ghost come to haunt the black father who, unlike Thomas Sutpen, did not know he was a father, the narrator calls her own reliability into question:
What was I thinking of? How could I have imagined him so poorly? Not noticed the hurt that was not linked to the color of his skin, or the blood that beat beneath it. But to some other thing that longed for authenticity, for a right to be in this place, effortlessly without needing to acquire a false face, a laughless grin, a talking posture. I have been careless and stupid and it infuriates me to discover (again) how unreliable I am. (160)

She then calls on herself to think things through and be careful, aware that she is liable to another misunderstanding. As Golden Gray and his father, Henry/Hunter, try to figure out what he is, much like Light in August’s Joe Christmas does, he tells his father he wants to be a “free man” not a “free nigger” (173). His father’s answer is perhaps an answer to and a reinscription of Faulkner’s world of Jim Bond where blackness is an insidious ambiguity, an absent presence threatening the identity of white men: “Don’t we all. Look. Be what you want – white or black. Choose. But if you choose black, you got to act black, meaning draw your manhood up – quicklike, and don’t bring me no whiteboy sass” (173). This character speaks the charge to another character to acknowledge and take control over his own form: don’t let the narrator or tradition have dominion over your form. Just because Golden Gray looks “white,” he does not have to adhere to the traditional white ideology.

Furthermore, although neither Violet nor Joe knows that their pasts converged at this point, this story-within-the-story demonstrates the impulse toward reconnecting with the ancestor. For two people who lost their mothers, even felt rejected by them, they both exhibit a strong desire to find a replacement for the mother figure. Like Golden Gray,
they have trouble figuring out who they are without knowing where they have come from.

While Golden’s immediate reaction is to kill his father, the narrator tells us that the girl – Joe’s mother – changed his mind. Morrison ends Golden’s story here, but not without leaving the reader to wonder why he does not kill his father. This wild woman from the woods would not encourage life in her son, she would neither hold nor nurse the baby. When Hunter takes action to find a nurse for the baby and expresses concern for his life, Golden is provoked by this fathering gesture. Golden sees a reflection of his own existence in this scene: both the wild woman and Vera would suppress life where Henry/Hunter would take action to nourish life. While refusing to allow Golden to chastise him for being black and being his father, he also tells him he is welcome to stay and be his son: the choice is all Golden’s. Then he gives him the freedom to articulate his own identity, freedom from the whiteness with which his mother has inscribed him: “If she told you I was your daddy, then she told you more than she told me. Get a hold of yourself. A son ain’t what a woman say. A son is what a man do” (172). In the midst of racial ambiguity and identity crisis, Morrison gives Golden, Joe, and Violet the strategies whereby identity can be articulated. They all must kill off that thing in their heads that has inscribed them and, by reconnecting with the past and the ancestor, say and be who they chose to be. Morrison also upsets the narrator’s comment that “girl” changed Golden’s mind. It is his father’s reaction to her body and to Golden’s own predicament that precipitates a change in his mind. She thereby removes the burden of redemption from the black woman’s body and reinforces the idea that we all must go through the process of self-definition on our own terms.
As Morrison works to remake forms and language so that they are not bound up by racial ideologies, she also participates in the conversation among African American women writers. Like Zora Neale Hurston, Alice Walker, and Suzan-Lori Parks, Toni Morrison asserts that the ability to make or define one’s own form is rooted in acceptance and love of the body. Where Hurston and Walker focus on the autonomy of sexual choice and Walker especially focuses on psychosexual trauma and body mutilation, Morrison focuses on restructuring language and identity so that the individual black body can be loved.

*The Bluest Eye*, Morrison’s first novel, is a form unmade. It begins decentered, an embodiment of Pecola Breedlove’s lack of a unified form. Corporeal presence and validation depend upon Pecola’s notion of beauty. Beauty, for Pecola, is defined by whiteness: a Shirley Temple doll, blonde hair, blue eyes. It is everything Pecola is not, and therefore lack of beauty signals lack of form.

Morrison opens this novel with a paragraph from the Dick and Jane primers. This is a powerful move for it suggests that children’s first formal interaction with text and language is in a context that has no meaning for the reader. Meaning and continuity are disrupted twice as Morrison first removes all punctuation from the selection and then removes all spaces between words. In the first instance, meaning is indeterminate; in the second instance there is no meaning associated with the text on the page. On the very next page, Claudia MacTeer subverts the power of traditional narrative structures by revealing the entire plot of the novel. She speaks to the reader, admitting that the text that follows is simply the “how” of the story and suggesting that the “why” is the responsibility of the reader: “There is really nothing more to say – except why. But since
why is difficult to handle, one must take refuge in how” (3). In the first three pages of
the novel, Morrison has challenged the traditional ways in which we have received and
used language and form.

This challenge is reinforced by Morrison’s version of the speakerly text. Whereas
Hurston and Walker use the speakerly text as a means of becoming for Janie and Celie,
Morrison uses the speakerly text as a community’s witness of Pecola’s un-becoming.
Within her own community, Pecola has been othered and driven into madness as the last
refuge against being used up by others. The story is told from several perspectives, with
Claudia MacTeer’s voice dominating. Claudia explains, in terms reminiscent of
Morrison’s descriptions of the Africanist presence in American literature, how she and
her community have defined themselves by what Pecola is not: “All of us – all who knew
her – felt so wholesome after we cleaned ourselves on her. [. . .] We honed our egos on
her, padded our characters with her frailty, and yawned in the fantasy of our strength”
(163).

However, Morrison’s most brilliant re-vision of the speakerly text is through the
interior monologue, and eventually dialogue, of Pecola Breedlove. Everywhere around
Pecola, the validity of her form is denied. Her own father cannot distinguish her as an
individual, and her mother denies the reality of what her husband has done. Without
recourse to a Pheoby or a Nettie, Pecola turns to her own fragmented identity to witness
her presence as defined by the blueness of her eyes. She worries that even her internal
auditor will leave if her eyes are not blue enough:

Don’t go. Don’t leave me. Will you come back if I get them?

Get what?
The bluest eyes. Will you come back then?

*Of course I will. I’m just going away for a little while.*

You promise?

*Sure. I’ll be back. Right before your very eyes.* (161-2)

She is both speaker and auditor, caller and responder, lover and beloved. There is no form she knows that she can project into the world and be accepted. The only form that has any meaning for her resides in blue eyes, so she retreats to the inside while the community tries to see her without looking.

In the end, though Claudia knows the community has failed Pecola, she laments that it is too late to admit they were wrong. What the entire community is guilty of is not taking responsibility for making their own forms: “We substituted good grammar for intellect; we switched habits to simulate maturity; we rearranged lies and called it truth, seeing in the new pattern of an old idea the Revelation and the Word” (163). Substitutions and new names are not the ways to make new forms; in fact, these methods bring about destruction for the possibility of new forms. It is no wonder, then, that Claudia’s and Frieda’s seeds do not bloom.

Claudia takes up the speakerly text at the point when Pecola speaks only to the self. Though the reader is witness to this fragmentation, Pecola is completely unaware of it. For Claudia, then, the speakerly text becomes an address to the reader. It is a story to pass on, this realization that “[T]here is no gift for the beloved. The lover alone possesses his gift of love. The loved one is shorn, neutralized, frozen in the glare of the lover’s inward eye” (163). Morrison suggests that the notion of the “beloved” is an external definition, and the body becomes wholly circumscribed by the body, that is the
eye, of the beholder. This iteration of the speakerly text becomes a call to which Beloved responds.

In Beloved, Toni Morrison makes new meaning for traditional forms including the slave narrative and the black sermon. The form of the text is central to the project of freeing up language as it is a fragmented narrative, moving across time, space, perspective, and omniscience. As body and text interact, Morrison maneuvers language so that an African American woman’s awareness of her own form, both text and body, inaugurates her dominion over it.

The content of the slave narrative is appropriated here, but Morrison breaks up the chronology of the life at Sweet Home, the escape, and the tragic events leading up to Paul D’s appearance at 124 Bluestone Road, interspersing that story with the story occurring during narrative time. Amy Levin comments that this appropriation “revises original slave narratives” and “de-authorizes the original figures in power” in the telling and retelling of the slave’s story from her perspective (131). Part of this perspective comes through in the authenticity of fragmented and triggered memories. Carole Boyce Davies highlights the importance of re-memory to form and re-vision:

[T]oni Morrison in Beloved makes re-memory central to the experience of that novel; the recalling of what she calls the ‘unspeakable thoughts, unspoken’ and the re-membering or the bringing back together of the disparate members of the family in painful recall. Morrison is clearly talking here about crossing the boundaries of space, time, history, place, language, corporeality and restricted consciousness in order to make reconnections and mark or name gaps and
absences. [...] The process of re-membering is therefore one of boundary crossing. (17)

While fragmentation in Beloved highlights Morrison’s notion of re-memory, the passing on of a story, and the abolitionists’ use of the slave narrative for their political purposes, non-chronological memories of the body as text signal key moments of Sethe’s growing awareness of form. Further, Sethe’s awareness of form is a testimony to the gospel ideology that enables her to acknowledge the pain of the past so that it does not define her in the future. As she acknowledges what has been inscribed on her body and how form has circumscribed her family, she learns how to use body and language to define the terms of her own form.

One of the most significant means of bodily inscription in Beloved is Sethe’s back. We first learn about the scars on her when Paul D questions Sethe’s choice to remain in a house haunted by sadness. She tells him that all she has is the tree on her back, the ghost in her house, and the daughter she holds in her arms. Those things compose her form, and she is determined to not relinquish another part of her form. Paul D asks her about the tree, and in his confusion he cannot fathom anything but a tree growing out of her back. Sethe tells him about the tree, but refrains from explaining what it signifies. It is a mark she knows is there, but it was inscribed by a white girl: “I’ve never seen it and never will. But that’s what she said it looked like. A chokecherry tree. Trunk, branches, and even leaves” (15). At this point, and for a majority of the novel, the tree signifies Sethe’s identification of her form through her children and the journey from Sweet Home to Cincinnati, Ohio.
When she runs from slavery she attempts to take charge of her form and that of her children. She is still attempting dominion when the schoolteacher comes to reclaim these bodies; she exercises the only control she can think of, murder. She says that she planned to take her children to be on the other side with her mam, but even this attempt fails as Baby Suggs and Stamp Paid intervene and save three out of four of her children. After Sethe is released from prison for killing her daughter, she and her family distance themselves from community and fellowship. Haunted by guilt, sorrow, and a baby ghost, her mother-in-law wills her own death, her sons leave, and her daughter Denver is nearly insane.

Sethe is stuck in a construct like her mother’s mark. One definition of inscription involves a geometrical figure: “to draw within a figure so as to touch in as many places as possible” (Merriam-Webster’s Universal Encyclopedic Dictionary). She wanted her own mark as a child, but it was not until she got her own as an adult that she understood its hidden signs of ownership and control of touching in as many places as possible. While the white schoolteacher marks her initially, the “whitegirl” of the woods, Amy Denver, assigns her mark meaning. Davies distinguishes between “marking” and “naming” (re-marking) to indicate revisions of transgressive inscriptions on the body: “‘Marking’ is the product of abuse and is linked to societal inscriptions on the body of the ‘other.’ Naming (or re-marking) has to do with redefinition” (138). Davies further suggests that it is Amy Denver who is able to name Sethe’s marking in terms that help her redefine it. Rafael Perez-Tores also claims that Amy helps Sethe to reinscribe the mark as a source of life (99). However, this re-naming by Amy Denver occurs before Sethe kills Beloved and subsequently allows Beloved’s ghost to nearly drain her of all life. It is not until Sethe
acknowledges the life in her individual form, rather than the death, that she is able to name her form.

In the end, Paul D offers a construct as a lesson for all: in order to have dominion over one’s own form, one must have awareness of it and embrace it. When he returns to 124 Bluestone Road to set his story beside Sethe’s, he finds her ready to die because she believes the now-departed Beloved was her “best thing” (258). As he examines his own form and his memories, he is reminded of Sixo’s construct of a woman as a “friend of your mind,” and that only Sethe could have seen him marked and left his manhood intact. But in order for him to “put his story next to hers,” she has to rewrite her form. To have dominion over her form, she can no longer be the schoolteacher’s text, Amy Denver’s reading, or food for guilt and motherhood. He tenderly points out to her, “You your own best thing, Sethe.” In response, she says “Me? Me?” first in acknowledgement and then in embrasure (258). And while the omniscient narrator laments that all trace of story is gone, Morrison assures that it lives on in form of the text, the re-vision of language, and in the infinite meaning making that the reader engages in.

While Sethe learns in the end that she must define her own form, it is Denver who is the inheritor of the gospel as preached by Baby Suggs. As an improvising character, Denver is the practitioner of the gospel ideology who brings herself and her family back to the present and the context of the community. In contrast to Sethe, who is debilitated by the corporeal presence of her guilt, Denver demonstrates how to re-member the past to have possibility for the future.

Denver’s inspiration for individual expression and action comes from her grandmother, Baby Suggs. As Denver re-members the words and ideology of Baby
Suggs, she finds the strength to step outside the construct of Sethe’s self-loathing and guilt. Morrison makes Denver capable of improvising in a way that Claudia MacTeer is not. It is the spirit of Baby Suggs that urges Denver to “go on out the yard” (288), but it is Denver’s visit to Lady Jones that sparks a series of events that saves Denver’s family and the community from being inscribed by the past.

When Denver admits to Lady Jones that she needs help, Denver rejoins the community. She is eventually able to lay down her painful memories of community interaction and thus ushers in Baby Suggs’ long-forgotten message of healing. Though the women of the community leave food for the family, Denver and her mother are still plagued by Beloved. It is only when Denver decides to speak of her troubles that the past as embodied by Beloved can be dealt with:

It was a little thing to pay, but it seemed big to Denver. Nobody was going to help her unless she told it – told all of it. It was clear Janey wouldn’t and wouldn’t let her see the Bodwins otherwise. So Denver told this stranger what she hadn’t told Lady Jones, in return for which Janey admitted the Bodwins needed help, although they didn’t know it. (299)

Janey becomes the willing auditor that Pecola Breedlove did not have. She in turn tells Ella, who though she has spurned Sethe, understands her rage and leads the women in the community to improvise an exorcism of Beloved. If Denver had not first broken the form that inscribed her actions, her family and the community would have been stuck endlessly repeating the past. Through continuous re-vision of the speakerly text and through the improvisatory actions of her characters, Morrison’s version of the gospel ideology creates a vision of possibility in the future.
Re-vision in *Jazz* exists on many levels and is achieved through the form and the act of performance. Morrison works on a system of upsetting expectations to empty meanings and offer alternatives to racially determined language for the characters and the readers. Title, form, content, and appropriation of the modernist and postmodernist novel are all involved in a complex interplay that leads the narrator to draw the reader into the process of remaking, calling attention to the reader’s hands holding the text.

The relation between title, form, and content is the most obvious re-visioning in the text. Morrison leads readers to expect a story of some sort about jazz; instead the story *is* jazz. At times the narrator’s commentary reads like the jazz lyric: “The smart ones say so and people listening to them and reading what they write down agree: Here comes the new. Look out. There goes the sad stuff. The bad stuff. The things-nobody-could-help stuff. The way everybody was then and there. Forget that. History is over, you all, and everything’s ahead at last” (7). Eusebio Rodrigues analyzes syntax and rhythm of Morrison’s sentences as jazz performance: “The harsh blare of the consonants, the staccato generated by the commas that insist on hesitations needed to accelerate the beat, the deliberate use of alliteration and of words repeated to speed tempo – all come together to recreate the impact of jazz” (247). In the foreword to *Jazz*, Morrison comments on the parallel between structure and meaning: “I didn’t want simply a musical background, or decorative references to it [the Jazz Age]. I wanted the work to be a manifestation of the music’s intellect, sensuality, anarchy; its history, its range, and its modernity” (xix). Henry Louis Gates, Jr. points to what is perhaps most significant about Morrison’s choice of title here: “Signifyin(g) in jazz performances and in the play of black language games is a mode of formal revision, it depends for its effects on troping, it
is often characterized by pastiche, and, most crucially, it turns on repetition of formal structures and their differences” (52). He later defines pastiche as the “act of literary ‘Naming,’” an homage of sorts to the form that is not characterized by negative critique: “Pastiche only renders explicit that which any literary history implies: that tradition is the process of formal revision” (124). Morrison pays homage to the form of jazz, both making it and allowing the reader to remake it.

In appropriating modernist and postmodernist forms, Morrison not only questions narrative authority, she empties it and replaces it with a model for challenging the chains of language. The narrator begins the tale with seeming omniscience and authority: “Sth, I know that woman” (3) and starts to tell the story of Joe and Violet Trace and Dorcas. The notion of omniscience is quickly questioned, however, as the narrator confesses lack of knowledge of events and states of mind: “Whether she sent the boyfriend away or whether he quit her, I can’t say” and “Maybe she thought she could solve the mystery of love that way” (5). The first real clue about the narrator’s authority and intentions comes while she is discussing survival in the City: “Mostly it’s making sure no one knows all there is to know about me. Second, I watch everything and everyone and try to figure out their plans, their reasonings, long before they do” (8). The narrator attempts to be unobservable, to shield her story from others as a measure of survival. This, however, is a mistake, for in revealing modes of observation sometimes through inner monologue and sometimes through stream of consciousness and creating a text in collaboration with other voices, the narrator reveals much of her own plans and reasonings. Furthermore, she reveals a possible fallacy in her narration; what she relates may be an attempt to figure out the action before it happens.
In fact, we find out that this is exactly what happens. Before the narrator’s omniscience and reliability begin to crack, she sets reader’s expectations for the narrative:

When spring came to the City Violet saw, coming into the building with an Okeh record under her arm and carrying some stewmeat wrapped in butcher paper, another girl with four marcelled waves on each side of her head [similar in appearance to her husband’s murdered lover, Dorcas]. Violet invited her in to examine the record and that’s how that scandalizing threesome on Lenox Avenue began. What turned out different was who shot whom. (6)

Morrison plays here with stereotypes and received notions about jazz and African American sexuality. The narrator sets the stage for sexual licentiousness and scandal, but only three pages later hints at upsetting expectations. This new girl Felice, a friend of Dorcas’, is introduced as a means to rewrite the first love triangle and to offer an explanation for the recent past that might usher in possibility for the future. When the novel ends, we learn that the threesome is actually an alternate form of family rather than a sexual relationship in which someone is killed.

As the novel progresses, the narrator questions herself with increasing regularity. Part of the characters’ acknowledgement of their own form is to engage with their past and their origin. We find out that Violet’s mother, Rose Dear, was abandoned by her husband and eventually committed suicide by throwing herself down a well. Violet’s grandmother, True Belle, leaves the home of the white abolitionist, Vera Gray, to rescue her daughter’s family. The narrator connects this section with the last, Joe’s reflection on his affair with Dorcas and double-consciousness, through variation and theme. Joe’s
section ends, “Those old people, they knew it all. I talk about being new seven times before I met you, but back then, back there, if you was or claimed to be colored, you had to be new and stay the same every day the sun rose and every night it dropped. And let me tell you, baby, in those days it was more than a state of mind” (135). The narrator then explicitly questions the legitimacy of Joe’s perspective, but more significantly implicitly questions her own perspective and by extension the ability for any one person to claim omniscience or authority:

Risky, I’d say, trying to figure out anybody’s state of mind. But worth the trouble if you’re like me – curious, inventive and well-informed. Joe acts like he knew all about what the old folks did to keep on going, but he couldn’t have known much about True Belle, for example, because I doubt Violet ever talked to him about her grandmother – and never about her mother. So he didn’t know. Neither do I, although it’s not hard to imagine what it must have been like. (137)

Framing this particular section in this manner is a central part of emptying the form, for in this section the narrator attempts to relate how it is True Belle reifies whiteness for Violet in the form of the adored blond child, Golden Gray.

Violet’s mother, Rose Dear, battled insanity when her husband deserted her. Rose Dear’s fragmentation of self ended in denial of the form through suicide. As Violet wanders through the City after she has marked the corpse of her husband’s lover and fears that her husband too will desert her, the narrator threatens to inscribe her by insanity. The narrator assures us, however, that Violet “stumbled into a crack or two” long before Joe had the affair with Dorcas (23). These are characterized as
manifestations of Violet’s “renegade tongue” and although these words intrude on otherwise normal conversation, they signal a foreknowledge or omniscience that the narrator does not possess. As the narrator tries to paint Violet as a woman doomed to insanity, Morrison uses Violet’s comments to undercut the authority of the narrator. Violet is eventually able to maneuver linguistic and physical expression to empty both the stories her grandmother told her and the traditional Western third-person omniscient narrator of their power to define and oppress. When she is able to articulate “me” for the first time (209) it is because she has worked through received forms and re-made her concepts of mind and body: mind and body unite in her expression of the self.

One way Morrison allows her characters access to dominion over their own forms is to upset associations with the African American woman’s body. In _Jazz_, Violet acts on these associations, and in the acknowledgment of her own form wrests the African American female body from such inscriptions. As she is threatened with insanity, barrenness, and smallness, Violet learns to take charge of her own form, demonstrating possibilities to her community and readers. There is a point in the novel when Violet accepts her body, when she stops drinking malts and cooking artery-clogging food in her efforts to “get hips.” In this way, Toni Morrison provides a model of African American womanhood who neither has to be physically and mythically large nor reproductively fertile in order to be strong and make her own form.

Eventually Violet is able to re-make her form out of the fragments by realizing that her problem was psychological rather than physical. She tells Felice that the stories her grandmother told her about Golden Gray took shape inside her head and killed her sense of self. When Morrison shows that Violet is able to take control of her own life
again, it is a direct result of ridding herself of stories and external definitions that make her want to be something she is not. The thing that remains, Violet says, is “me” (209). Felice comments, unwittingly, on the significant use of language here: “I didn’t say anything. I started thinking maybe the hairdresser was right again because of the way she looked when she said ‘me.’ Like it was the first she heard of the word” (209). Later, Felice thinks about this “me,” a me who would not be stolen from “whitepeople” and then manipulated through language to believe in its legitimacy. She equates the ring her mother stole from Tiffany’s to the Golden Gray who lives inside Violet’s head:

   I wanted the ring back not just because my mother asks me have I found it yet. It’s beautiful. But although it belongs to me, it’s not mine. I love it, but there’s a trick in it, and I have to agree to the trick to say it’s mine. Reminds me of the tricky blond kid living inside Mrs. Trace’s head. A present taken from whitefolks, given to me when I was too young to say No Thank you. (211)

The trick is that once you agree to external definition or inscription by “whitepeople,” that definition makes you dissatisfied with yourself, makes you mortify your flesh and your sense of self. Violet and Felice are able to escape the construct because they articulate the self by examining the trick, the form, the language and then discarding it.

   At the end of the Jazz, Morrison forces the narrator to admit that she was wrong in many ways. Through these admissions, she offers possibility for the communal body. First she admits that she was wrong in thinking that she could keep herself secreted from people while observing them: “I thought I knew them and wasn’t worried that they didn’t really know about me; they knew me all along. Out of the corners of their eyes they
watched me. And when I was feeling most invisible [...] they were whispering to each other about me” (220). Then she addresses her lack of reliability and omniscience:

So I missed it altogether. I was sure one would kill the other. I waited for it so I could describe it. I was so sure it would happen. That the past was an abused record with no choice but to repeat itself at the crack and no power on earth could lift the arm that held the needle. I was so sure, and they danced and walked all over me. Busy, they were, busy being original, complicated, changeable – human, I guess you’d say, while I was the predictable one, confused in my solicitude into arrogance, thinking my space, my view was the only one that was or that mattered. (220)

Here, Morrison comments on her own project and the ways in which *Jazz* has freed up language, form of text and body, and created new and useful possibilities of blackness. Narrator and omniscience are emptied of their authority, received forms and associations are delegitimized, and limitless alternatives are offered; it is only through the multiplicity of perspective that a form can be freed. As the narrator calls attention to the readers’ hands holding the text, she reminds them of Alice’s earlier advice to Violet. Rather than simply accepting a form by “taking it,” make your own, remake the received one: “But I can’t say that aloud; I can’t tell anyone that I have been waiting for this all my life and that being chosen to wait is the reason I can. If I were able I’d say it. Say make me, remake me. You are free to do it and I am free to let you because look, look. Look where your hands are. Now” (229). Kevin Quashie eloquently reads Morrison’s play with narrative authority as integral to breaking out from the circle of inscription:
The communal imperative has often, if not always, been on truth – a kind of restorative, confrontational, authenticating responsibility to correct that which is wrong about the black self and to do so in the master tongue. Although the writer, Black and female, cannot merely abandon this imperative, she must surely attenuate it, lest it stifle, coerce, co-opt her own body. (154)

The narrator has relinquished authority and admitted existence as a textual form, a useful construct that the reader can make and remake.

Toni Morrison demonstrates making and remaking forms on the level of the individual word and the syntax of her sentences. Her rhythmic and lyrical prose juxtaposes the world of ideas with the harshly crude realities of survival. The reader goes over her language again and again, associating the rhythm with earlier forms and making new meanings out of passages where Morrison refuses to allow the seemingly ordinary events of life to be limited by lackluster language. She taps into the union of body, language, and music as a means of extraordinary expression. When she writes of Eva Peace, who saved her son’s life by using her only food as a suppository, Morrison’s language is thick, plodding, and guttural: "Deep in its darkness and freezing stench she squatted down, turned the baby over on her knees, exposed his buttocks and shoved the last bit of food she had in the world (besides three beets) up his ass" (Sula 2008). She slips in jazz lyrics, blues lyrics, and even gospel lyrics so that the reader is singing, maybe even moving, in the participatory act of meaning making before he or she even realizes it. The impulse toward song is strong at the sentence level and in the structure of her novels. This impulse carries the kinetic orality, the drive to action, the force that
enables re-vision and remaking of forms. Nowhere is this impulse stronger in her novels than in making meaning of the songs of parents.

In *Song of Solomon*, Morrison plays with this impulse. She also brings the reader along in making meaning through the consciousness of a character named Milkman Dead. He is a self who comes together on a quest motivated by greed but that ultimately makes him connect with his past and language in a way that creates possibility for the text and the reader. Much like the nature of Milkman’s journey, Morrison constantly revises meaning through the stories parents tell – or don’t tell – their children, through the words of songs, and through the shifting ideologies of Milkman Dead, Pilate Dead, and Guitar Bains. Morrison thus invites the reader to participate in this perpetual reinvention of meaning and the dynamic and kinetic expressivity related to it.

In this novel, Morrison makes a point of demonstrating that her characters are neither static nor predictable. Pilate is a shape-shifter and Guitar is both a murderer and yet strikingly perceptive about human nature in general and the nature of love in particular. Perhaps more than any other of her novels, *Song of Solomon* is the novel with characters who are neither everything nor nothing and thus most human: no one character is entirely good or evil, and all are vulnerable to excessive love. In this sense *Song of Solomon* is a cornerstone in Morrison’s gospel ideology for it calls to the reader to respond with body and mind in the process of remaking the terms by which one articulates the self.

The story here is about a family named Dead. Macon and Pilate are the children of Macon Dead, a man who died protecting his farm in Pennsylvania. Macon Dead, Sr. and his moved to Pennsylvania from Virginia, and they carved a farm out of wilderness.
His wife died before Pilate was born; Pilate birthed herself a minute after her mother died. Pilate begins life outside of a form, and her lack of a navel is a sign that she will remain outside of all known definitions her entire life.

After their father is murdered by wealthy whites who want his land, Macon and Pilate flee from the murderers and their father’s ghost. When they finally follow the ghost, they come upon a cave where they encounter a white man and a stash of gold. In self-defense, Macon kills the white man. He and Pilate physically fight over the course of action and Macon deserts Pilate. Eventually, he makes his way west to Detroit, but only after he has returned to the cave to retrieve the gold. The gold and the body of the white man are both gone.

Pilate makes her way to Detroit after twenty years of wandering. She has a daughter, Reba, and a granddaughter, Hagar, but she has no husband. Her life has been an existence of othering, mostly based on her missing navel. Pilate returned to the cave before Macon did. Her mission is to get the bones of the man whose life they took; she does not even look for the gold. By the time Macon reaches the cave, he believes Pilate has double-crossed him.

Macon has come to love wealth and owning things more than loving people because he believes this is the only way he can still love his father:

And his [Milkman’s] father. An old man now, who acquired things and used people to acquire more things. As the son of Macon Dead the first, he paid homage to his own father’s life and death by loving what the father had loved: property, good solid property, the bountifulness of life. He loved these things to excess because he loved is father to excess.
Owning, building, acquiring – that was his life, his future, his present, and all the history he knew. That he distorted life, bent it, for the sake of gain, was a measure of his loss at his father’s death. (300)

Because he believes Pilate has betrayed him, he is maimed and becomes capable of loving only the acts of acquisition and control. He controls and neglects his wife, Ruth, who wants only to have external validation of her flesh, his daughters Magdalene called Lena and Corinthians, and his son Macon called Milkman. Milkman is so named after the community gossip sees Ruth breastfeeding her son when he is well beyond the age when this is still done.

Milkman is befriended by a boy from the wrong side of town, Guitar Bains. It is Guitar who reunites Milkman with his Aunt Pilate. Pilate had come to Detroit twenty years previously to be reunited with her brother. Macon, however, believes she is a snake and forbids his family from having contact with her. Milkman finds all sorts of love from being in Pilate’s house. He finds his cousin Hagar’s “anaconda” love – the same suffocating love he feels from his mother – and he finds the sack that Pilate calls her inheritance. He bumps into the sack, and it marks his head. In casually relating the incident to his father, Macon comes to believe that the sack contains the gold from the cave. Macon communicates the love of things to his son, and Milkman and Guitar steal the sack from Pilate’s house. After discovering the sack contains bones and no gold, the young men are arrested without explanation. Pilate comes to their rescue, and Macon persuades Milkman that the gold must still be hidden in the cave.

Milkman decides to take a journey to find the gold. He tells Guitar it is something he has to do on his own. Guitar is immediately suspicious and trails him,
attempting to take his life at the moment when Milkman’s definition of life as an accumulation of taking things disintegrates. On his journey, Milkman comes to understand many things about his past and his self. All of this, of course, is based on the stories told to Milkman by different people. There is no one single source that relates the complete story to him; the collection of his past is a communal effort. The reader must also assemble the fragments into the tale Morrison would have us all understand. Her theme of making it versus taking it is integral to this tale. In this novel, she establishes the significance of making it versus taking it and uses the ambiguity of “taking it” to question our dependence on binaries. For at first it seems that the difference between taking it and making it is the difference between being passive and being proactive. While these terms are neither antonyms nor binaries, Morrison is not content with the suggestion of an either or relationship here. What coalesces by the end of the novel is the idea that “taking it” can also mean helping yourself to something you think you deserve but have done nothing to earn.

Taking it in this sense is what has led the whites to steal the Dead farm, it has led Macon to take the white man’s life and to take advantage of the community as a slum lord, and it has led Milkman to take to love of everyone around him and never offer anything in return. When he finally learns the secret to Pilate’s inheritance, that she carries around the bones of her father and not the white man, he returns home to offer something to the woman who gave him his life. Milkman has also figured out that he has abused his cousin Hagar by using up her love and then throwing her away with a thank-you note. But he has returned too late for Hagar for she has died of grief and the efforts to make herself over in the image of what she thinks Milkman will love. Milkman does
convince Pilate to go with him to bury her father’s bones in Virginia. After Pilate leaves a memento at the grave, Milkman realizes his friend Guitar has shot Pilate and will soon take his life. Morrison leaves the reader with an ending that is ambiguous with regard to Guitar’s motives and Milkman’s life:

Milkman stopped waving and narrowed his eyes. He could just make out Guitar’s head and shoulders in the dark. ‘You want my life?’ Milkman was not shouting now. ‘You need it? Here.’ Without wiping away the tears, taking a deep breath, or even bending his knees – he leaped. As fleet and bright as a lodestar he wheeled toward Guitar and it did not matter which one of them would give up his ghost in the killing arms of his brother. For now he knew what Shalimar knew: If you surrendered to the air, you could ride it. (337)

What is clear here is that at last, Milkman has made something and given it rather than taken it. Here, Morrison also makes clear other references to flying. Much earlier, when Guitar and Milkman had been considering why a peacock cannot fly any better than a chicken, Guitar reasons that the peacock has too much tail, too much vanity: “Wanna fly, you got to give up the shit that weighs you down” (179). This is what Shalimar and Pilate, who flew without ever leaving the ground, knew. In word and deed, Morrison shows that Milkman has learned to throw off everyone else’s definition for him and make his own for flying as Morrison defines it in conclusion involves both surrender and autonomy.

Pilate as singing mother imparts a special kind of wisdom and a challenge to the community. Within the context of her own family, though, things have gone awry. Her
granddaughter Hagar, accustomed to receiving everything she wants, is killed by grief when she is cast aside by her cousin Milkman. Macon, Pilate’s brother, has turned a deaf ear to his sister to the extent that he cannot even participate in the linguistic play of his community. And Pilate herself has been carrying around a legacy she has misunderstood.

The spirit of her father comes to Pilate saying, “Sing. Sing [. . .] You just can’t fly on off and leave a body” (147). Pilate, the narrator tells us, understands him completely: “To sing, which she did beautifully, relieved her gloom immediately. And she knew he was telling her to go back to Pennsylvania and collect what was left of the man she and Macon had murdered. (The fact that she had struck no blow was irrelevant. She was part of her brother’s act, because, then, she and he were one.)” (147). Thus Pilate returns to Pennsylvania to collect these bones that she carries around in a sack for years.

All that Pilate knows of her mother is that she died before she could give birth to her. Pilate struggles to be born, forcing her way out of a lifeless womb. The fact that she knows nothing else about her mother and that she loses her father, her home, and her relationship with her brother at a very young age explains in part the misinterpretation of her father’s words and the legacy she carries. Morrison suggests that it is not enough to remember the words of elders; because Pilate did not know her father’s history, she did not understand his words.

It is her nephew Milkman who uncovers the history and the meaning of the words. After listening to an inaccurate story his embittered father tells him, he sets off on a journey motivated by greed. He thinks Pilate’s sack is filled with gold; instead he finds it is filled with bones. Meaning starts to unravel for Milkman, but he is still determined to find the gold. His greed carries him all the way to Shalimar, Virginia. Along the way
he has experienced acceptance and initiation into a community. As a result of these experiences, he is primed for learning his history. What he discovers is the true meaning of his grandfather’s words that offer him the possibility of naming the terms of his own existence.

Sing, he learns, was not a command but the name of his grandmother. As he died, Milkman’s grandfather, Jake, was calling for his wife. It is interesting that Pilate’s misunderstanding of the word as a command gives her a calling within the community. Her song, “Sugarman, Don’t Leave Me,” we learn is a corruption of the Song of Solomon. Furthermore, unlike the biblical text, Morrison’s Song of Solomon is not a man’s song, but rather a woman’s song.

After Jake called for his wife as he was dying, he exhorted “You can’t just fly on off and leave a body,” leaving Pilate with the burden of never burying her father. But Jake was talking to his father. This second misunderstanding, however, has resulted in an unburied past that keeps calling out for peace. Through a song that Milkman hears in Shalimar – “Oh Solomon, Don’t Leave Me” -- he eventually pieces together his grandfather’s and great-grandfather’s stories. Shalimar/Shalleemone/Solomon all signify Milkman’s great-grandfather who reportedly flew back to Africa rather than take the oppression of his future in America. All of this leads Milkman to the discovery of who his family is, and that Pilate is carrying around the bones of her father rather than the bones of a white man. Pilate knows the words of her father, but she has corrupted some and misunderstood others.

Through Milkman’s investigation of the words of the song, he discovers a possibility for himself. He also discovers that Pilate innately knew this possibility even
though she misunderstood her father’s words. As she dies, she commands Milkman to sing. Although he knows no songs and does not have a singing voice, Milkman re-makes the Song of Solomon: “Sugargirl, don’t leave me here/Cotton balls to choke me/ Buckra’s arms to yoke me” (336). When she dies, he continues to sing, almost hoping that his words will wake her. Instead he awakens two birds, who we are to understand are Macon Dead, Sr. and Pilate in new forms. Macon Dead, Sr. can now rest easily dead because his bones have been properly buried. The Pilate bird dives down to retrieve the earring that contains her name. As Milkman watches the birds, he realizes that Pilate did not have to be dead to “get rid of her shit”; Pilate could fly without ever leaving the ground. Her songs were proof of that. This marriage of body and words in song allows Milkman to make his own life, to fly on off rather than let someone else write the end to his story.

But there is a certain sense of ambiguity about what Pilate knew. In fact, there is the suggestion that Pilate already knew what Milkman discovered. Milkman’s discovery and journey, however, was necessary for his articulation of self and for the reader to participate in the act.

Guitar is another crucial dynamic and ambiguous character. On the surface Morrison has constructed a character who becomes embittered and so rotten with greed and jealousy that he is a destructive force. But true to her commitment to escape inscription by Western literary codes, Morrison has created a character who asks readers to question their notions of right and wrong, good and evil. Quite simply, one might argue that a binary between good and evil or love and hate exists in this novel in the characters of Pilate (good) and Guitar (evil). However, what Morrison does is circumvent this binary altogether by creating characters who embody multiple faults and
virtues and by suggesting that the seemingly “evil” characters are necessary players in the action.

Guitar is part of a secret society, the Seven Days, committed to arbitrary retribution for racial injustice. There are seven members of the society, each responsible for a day of the week. When a black person is abused or denied justice, one of the Days will commit a similar random act of violence against a random white person. Guitar confides to Milkman that right before he commits the act, he whispers “Your Day has come” to the victim. This message conveys a multiplicity of meanings, both positive and negative. When Guitar tracks Milkman to Shalimar, he leaves this message for him. Guitar believes that Milkman has double-crossed him to get all of the alleged gold for himself. And though it is clear that Guitar is trying to kill Milkman, his efforts are also driving Milkman closer to the discovery of his past. Even when Guitar kills Pilate, her death allows Milkman to see how make his life rather than to take the life others offer him.

Given the ambiguous ending to the novel, there are questions that remain unanswered. Does Guitar track Milkman so he can learn to make his life and give it? But does he track Milkman so he can learn to make his life and give it? Does Guitar kill Pilate so that she can fly? Or does he kill Pilate in order to give a Milkman a chance to learn the secret to flying? Morrison suggests that the answers are not important; what is important is that the plot and characters are not boiled down to a battle of good versus evil or love versus hate. Through Guitar, Morrison offers a collection of ideologies that are strikingly contradictory and yet believably human and real. He is too much in love with the idea of love -- like all of the Seven Days -- to the point where it negates any life
of his own. Yet he is compassionate to Hagar when she has failed for the last time to kill Milkman. Milkman’s greed as represented by his quest for the gold and his selfish taking and throwing away of Hagar’s love pushes Guitar to try to take Milkman’s life, but whether he actually would or whether he was the catalyst to get Milkman to give his life is left up to the reader to determine. There is an echo as Milkman shouts to Guitar, “‘Here I am!’ Am am am am, said the rocks. ‘You want me? Huh? You want my life?’ Life life life life” (337). Guitar smiles and murmurs “‘My man [. . .] My main man’” to himself, then puts the rifle on the ground and stands up. Has he brought Milkman to the point of self-revelation, never really intending to kill him? Or maybe more pertinent is the question of whether or not either one of them survives. Or maybe what is important is the agency and self-articulation. This is yet another way in which Morrison uses ambiguity to suggest possibility.

Morrison’s novels also attend to the health of the communal body. Sometimes the community is ill, feeding upon pariahs like Pecola or Sula. Sometimes characters have turned away from the community, and sometimes they have lost the definition of community. Then again, sometimes the community overcomes its faults or characters construct their own community. In Beloved, Jazz, and Paradise, Morrison presents a progression of improvisations that allow for positive and healthy communities.

In Beloved, the form of the text is central to the project of freeing up language as it is a fragmented narrative, moving across time, space, perspective, and omniscience. As body and text interact, Morrison maneuvers language so that an African American woman’s awareness of her own form, both text and body, inaugurates her dominion over it. Sethe’s awareness of form is a testimony to the gospel ideology that enables her to
acknowledge the pain of the past so that it does not define her in the future. As she acknowledges what has been inscribed on her body and how form has circumscribed her family, she learns how to use body and language to define the terms of her own form.

Denver’s inspiration for individual expression and action comes from her grandmother, Baby Suggs. As Denver re-members the words and ideology of Baby Suggs, she finds the strength to step outside the construct of Sethe’s self-loathing and guilt. It is the spirit of Baby Suggs that urges Denver to “go on out the yard” (288), but it is Denver’s visit to Lady Jones that sparks a series of events that saves Denver’s family and the community from being inscribed by the past.

When Denver admits to Lady Jones that she needs help, she rejoins the community. She is eventually able to lay down her painful memories of community interaction and thus ushers in Baby Suggs’ long-forgotten message of healing. Though the women of the community leave food for the family, they are still plagued by Beloved. It is only when Denver decides to speak of her troubles to Janey that the past as embodied by Beloved can be dealt with:

It was a little thing to pay, but it seemed big to Denver. Nobody was going to help her unless she told it – told all of it. It was clear Janey wouldn’t and wouldn’t let her see the Bodwins otherwise. So Denver told this stranger what she hadn’t told Lady Jones, in return for which Janey admitted the Bodwins needed help, although they didn’t know it. (299)

Morrison establishes Janey as a willing auditor who in turn tells the painful story to Ella. Although Ella has spurned Sethe, she understands her rage and leads the women in the community to improvise an exorcism of Beloved. If Denver had not first broken the form
that inscribed her actions, her family and the community would have been stuck endlessly repeating the past. Through continuous re-vision of the speakerly text and through the improvisatory actions of her characters, Morrison’s version of the gospel ideology creates a vision of possibility in the future.

We have seen how Denver’s improvisatory actions enable family and community healing in *Beloved*. Though the storyline and particulars are different, in some respects this is a rewriting of community in *Sula*. The actions of both Sethe and Eva are beyond the understanding of the community, and so these families are shunned and excluded from community. In *Sula* the failure of community to reconnect with the pariah ensures destruction not only for Sula, but for the community as well. However, through improvisation, Morrison demonstrates in *Beloved* the necessity for the individual in the community context. The autonomous self and the corporate self are not mutually exclusive; both are necessary for survival and growth.

Denver begins rebuilding the relationship with the community when she asks Lady Jones for help. The women tentatively respond by leaving food for Denver’s family. They signal an invitation to participate in community life by leaving their names with the parcels of food. When the gifts are anonymous, Denver improvises by guessing the owner of the container and attempting to return it. These women are reminded of Baby Suggs and the community center that the house at 124 Bluestone Road represented. Though they still gossip about what goes on at the house, their sense of community will not allow disdain and meanness to repeat the past: “They whispered, naturally, wondered, shook their heads. Some even laughed outright at Denver’s clothes of a hussy, but it didn’t stop them caring whether she ate and it didn’t stop the pleasure they took in her
soft “Thank you”” (294). Eventually, though, Denver decides to do something for herself and finds a job.

To get this job, she must tell her troubles to Janey. Janey must witness and testify to the rest of the community the horrors of past visited upon Sethe. In order for the community to respond, Denver first had to decide to do something about her situation. She refused to rely on kindness, instead choosing to take her existence into her own hands. Again, improvisatory action is the key to healing the communal body.

Sethe’s story strikes a chord in Ella, the woman who had formerly shunned her. It’s not so much that she understands what Sethe did, or that she is bothered by a typical haunting. Rather, when Beloved improvises and steps out of her “ghostly place” taking flesh and dwelling in the present (302), Ella senses a transgression against the continuity of the community. The past that has haunted Sethe now threatens the entire community.

The women then band together destroy the form that the past has appropriated: Beloved. Each woman, in her own way, brings her voice to the community chorus: “Some brought what they could and what they believed would work. Stuffed in apron pockets, strung around their necks, lying in the space between their breasts. Others brought Christian faith – as sword and shield. Most brought a little of both” (303). Though the women have no idea what they will do when they reach Sethe’s house, they are able to improvise.

They raise their voices, led by Ella who, shaken by the idea of her past taking flesh, hollers without words. She is then joined by a chorus: “Instantly the kneelers and standers joined her. They stopped praying and took a step back to the beginning. In the beginning there were no words. In the beginning was the sound, and they all knew what
that sound sounded like” (305). It is this sound that draws Sethe and Beloved from the house and breaks the forms that have inscribed them: “[W]here the voices of women searched for the right combination, the key, the code, the sound that broke the back of words” (308).

Sethe herself then improvises in a re-vision of the past. As she sees Mr. Bowdin coming to pick up Denver, all she sees is another whiteman coming into her yard. This time, though, the community is there to support her instead of refusing to warn her. Rather than attacking Beloved, her rage is directed toward the whiteman. The community of women saves her from another crime, and the form that the past took – Beloved – has been destroyed. When Sethe and the women are allowed to re-vision the past through improvisation, they are able to heal and exist as individuals within the community context.

As Violet spins toward a fragmented self in Jazz, the narrator functions as the gossipy and destructive voice of the community, drawing support and communion away from her. However, Violet is able to break the record of her past, her mother’s past, and her grandmother’s past, and reclaims community through improvisation. None of the expectations that the narrator/community establishes are met in the end. In the family of three that is built at the end (Joe, Violet, and Felice), the members are able to find what they have been looking for, “putting their lives together in ways [the narrator] never dreamed of” (221). Though the narrator and the community expects the murder and the insanity of the past, these characters are able to step out of the construct and free up the future for themselves and for the larger community.
The Convent in *Paradise* is an anti-community of sorts. In this last movement of these three novels that are frequently grouped together, Morrison provides an alternative for the failure of community. The women at the Convent have all come to that place because their communities have failed them in some way. They are trying to break the forms that bind them, trying to improvise to break the record of the past. And yet the men of Ruby, who are full of spite and misunderstanding, seek to use them, to fortify their egos, by destroying them and the community they have built. The women’s response, though ambiguous and indeterminate, circles back to *Beloved* and suggests the healing and protective potential of a women’s community.

In all of her novels, Toni Morrison responds dynamically to the call of the gospel ideology. Her chief concern is that her characters refuse to be inscribed by expectations or traditional forms. The power to change the “abused record of the past” and to free up the language rests in the hands of each individual. Morrison demonstrates that no one has to just take what life provides. In this regard, she is clearly one of Zora’s daughters. Rather than creating a staunchly individualist ideology, Morrison draws upon the participatory and improvisatory actions of the gospel ideology to allow readers to remake themselves. She Signifies on the Africanist presence in white literature and creates the possibility of an autonomous self and a corporate self housed in the same body.
Alice Walker’s entire body of work – novels, poems, essays, a documentary – is actively engaged in the mission of freeing up the language with a gospel ideology. The novels in particular call and respond to those of other writers as well as to her own work. And while at first glance it might appear that *The Color Purple* is her main experiment with form, Walker has consistently modified structure, perspective, language, and memory to reflect the concerns of African American women. Her characters are dynamic beings who either learn to love their own bodies or who demonstrate the physical and psychic trauma of self-loathing. Though not all of her characters learn how to “make it,” true to the gospel ideology Walker never abandons faith in the possibility for the future and the reader. In the careful construction of her characters’ consciousnesses and their attitudes toward their bodies, Walker creates a refrain that plays again and again in her novels.

In this refrain, there is an abiding concern with not only the acceptance of but also the enjoyment of the divinity of one’s body. While this concern is nascent in such early works as *The Third Life of Grange Copeland* and *Meridian*, it is fully embodied in the character of Shug Avery in *The Color Purple* and becomes conflict and theme in Walker’s later novels. Self-inflicted transgressions against the body are of such great concern in *Possessing the Secret of Joy* and *By the Light of My Father’s Smile* that
Walker starts to seem singularly obsessed. If her novels are considered as a coherent body of work, however, they reveal a pattern of repetition, a refrain, influenced by the gospel ideology. Walker is going to keep on repeating the refrain, with variation, until the world gets her message that the human body is an extraordinary instrument. And though her last novel, *Now is the Time to Open Your Heart*, is strikingly less concerned with body modification, it presents an African American woman at peace with her body and her choices. In fact, this novel serves as a literary coda to the themes developed from *The Third Life of Grange Copeland* to *By the Light of My Father's Smile*.

Walker’s novels are not, however, mere repetitions of other African American women’s novels. Though Walker’s novels talk to her own and other authors’ work, each novel is an individual expression of her refrain and a dynamic development of her style. Walker has moved increasingly toward the theoretical with each novel. Both her message and her concerns have become more global in nature, while her conclusions grow more prophetic and utopian. She is deeply attuned with the divine, and many of her characters are as well, but the supernatural or fantastic are either limited to the world of dreams or are presented as extensions of characters’ personalities. One last hallmark of her style speaks to the role of personal history in being a doer of the word. Walker shows her characters living through their painful pasts rather than only showing them *dealing* with their painful pasts. As Janie tells Pheoby at the end of *Their Eyes Were Watching God*, we see Walker’s characters “go there” and watch them learn to “know there.”

Although Walker does not simply retell the stories of her literary foremothers through a contemporary lens, she is quick to acknowledge her indebtedness, especially to Zora Neale Hurston:
When Toni Morrison said she writes the kind of books she wants to read, she was acknowledging the fact that in a society in which ‘accepted literature’ is so often sexist and racist and otherwise irrelevant or offensive to so many lives, she must do the work of two. She must be her own model as well as the artist attending, creating, learning from, realizing the model, which is to say, herself. [. . ]

Well, I thought, where are the black collectors of folklore? Where is the black anthropologist? [. . .]

And that is when I first saw, in a footnote to the white voices of authority, the name of Zora Neale Hurston. [. . .]

And having found that Zora [. . .], I was hooked. What I had discovered, of course, was a model. A model, who, as it happened, provided more than voodoo for my story, more than one of the greatest novels America had produced – though, being America, it did not realize this. She had provided, as if she knew someday I would come along wandering in the wilderness, a nearly complete record of her life. And though her life sprouted an occasional wart, I am eternally grateful for that life, warts and all. (In Search of Our Mothers’ Gardens 8-12)

This indebtedness is an acknowledgement of the empowering forces behind the gospel ideology. In the development of an African American women’s literary tradition, Hurston provides a necessary bridge from suppression of self in the service of racial uplift to the assertion of a self liberated from the constrictions of language and gender.
Janie Crawford had to first listen to her own voice and assert her right to her body in order for any of Walker’s characters to give voice to the divinity of their bodies.

In making their books “talk,” both Hurston and Walker join text with body. The expressivity of the body becomes the expressivity of the text. In key moments, where stereotypes are destroyed and the language of the dominant culture is subverted, the body of a character speaks. Both Janie and Celie experience moments of self-negation, and both Janie and Celie are able to regain that presence through the expressive capabilities of the body. In the chapter “Color Me Zora: Alice Walker’s (Re)Writing of the Speakerly Text” from The Signifying Monkey, Henry Louis Gates, Jr. attributes the self-assertion in both novels to a linguistic act: “[C]elie’s written voice to God, her reader, tropes the written yet never uttered voice of free indirect discourse which is the predominant vehicle of narrative commentary in Hurston’s novel. [. . .] Janie and her narrator speak themselves into being; Celie, in her letters, writes herself into being” (243). These characters, however, would not have been able to complete these linguistic acts if they had not first recognized the divinity of their bodies.

For Alice Walker, the gospel ideology is the thing that guides humans to love their bodies, to use them to express individuality, and to pass this good news on to the community. It is the force that breaks the racial and gendered chains of language. It is a force within everyone requiring, however, acknowledgement and assertion of one’s own form. Henry Louis Gates Jr., in fact, touches on this idea when he explores Walker’s troping of Rebecca Cox Jackson’s miracle of literacy:

Walker [. . .] makes much of this scene in her essay on Jackson, underscoring the fact that “Jackson was taught to read and write by the
spirit within her.” When Walker dedicates The Color Purple “To the Spirit,” it is to this spirit which taught Rebecca Jackson to read. It is the representation of the unfolding of this gift of the “spirit within her,” an “unspeakable gift,” through which Walker represents the thoroughly dynamic development of her protagonist’s consciousness, within the “unspeakable” medium of an epistolary novel comprised of letters written but never said, indeed written but never read. Celie’s only reader, and Rebecca’s only literacy teacher, is God. (243)

Whereas Jackson was working within a tradition in which the writer is disembodied and becomes merely a vessel for the words of God, Hurston creates a tradition in which the body is very much a part of creating expressions of divinity. Walker in turn adds her own interpretation of the gospel ideology to the tradition by requiring her characters to acknowledge that love of the body is what makes “the Spirit” possible.

Once Walker brings Celie to the realization that God is not a form outside of herself, that in fact God – as Shug says – is everything, her spirit is reunited with her body and her linguistic activity. It allows her to tell Mr. ___ that she doesn’t want to marry him because she is not attracted to men (“I still don’t like frogs”) and to write to Nettie that whether or not Shug comes home, she will be content: “I be so calm. If she come, I be happy. If she don’t, I be content. And then I figure this the lesson I was suppose to learn” (290). Walker’s use of italics here demonstrates that Celie no longer needs to write to an external spirit and a divided consciousness. She can write to her sister that she says “I be so calm” to herself. Celie then addresses her last letter to God and Everything, including herself. When Nettie, Samuel, and the “children” arrive at her
home, speech fails her. However, both Shug and Albert use their bodies to help her.
Nettie’s foot on the porch affirms her bodily presence, and though they do not speak at
first, they cry, moan, hug, and knock each other over. Walker makes their bodies subvert
the power of strictly verbal expression and what is expressed subverts notions of bodily
shame.

Within this context of Walker’s community of novels, each repetition of these
themes acts as an individual expression. Furthermore, the repetition of themes and
characters among novels is a large-scale application of the rhetorical strategies of the
gospel ideology: each iteration is familiar but unique; each repetition strengthens the
power of the theme yet adds something new; each Signification loosens the chains of
language while it creates new meaning. In *The Way Forward is with a Broken Heart*, one
narrator takes her mother, aunt, and family friend to an adult film in the service of
opening up a dialogue about sex. Their ensuing conversation leads to a consideration of
etymologies: “What are those things called when you, you know what? asked my mother.
[. . .] Orgasm, I said [. . .] No colored person thought up that word, that’s for sure, said
Aunt Fanny. Got a wormy sound to it. Gets slimy and hung up in your back teeth. [. . .]
It’s a trip being trapped in somebody else’s language, isn’t it, I said” (183). The result of
the repetition is a body of work that has transformed the English language not only for
African American women, but for a global community. That language can no longer
provoke shame and hatred of the body; rather Walker uses the language to celebrate the
body’s divinity both in corporeal representation and through the body of the creative
expressive act. The use of repetition and participation in the gospel ideology is suddenly
illuminated:
We are not even the only ones not speaking to each other. Across America elders are not speaking to each other, though most of us will find we have a lot to say, after we’ve cried in each other’s arms. [...] And yet, Stranger who perhaps I am never to know, the past doesn’t exist. It cannot be sanctuary. [...] We see that everything that is truly needed by the world is too large for individuals to give. We find we have only ourselves. Our experience. Our dreams. Our simple art. Our memories of better ways. Our knowledge that the world cannot be healed in the abstract. That healing begins where the wound was made. Now it seems to me we might begin to understand something of the meaning of earnest speaking and fearless listening; something of the purpose of the most ancient form of beginning to remake the world: remembering what the world we once made together was like. (199-200)

Much like Toni Morrison’s narrator in Jazz, Walker’s narrator calls to the reader to re-make the language in order to re-vision the self and the community.

Alice Walker also employs the strategy of repetition with a group of characters in three novels. Although she has expressly stated that these novels are not sequels to The Color Purple, the repetition of the characters demonstrates their dynamic qualities, their influence on the community, and the way in which Walker subverts language and Western literary structures through the disruption of a linear concept of time. For the purposes of this study, however, one character repetition is central to Walker’s entire project. Shug Avery figures largely in The Color Purple and makes appearances in Possessing the Secret of Joy and The Temple of My Familiar. Her presence in all three of
these novels serves to reinforce the importance of corporeal presence to the gospel ideology.

Among the many purposes Walker has Shug fulfill in *The Color Purple* is to help Celie remake her image of God. Shug espouses a belief of the divinity within and an African animism that asserts God is everywhere, in everything. Given the dynamic nature of the world and the self, Shug’s concept of God cannot remain static. Furthermore, Shug represents a very personal relationship with divinity, a desire that is present in Walker’s early novels such as *The Third Life of Grange Copeland*. In Walker’s work, there is a close link between the creative impulse and the identification of the divinity within the self.

Walker gives this creative impulse to Shug Avery, both in her role as a blues singer and as a “minister” and the author of a pamphlet, *The Gospel According to Shug*, in *The Temple of My Familiar*. Olivia, Celie’s daughter, is the first character who addresses Shug’s publication and her religion:

[M]ama Shug had decided to found her own religion [. . .] Everyone who came brought information about their own path and journey. They exchanged and shared this information. That was the substance of the church. Some of these people worshipped Isis. Some worshipped trees. Some thought the air, because it is alone everywhere, is God. [. . .] Mama Shug felt there was only one thing anyone could say about G-O-D, and that was – it had no name. [. . .] I was telling them, Mama Celie and Miss Shug, about how the Olinka use humming instead of words sometimes and that that accounts for the musicality of their speech. The hum has
meaning, but it expresses something that is fundamentally inexpressible in words. Then the listener gets to interpret the hum, out of his own experience, and to know that there is a commonality of understanding possible but that true comprehension will always be a matter of degree.

Walker’s use of Olivia to repeat Shug’s gospel is as significant as the repetition of the character Shug herself. Shug articulates an ideology that Olivia connects to a West African linguistic maneuver. Furthermore, Olivia understands the dynamic and individual nature of the gospel as she repeats it to her own daughter who is much in need of a strategy for breaking free from forms.

Much later in the novel, Walker textually reproduces the pamphlet. It reads much like the Beatitudes. But rather than declaring the doers of the words as “blessed,” Walker remakes the meaning of the form by asserting the doers are “helped”: “HELPED” are those who are shown the existence of the Creator’s magic in the Universe; they shall experience delight and astonishment without ceasing” (289). In all, there are twenty-seven tenets that comprise this gospel. They articulate Walker’s concerns and themes from *The Third Life of Grange Copeland* to *The Way Forward is With a Broken Heart*. Furthermore, they represent the union of word with action, they reconstruct a scriptural form and the Christian ideology, and they are the counterpart to the physical Shug that Walker presented in *The Color Purple*.

In this group of novels, Walker is also concerned with how assertion of the self and individual expressivity are stymied by mutilation of the body. In fact, Walker explores the cycle of abuse, the damaged psyche, mutilation, and lack of agency in all of
her novels. She moves beyond female circumcision to include any alteration or marking of the body resulting from shame, oppression, or an attempt to conform to a dominant standard. Whether sexuality is suppressed or the body is mutilated, Walker elucidates the connections between body image and expression. The body becomes either a passive text to be written on, or an instrument through which the self is expressed. For the latter to happen, characters have to re-make their form and tell how they did it.

With *The Color Purple*, Alice Walker appropriates both the theme of the bildungsroman and the form of the epistolary novel to challenge the racially and culturally determined relationships between men and women, women and women, and men and men. Notions of God, the body, space, and sexuality are all deconstructed in this novel. In what Linda Abbandonato calls a “conscious rewriting of canonical male texts,” Walker offers views “from elsewhere” (296-8). What the reader discovers is that Walker offers an intensely personal and individualized engagement with the revitalization of language and form to signal that alternatives for community start with individual growth and commitment to the self.

The epistolary novel is a vehicle that can give its fictional writer dominion over form, content, and the body through articulation of the self. In the case of Celie, however, the writer’s auditor/reader – God -- has been defined by the man she believes to be her father. He has also inscribed her body. After repeatedly raping her and impregnating her twice, he sets in motion a cycle of abuse, silence, and repression that lasts for two-thirds of the novel: “You better not never tell nobody but God. It’d kill your mammy” (1). In *The Wayward Preacher in the Literature of African American Women*, James Robert Saunders discusses the danger of inscription of the self through religion.
Certain African American authors, he claims, “are warning against capitulation to religious functionaries who insist that the self must be virtually obliterated in order for salvation to be attained” (7). Here Walker Signifies on the tradition of the disembodied voice. She is certainly responding to the repression and inscription invoked in the father’s use of “God.” Over the course of the novel, Celie works with received forms and finally takes control over her own form, translating that control to re-vision God, self, and relationships.

The concept of God is one that both confuses and delimits Celie. In her first letter she asks him for a sign of what is happening to her. Her pain and misery seem illogical to her as she writes that she has “always been a good girl” (1). When pressed by her mother to reveal the father of her children, Celie says that they are God’s and that he took the first one to the woods and killed it. When Pa starts to look at Nettie, Celie determines to take care of her with God’s help. Later, she hears Pa tell Mr.____ that God has sterilized her. After she has married Mr.____, Celie sees her little girl in town with her adopted mother, Corinne. Celie tells her who her husband is, and when Corinne comments on his handsomeness, Celie thinks that most men look alike to her. In essence, all men resemble a white God: domineering, silencing, and controlling.

In her last letter to God after she and Shug find Nettie’s letters, Celie reveals that all forms known to her have been emptied: “Dear God, […] My daddy lynch. My mama crazy. All my little half-brothers and sisters no kin to me. My children not my sister and brother. Pa not pa. You must be sleep” (183). A few letters later she writes to Nettie about her meditations on God with Shug. What she has discovered is that she has spent so much time trying to empty God of the notions inscribed by whites that she has not
allowed herself to invent her own form: “Trying to chase that old white man out of my head. I been so busy thinking bout him I never truly notice nothing God make. […] Whenever you trying to pray, and man plop himself on the other end of it, tell him to git lost, say Shug. Conjure up flowers, wind, water, a big rock” (204). From the beginning of the novel when Celie nearly writes herself out of the text, Walker is emptying the form of the novel of its associated meanings. When all forms are emptied, Walker starts accumulating new meanings for the novel, for God, and for Celie. However, Celie still has to rid herself of anger before she can create and acknowledge her personal form of God and thank it at the close of her story. In order to do so, she recognizes the divinity of her mind and body and expresses to an external auditor this internal and personal experience.

Alice Walker has been criticized for creating a form and a vision that is utopian and disingenuous because, though the novel ends “happily ever after,” for Celie, she has done nothing to make her world a better place for African Americans. bell hooks is perhaps the most well-known critic of Walker’s revision of the form: “Given these terms, Walker creates a fiction wherein an oppressed black woman can experience self-recovery without a dialectical process; without collective political effort; without radical change in society. […] It is a brand of false consciousness that keeps everyone in place and oppressive structures intact” (295). In connecting African American women’s texts to the history of the Civil Rights Movement, Melissa Walker offers a further perspective on the significance of attention to the personal form in *The Color Purple*. The 1930’s, she explains, were a time of disparate visions on the goals and progress of civil rights for the
African American community. Furthermore, many did not even know that there was a change that was possible:

For African Americans who had little evidence that life could be different, the concept of progress had little meaning. [...] Progress in *The Color Purple*, however, is entirely in the private domain, as characters relinquish destructive behaviors, develop satisfactory personal relationships, and construct economically viable lives in the midst of a hostile, oppressive, and essentially unchanged society. (50)

Perhaps what these critics miss is that change begins on a very personal level. If one does not know how to make new meaning for language, forms, constructs, etc. from their racial determinations, one cannot effect lasting and meaningful social change. Shug Avery serves as a minister to the characters and the readers. While she has a strong sense of self, she makes choices that harm other people. She admits to having done wrong and sets out to help Celie recover her sense of self. These women minister to each other from the moment that they recover their own selfhood. Alice Walker re-vision form and language by asserting the individual’s primacy and dominion in its creation and shape.

In *The Color Purple*, Walker introduces the character Tashi. She is a member of the Olinka tribe that practices facial scarification and female circumcision. Walker refrains from exploring the origins of these traditions in this novel, choosing to focus instead on the meaning of the rituals and comparing the acceptance of them to the way in which cyclical oppression and violence threaten African American families.

When Nettie, Samuel, and Corinne were missionaries with the Olinka, they were effective in curbing the scarification and circumcision. After the Belgians decimate their
village and their way of life and force them into laboring on the rubber plantations, many Olinkans run away to join the mbeles who fight white oppression and rule. Samuel, Nettie, Adam, and Olivia take a trip to England to seek aid for the Olinkas. Nettie notices Adam’s morose attitude, and Olivia tells her it is a result of Tashi’s decision to participate in both modification rituals. For Tashi, it is a decision for the community and one of personal resistance. The result, however, is Adam’s refusal to touch her scars and ensuing shame about her body.

Tashi is deluded into thinking that participation in these rituals will strengthen community through the preservation of rituals. Furthermore, she is happy, Olivia says, that these things are not done in Europe and America. Tradition has perpetrated on these Olinkan women the idea that mutilating their bodies and thereby denying their rights to sexual pleasure is in the best interest of their community. Walker calls blind obedience to ritual into question here, subtly paralleling this situation with Harpo’s confusion of traditional gendered behaviors with masculinity. Tashi’s circumcision and scarification are also a parallel suppression of her own body and her belief that she is ugly. These characters are faced with the difficult consequences of adhering to customs and traditions for which the meaning has been lost.

When Adam and Tashi return from the mbeles, Tashi fears marrying Adam for the shame she would feel about her face in America: “[S]he had seen the magazines we receive from home and that it was very clear to her that black people did not truly admire blacksinned black people like herself, and especially did not admire blacksinned black women. They bleach their faces, she said. They fry their hair. They try to look naked” (285-6). Walker is careful here to point out the mutilation in the West. In fact, this is a
theme she repeats throughout her novels. Female circumcision is not the only mutilation; chemical hair straightening, plastic surgery, obsessive dieting, and piercings come under her definition of mutilation. Tashi is a woman caught between two cultures that would inscribe her in very different ways. Adam’s response is to ask forgiveness for his initial response and to scar his own cheeks. At the end of this novel, Tashi feels the love and acceptance of Adam’s family, but the damage to her psyche is revealed in *Possessing the Secret of Joy*.

*Possessing the Secret of Joy* is a novel that in form and content reveals the divided consciousness of Tashi. Each character narrates his or her own section in a disrupted linear progression. The clearest indication of Tashi’s fragmentation is the varying headings of her sections: Tashi, Evelyn, Tashi-Evelyn, Evelyn-Tashi., Tashi-Evelyn-Mrs. Johnson. In these sections, Walker uses these conflicting fragments of Tashi to give voice to the corporeal and psychological damage of the circumcision in particular. Ultimately, Tashi murders the *tsunga* (ritual circumciser) who circumcised her, and is condemned to death for her deed. In the end, she is Tashi Evelyn Johnson Soul, no longer fragmented, reborn to spread the gospel ideology through her voice in the text.

In her journey to this point, however, Tashi experiences an unfathomable amount of physical and emotional pain. Walker draws upon her research of female circumcision rites to paint a grim picture in which Tashi is subjected to not only a clitoridectomy, but her labia are also removed and the gaping wound is sewn shut with a thorn. She suffers from the pain and stench of a blocked menstrual flow, unsuccessful surgical attempts at reconstruction, and a distorted birth canal that damages the brain of her son, Benny. In
The Color Purple Walker has Tashi relate her worst fears: “I fear Adam will be distracted by one of these naked looking women and desert me. Then I would have no country, no people, no mother, and no husband and brother” (286). In fact, Adam engages in a sexual relationship with a French woman, Lisette, and has a son with her.

It is this son, Pierre, who ministers to Tashi by researching the origins of female circumcision rites. Tashi has been plagued by a nightmare of a tower, and this nightmare has become the sole obsession of Lisette. Pierre uncovers the meaning of this tower and reaches out to help Tashi heal. Female circumcision is revealed as a mutilation of the female form borne out of the male need to dominate. Furthermore, both male and female circumcision are attempts to create an unnatural gender division: the clitoris is masculine in its protrusion from the body, and the foreskin is feminine in its enclosure of the penis. From his research, Pierre asserts that the original human beings were endowed with two souls of different sex, but the desire for definite categories and forceful domination led man to circumcision.

After learning this, Tashi remarks that it is no surprise to her that Pierre is biracial and bisexual. He fully accepts all of the parts and urges of his body. As a character similar to Shug Avery, Pierre helps Tashi to unlock the pain of her nightmares, her divided consciousness, and to learn the meaning of a ritual to which she so blindly capitulated. It is a mystery, Tashi writes in a letter, “that kept me enmeshed” (277). The mystery threatens to destroy her until she learns that there was a tribe of African women who loved their bodies: “[T]hey liked their genitals. So much so that they were observed from birth stroking and ‘pulling’ on them. By the time they reached puberty, well, they had acquired what was to become known, at least among European anthropologists, as
‘the Hottentot apron’” (277-278). Before patriarchy and theories of race difference, there were women not ashamed of their flesh. Pierre’s research opens up the meaning of the tradition and allows Tashi to be free of its inscription. Though she cannot recover her clitoris or labia, Walker creates a woman who can re-make her self and spread the gospel. As Tashi is executed she reads the banner that her people have made for her “RESISTANCE IS THE SECRET OF JOY!” (281) Her very resistance to form and oppression inspires her fellow countrywomen.

As Tashi makes her way to her execution, she is met by women protesters. The meaning of their presence is not recognized by the men facing them with machine guns. They have been warned not to sing. Unbeknownst to the men, their corporeal presence is a song of sorts to Tashi. By asserting their right to a physical presence in a culture that devalued them and denied them pleasure for reasons long forgotten, these characters whom Walker places at Tashi’s execution stand for resistance. They communicate in a way that is incomprehensible to their oppressors, and they remake meaning for their own forms:

The women along the way have been warned they must not sing. Rockjawed men with machine guns stand facing them. But women will be women. Each woman standing beside the path holds a red-beribboned, closely swaddled baby in her arms, and as I pass, the bottom wrappings fall. The women then place the babies on their shoulders or on their heads, where they kick their naked legs, smile with pleasure, screech with terror, or occasionally wave. It is a protest and celebration the men threatening them do not even recognize. (280)
In true antiphonal fashion, Walker has Tashi call to her fellow countrywomen through her actions and insistence on the divinity of the body, and Walker has the women respond with their bodies. Furthermore, while the presence of the women represents resistance, the nonviolent act of removing the swaddling – forms that bind – from their babies’ bodies indicates the reintegration of body and spirit and positive resistance for the future.

Although song does not figure largely in all of Walker’s novels, her strategic use of it in *Meridian*, *The Color Purple*, and *Now is the Time to Open Your Heart* are repetitions of this link between resistance and joy. Song in these novels ranges from hymns and gospel to the blues and Native American chant. Each version of song is different in its context, but the role of song in all of these novels is to express the awareness of one’s form.

Song is present in three pivotal moments in Meridian Hill’s developing consciousness. All of these moments depict the community’s reaction to death. The first instance involves the funeral of Wile Chile who appears in the slum near Meridian’s college when she is estimated to be five or six. Wile Chile had no parents, friends, relatives, or language. She could not tell her story or even tell anyone her age. Over the years, the neighbors attempt to take her in and civilize her. She resists all attempts until she is found to be pregnant. Meridian succeeds in capturing her by luring her with cake, colored beads, and fresh cigarettes. While Meridian bathes her, Wile Chile reveals her linguistic ability in the form of obscenities. She is uncouth, farting “as if to music,” and upsets the peace of Meridian’s college dorm. Meridian attempts to find a home for her, but Wile Chile escapes and is killed by a speeding car.
Meridian and her friends band together to buy a casket and hold a funeral for Wile Chile. They are met with administrative opposition as they attempt to enter the chapel. In response, the women begin expressing their resistance in a number of ways:

For five minutes the air rang with shouts and the polite curses of young ladies [. . .] They were so ashamed and angry they began to boo and stamp their feet and stick out their tongues through their tears. In the heat of their emotion they began to take off their jewelry and fling it to the ground [all symbols by which their culture would inscribe them] [. . .] They shook loose their straightened hair, and all the while they glared at the locked chapel door with a ferocity that was close to hatred. (47)

Without speaking a word, the women move the casket to the symbolic tree, The Sojourner. They begin to sing “We Shall Overcome” with tears and grief streaming down their faces and bury Wile Chile in an overgrown corner of the black cemetery. It would seem that these women have learned to resist oppression and exterior definition.

In reality, the very act of capturing Wile Chile leads to her destruction. Similarly, when they riot in response to administrative oppression, they mistake the meaning of The Sojourner and saw down the “mighty, ancient, sheltering music tree” (48). Meridian does not participate in this act, and attempts to persuade the women to dismantle the president’s house instead. The narrator writes that their act was done in “a fury of confusion and frustration.” They have mistaken the symbols, mistaken who Wile Chile is, and have destroyed their mothers rather than their oppressors. Though they express their anger with their bodies and sing a hymn of protest, the meaning is lost on all but Meridian. The sense of guilt weighs so heavily upon her that she is catapulted back
through a series of reflections in which the meaning of guilt as defined by someone else has led her to misunderstand her own self.

The second key instance of song is much later in Meridian’s life when she attends the funeral of Martin Luther King, Jr. After the service, the “pitiable crowd of nobodies” follows the casket singing “In the Garden.” The song, a favorite of Dr. King’s, seems neutral to Meridian. She then notices that the crowd is absorbed all things except for obvious mourning, and they cease the song: “Those who had never known it anyway dropped the favorite song, and there was a feeling of relief in the air, of liberation that was repulsive” (186). Though the song is about the individual soul’s communion with the deity, shame nearly forces Meridian to misunderstand the community.

As she turns in shame, she hears a young black man offer an explanation to a white couple. Here Walker recalls the speech about guilt she had Grange Copeland give his son: “‘It’s a black characteristic, man,’ a skinny black boy tapping on an imaginary drum was saying. ‘We don’t go on over death the way whiteys do.’ He was speaking to a white couple who hung on guiltily to every word. Behind her a black woman was laughing, laughing as if her cares, at last, had flown away” (186). Their behavior at a funeral is a thing of resistance itself; they will not subscribe to white notions of guilt and let that dictate their behavior.

Meridian then reflects on a series of questions she discussed with her sometimes lover Truman Held. What she struggles with is the differentiation between the “right” thing and the “correct” thing to do when it comes to killing. She knows that people do whatever is necessary to survive without counting the cost. This, the narrator tells us, is what differentiates most people from Meridian. In Meridian, however, Walker embodies
the notion of the physical action requisite for the spoken word: if Meridian says she would be willing to kill, then she had better be able to do it. Barbara Christian identifies this as Meridian’s “persistent identification of her body with her soul, her past with her present” (“Novels for Everyday Use” 77). Through the character of Meridian, Walker illustrates the organic process of engaging with the gospel ideology.

Shortly after Dr. King’s funeral, Meridian starts attending church sporadically. She notices a red-eyed man whose son was slain in the Civil Rights struggle. The congregation begins to sing a song. Meridian remembers the melody, but cannot remember the words. In fact, the words seem to be associated with Meridian’s search for self:

But now she could not remember the words; they seemed stuck in some pinched-over groove in her memory. She stared at the people behind the altar, distractedly clutching the back of the bench in front or her. She did not want to find right then whatever it was she was looking for. She had no idea, really, what it was. And yet, she was there. (194)

Meridian tries to sing but realizes the words are new to her. Just then the red-eyed man starts to whisper to the people around him, and another man asks for someone to lead in prayer. The prayer delivered is more of a declaration thanking the community for its solidarity but resolving to not pray any longer because of the amount of work required in the community. Speaking the words without resolve for personal action is no longer enough. This interaction with language is representative of a fundamental shift in the Civil Rights Movement from the ideology of the Sixties to that of the Seventies, and the setting for Meridian’s contemplation establishes the importance of her role as a redefined
self interacting in a community context. Again, Barbara Christian elucidates the importance of the connection between mind, or thought and language, and body, a necessary instrument for articulating that which cannot otherwise be articulated:

Meridian insists that to be whole, there must be a unity of body and mind. So, too, the central action of the Civil Rights Movement, body resistance to manifest the protest of the mind, attempted to demonstrate this oneness. The process of putting one’s body on the line, of resisting oppression without inflicting violence, is crucial to the Movement’s spirit – the desire to change without destroying, to maintain the integration of body and spirit, to resist separation and alienation. (“Novels for Everyday Use” 79)

It is this same union of language/thought/mind and body/expression that the women meeting Tashi at her execution represent. In the face of a government that has completely convoluted oppression and reinforced sexism through the separation of a woman’s body from her spirit through ritual female circumcision, Tashi’s fragmentation drives her to violence. But Walker allows Tashi to be remade whole, and the women who meet her at her execution remake this violent act into a scene of resistance and unification. In Meridian Walker issues a call about the cultural oppression that separates the body from the mind; the refrain here is a very personal and particular. Walker responds to her own call with Possessing the Secret of Joy, in which we see both the personal and the political reunification and revision of form.

After Meridian is given the chance to ponder how the unfamiliar familiar reflects her own purpose, another song with unfamiliar words is sung. This time, however, Meridian abandons the search for words as her consciousness merges with “the
triumphant forcefulness of the oddly death-defying music” (195). After this song, the minister who sounds a lot like Dr. King begins to preach. Meridian initially questions his imitation, attributing it to mockery. She suddenly realizes that the imitation is a deliberate Signification designed to keep lost voices alive: “It struck Meridian that he was deliberately imitating King, that he and all his congregation knew he was consciously keeping that voice alive. [. . .] [T]he preacher’s voice – not his own voice at all, but rather the voice of millions who could no longer speak. . .” (196). The congregation responds to this call in the nature of their “Amens.” Meridian notices that the responses are neither resigned nor desperate; the “Amens” calmly convey the message “We are fed up.” The red-eyed man then delivers his three word speech that he delivers every year, “‘My son died’” (193). He stands on display and then falls heavily into his chair, communicating the “inarticulate grief” that his speech could not. The service is concluded with music that further communicates this “inarticulate grief,” the passing of the collection plate for the prison fund, and the preacher urging the congregation to vote. Meridian’s experience in this church service ends with her contemplation of the stained glass. Rather than the traditional stained glass image, this one is entitled “B.B., With Sword.”

This experience leaves Meridian puzzled. She is puzzled that the church, once so reliable for its forms, has changed. She is puzzled about the changes in the community’s behavior in church. She is puzzled about how to show love for someone already dead. She is puzzled about the meaning of the ceremony at the church. Meridian at first sees it all as a defamiliarizing event, but she soon realizes the meaning of the linguistic and corporeal acts and this allows her to understand her role in the community.
As she makes out the meaning of the unfamiliar songs, the Signifyin(g) preacher, the new “Amen,” the physical expression of the red-eyed man, and the stained glass image of B.B. King, Meridian comes to understand the meaning of the communal body. The last two instances of song and death have Signified on her first experience with Wile Chile:

The people in the church were saying to the red-eyed man that his son had not died for nothing, and that if his son should come again they would protect his life with their own. ‘Look,’ they were saying, ‘we are slow to awaken to the notion that we are only as other women and men, and even slower to move in anger, but we are gathering ourselves to fight for and protect what your son fought for on behalf of us. If you will let us weave your story and your son’s life and death into what we already know – into the songs, the sermons, the ‘brother and sister’ – we will soon be so angry that we cannot help but move.’ (199)

Here Walker delineates the fundamental principles of her version of the gospel ideology. There are no strict forms to adhere to; the self and the community are dependent upon the new forms that develop each time a new story is added to the communal song. This is the point at which Meridian faces what she was looking for:

[T]he respect she owed her life was to continue, against whatever obstacles, to live it, and not to give up any particle of it without a fight to the death, preferably not her own. And that this existence extended beyond herself to those around her because, in fact, the years in America had created them One Life. (200)
She realizes then that she *would* kill before she allowed a member of the community to be murdered. Walker brings Meridian to the point where she, like the church, is going to be a proactive rather than a reactive body.

Meridian also realizes that she does not belong to the future because she herself could not kill. This does not bring despair; rather it allows her to affirm her value as an individual within the community. She likens herself to the old music and understands its purpose:

> [I]t will be my part to walk behind the real revolutionaries [. . .] and when they stop to wash off the blood and find their throats too choked with the smell of murdered flesh to sing, I will come forward and sing from memory songs they will need once more to hear. For it is the song of the people, transformed by the experiences of each generation, that holds them together, and if any part of it is lost the people suffer and are without soul.

(201)

Each person’s song and each person’s body are required for the perpetuation of a healthy community body. In her essay “Novels for Everyday Use,” Barbara Christian defines Walker’s construction of Meridian Hill as a device that articulates the quest for the individual’s voice within a communal context:

The question that permeates this book and her [Meridian’s] life is the nature of social change and its relationship to the past and the future, a question that is at the crux of the Civil Rights Movement. In other words, what does one take from the past, which is still often present, to create a new future? [. . .] In *Meridian*, Walker encompassed the past, the present,
and the future as her major character uses her heritage to change her society, even as she seeks her own expression. Meridian then is not only a character, she is the embodiment of the novel’s major concept, the relationship between personal and social change. (72-3)

This relationship between the individual and society is also the major concept in investing forms with new meaning.

Central to the gospel ideology is a concern for the community as a body. This does not signal the individual’s capitulation to dominant ideologies or the community’s will. Rather, it is through the individual’s experience in defining and asserting the self that he or she participates in community healing and building.

In Walker’s novels, the concept of community stretches beyond the narrow confines of neighborhood or geographic location. Community can be Trans-Atlantic, multi-national, and inclusive of the reader. Often one type of community tries to assert dominance over the character(s) trying to find voice; in this case, when the individual cannot repair community, another one is sought out. The community either learns from the individual or reinforces the gospel ideology.

In her first two novels, Walker uses a third person omniscient narrator to tell the stories of characters defining themselves. With The Color Purple, she uses the epistolary form to tell the story from Celie’s perspective and Signifies on the way in which Janie finds her voice in Their Eyes Were Watching God. The next novel, The Temple of My Familiar, has a third person narrator. Due to the number of characters and the global nature of the material, omniscience is necessary. The lives of these characters are all intertwined, and Walker uses the third person narrator to mediate the activity and fill in
gaps. *Possessing the Secret of Joy*, though involving many characters, is focused on the story of Tashi. The narration of this novel is patterned after the gospel song, where polyvocality and antiphony blend to create a master narrative. As the voices blend together, they are also distinct, sharing their individual experience in the narrative of the community.

Walker combines these narrative styles in *By the Light of My Father's Smile*. The reader first encounters what seems to be a third-person omniscient narrator. Walker soon reveals that he is the spirit of Susannah’s and Pauline’s father. Walker then blends this voice with those of other characters as they each relate their stories in response to the voice of this father. Although the father watches over the events of his daughters’ lives, it is not in a spirit of dominion or control. He is a restless spirit, forced to watch the consequences of the domineering actions of his earthly life. He is an absent presence felt by his daughters, seeking their forgiveness and trying to do for them in death what he could not do in life.

The father here is a clever repetition of Grange Copeland and Mr. ____. He is unable to redeem himself in this life and attain peace after death because he has sinned against the spirits of his daughters. His adherence to a patriarchal system that denies love of the body and expression thereof leads him to severely beat Pauline for her sexuality. Susannah witnesses this transgression against the body. Both daughters suppress the self and either abuse or mutilate the body throughout the rest of their lives. As a spirit, the father is able to restore a sense of wholeness, acceptance of the body, and acceptance of the self to his daughters.
In an interview with Alice Walker, Evelyn C. White asked her about the spirit of the father watching the sexual development of his daughters. Quite candidly, Walker asserts that women most want to be blessed in their sexuality by their parents. This allows the parents to know the entire child and to love him or her in entirety. Walker has clearly written this novel to especially touch the lives of fathers:

They need to know how deeply their daughters are wounded by their apparent incomprehension that their daughters have sexual feelings. I think young girls are hurt when they come to understand that just because they are female, their fathers don’t believe they have sexual passions or interests. Meanwhile, they get to watch their brothers be encouraged to sow his wild oats and be affirmed in their manhood. [. . .] I think they should be made aware of the tenderness that is required from fathers in raising daughters. They should embrace the whole female child in a way that makes her feel affirmed in her body.

Love of the entire self is essential to a healthy self-image and healthy behavior. Throughout her novels, Walker repeats the theme that self-loathing is at the root of oppression, racism, and violence. Later in the interview, Walker comments on the intended reader of this novel: “My novel is really a call to fathers to stand with their daughters and help protect them in a world where they are vulnerable. If a child has a strong mother, she’s very lucky. But barring that, she gets faulty information and becomes a victim. [. . .] The system has already told the woman that she is to submit. We need to break this.” One reader at a time, Walker is breaking the chains of oppression and freeing up the language.
Touching the life of the reader is the ultimate goal of these texts. The novels act as both song and choir, singing of themselves and their bodies to the reader. Both the characters and their bodies participate in expressing their individual and communal selves. Alice Walker offers multiple versions of characters who are able to define themselves as individual bodies, participate in a community context, and tell their stories to create an affirmative linguistic expression of their identity and to witness possibility to all hearers. Other characters in these texts are affected by their example and their song: Grange Copeland tells his story to empower his granddaughter Ruth; Meridian Hill resolves her internal conflict and passes this experience on to Truman and Anne-Marion; Shug, Celie, Squeak, Mary Agnes, Sofia, Harpo, and Mr. ____ all minister back and forth to each other; Pierre most tenderly ministers to Tashi’s fractured soul.

After hearing their stories and their songs and holding the body of the text in one’s hands, the reader is left with the choice of what to do with them. Like Brownfield Copeland, the reader can refuse to see the self because it is easier to blame someone else, to take another person’s definition of the self, than go through the process of self-definition. Or like the majority of Alice Walker’s characters, the reader can go to the source of pain, embrace the body, and assert the self by telling the story.
In a departure from her established genre of playwriting, Suzan-Lori Parks published her first novel in 2003. While she translates the form and content of William Faulkner’s *As I Lay Dying* into the context of an African American family, *Getting Mother’s Body* is neither merely a retelling nor a convenient already-constructed form through which to chronicle the black experience. Rather, it meaningfully empties and rewrites the form in the following way: in structure and content it digs up a myth, confronts it, seeks out its hidden meaning, and then re-buries the myth in its own space.

As a playwright, Parks engages in the performative aspect of the embodiment of language. When asked by interviewer Wendy Smith what made her decide to write a novel, Parks replied,

> It's another kind of writing, and it allows me to do things that are best done in a novel. You can travel along the interior of the characters' minds in a novel in a way you really can't do as effectively in a play. You can have a soliloquy—in all of Hamlet's monologues you can see his mind working—but in a novel you can do it all the time, and that's really one of the things I enjoyed doing in *Getting Mother's Body*. (Wendy Smith)

Her move into the realm of the novel is both bold and meaningful; Parks’ choice of genre echoes what she does with the form of *As I Lay Dying*. While as readers of a novel we do
not see the embodiment of language as we would in viewing a performance of a play, Parks’ treatment of language and her characters’ preoccupations with forms make the body a prominent presence. Much like in a play, the characters speak for themselves in this novel. By appropriating the form of Faulkner’s novel, Parks both uses the devices of that narrative and questions the validity of the conclusions they lead to. Primarily, Parks asks us as readers to question the “always already,” the forgone conclusions of language and form. Unlike *As I Lay Dying*, where the lack of a controlling, omniscient narrator combined with the characters’ theories on language results in a questioning of the value of words and language, *Getting Mother’s Body* privileges multivocality and the assertion of self through both original independent and communal linguistic creation.

The novel reads like a gospel song, where individual voices contribute to the concern for personal and communal health by reconstructing forms of linguistic and physical expression. Though many different elements contribute to this effect, Parks’ choice of Billy Beede as the central figure establishes her as the leader of this song. Billy is an amalgam of the traditional female gospel singer and a new woman who tells her own story within the context of a larger, communal story. Furthermore through Billy, Parks draws on the tradition of some of Toni Morrison’s female characters: Billy Beede is like the narrator of *Jazz*, and she is like Ella in *Beloved*. Ultimately, Parks ensures that Billy heeds, literally, the concluding words of the narrator of *Jazz* – “[M]ake me, remake me” (229) – and like Ella who leads the women in exorcising the past, their voices find the combination to break the back of words. Thus Parks establishes herself in the African American women’s literary tradition by defining her own form.
As I Lay Dying chronicles the journey of a poor, white southern family trying to bury the mother, Addie Bundren. Faulkner does not use a central, omniscient narrator, but rather tells the story through individual first-person narrative sections. At the opening of the novel, Addie is dying. She has made her husband promise to bury her in her family plot forty miles away. Each member of the Bundren family is also engaged in a personal dilemma and uses the burial journey as an excuse to resolve that issue and procure something for him- or herself. The family is beset by a series of mishaps that complicate their journey. They all seem irreverent and disrespectful to the memory and the body of their mother. Then, at the very center of the novel, Faulkner provides the only section from Addie’s consciousness. She is dead, and yet the ideas she has put into the world live on. Addie believes that words and action are unconnected, and it is then clear that her ideology has made it impossible for her children to articulate their own identity. As the family nears the end of the journey, Darl, the son who clearly understands and seems to reject his mother’s philosophy, attempts to burn her body. He sees this as a move to end the farce, but because it would mean that Anse’s promise could not be kept it would be an ironic fulfillment of Addie’s ideology. Even though he does not want to believe the words of his mother, they are all he knows. When the family is able to keep the promise and disprove Addie’s beliefs about words and action, Darl’s center of identity dissolves. Each member of this family uses the mother’s body as a means to an end, making even the notion of mourning into a “monstrous burlesque of all bereavement” (As I Lay Dying 78). Ultimately, Faulkner questions the legitimacy of language to communicate experience and articulate identity.

5 The Bundren family consists of the following characters: Addie (mother), Anse (father), Darl (son), Cash (son), Jewel (son), Dewey Dell (daughter), and Vardaman (son).
Getting Mother’s Body focuses on the predicament of a pregnant, unwed young African American woman, Billy Beede. Her mother Willa Mae, a blues singer and con artist, died from complications associated with an abortion. She has been raised by her aunt and uncle in the small town of Lincoln, Texas. A smooth-talking traveling coffin salesman, Snipes, sweeps her off her feet into the backseat of his car. When she reveals that she is pregnant, he gives her $63 to buy a wedding dress and meet him in Texhoma the next day to get married. What Billy discovers in Texhoma is that she has been tricked out of marriage by words: Snipes is already married with a houseful of children.

Billy feels like she has to do something about her pregnancy. She has already told everyone she is getting married, and the whole town is talking about her pregnancy. On the way back to Lincoln, she meets a white woman on the bus who tells her where she can get an abortion. Billy’s quest then changes to getting rid of her baby. This quest coincides with the news that she and her family are going to have to do something about her mother’s body: a shopping mall is being built over her burial site. The family is all thinking about Willa Mae’s last words, a request to be buried with her jewels. Their journey to retrieve the body is then motivated by what each of them believes can be gained from the jewels. When the body is retrieved, a solution is made possible for everyone involved, but it is not the solution they had expected.

This story is also communicated through the voices of each character in different sections. There are similar characters as well: a preacher, the mother’s lover, a white doctor, a “disturbed” young man, and many others. Furthermore, Parks asks the reader to consider the relationship between thought and deed, between the word and the body.
To catalogue the points of similarity between Parks’ and Faulkner’s text is tempting. The more rewarding and useful project, however, would be to investigate points of re-vision that examine the ways to deal with racially and culturally inherited myths. Rather than trying to use up the mother’s body, hide it, or destroy it in an attempt to forget or erase the past, the mother’s body must be retrieved in order to find the true meaning of her words. Parks’ story acts as symbol here, for getting mother’s body not only means digging up a corpse, but it also recalls Alice Walker’s search for the mothers’ gardens and locating a model in the figure of Zora Neale Hurston.

As emblem of both text and construct of the African American woman, the body is perhaps the most significant point of Parks’ re-vision. She restructures Faulkner’s arrangement because she can, and in her reconstruction she defamiliarizes both the text and a white man’s ideas about women. In doing so, the body, sexuality, and identity of African American women all become unfamiliar to the reader. This is not a move toward exoticizing the body, rather it erases stereotypes and allows Parks to create new possibilities for individual female characters.

Furthermore, rather than creating characters who are the black analogs to Faulkner’s characters, Parks crafts characters who are not only composites of Faulkner’s creations but also use the gospel ideology to break from the determinacy associated with his characters and their language. Because Parks restructures, rearranges, and remakes this novel, all readerly expectations are disproved. Thus she places the responsibility of identity on the individual rather than the dominant culture or literary traditions.

One way Parks re-visions form is to place a female character, rather than a male character, as the central narrator. The significance of this move rests with the project of
opening up possibilities of form and language for African American women. In doing so, she moves the responsibility for language from a white male who has lost his center of identity to an African American female who shapes her own identity. First and foremost, the characters in this novel are on a mission to retrieve the mother’s (Willa Mae’s) body—albeit for material gain—as opposed to the Bundren’s mission of getting *rid* of mother’s body. Addie Bundren’s words are heeded only as an excuse for her family to achieve their individual goals. Willa Mae Beede’s words are initially heeded for the same reason, but the process of re-embodying her words invests them with new meaning. For Billy Beede, getting her mother’s body is a means for her to get her own body. By making her the central narrator, Parks’ re-vision challenges racial and gender stereotypes. Parks connects to the tradition of such characters as Janie Crawford, Shug Avery, and Violet Trace and makes her own contribution: Billy Beede is able to define her own form only when she retrieves the ancestor by combining body and word.

At first glance Billy Beede is a Civil Rights era African American Dewey Dell. She has lost her mother, she has a weak father figure, she is pregnant and unwed, and she is trying to abort her baby. But she is also a little bit of Darl, a little Cash, and a lot of something all of her own. Unlike Dewey Dell, Billy Beede does not act on signs. There are no moments when Billy Beede makes a decision based on arbitrary conditions as Dewey Dell does when she cannot help but sleep with Lafe: “I said if it don’t mean for me to do it the sack will not be full and I will turn up the next row but if the sack is full, I cannot help it. [. . .] And so it was full when we came to the end of the row and I could

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6 Darl is a disturbed and “queer” young man whose entire being consists of words. Cash is a young man given to list-making and consumed with the notion that there is a particular way to do things.
not help it” (27). Although she is abused and mistreated, Billy Beede is not the helpless female that Faulkner creates in Dewey Dell.

Parks uses Faulknerian plot moves, rather than characters, to demonstrate an African American woman who refuses to be victimized. Billy Beede is capable of her own industry as a talented hair-dresser. Though her desire to be paid a higher wage cost her a job with Ruthie Montgomery, Billy Beede comes to her rescue and is able to negotiate for what she deserves to earn. When the father of her baby appears at the very best to be an adulterer, she is moved to action. Rather than simply giving up or not returning home, Billy Beede sets fire to the wedding dress her lover has given her the money to buy. It was Billy Beede’s skill with language and manipulation more than the $63, however, which made it possible for her to get the dress. Although she is unable to return the partially burned dress, she is able to trick a would-be victimizer into buying it. The closest that Billy comes to being a victim is when she listens to the words of a white woman, instead of really listening to the words of her mother, and decides to follow in her mother’s footsteps by having an abortion.

It is the cost of the abortion that sets Billy on the quest for her mother’s body. The myth of her mother’s body is that it was buried with her jewels. The reader, however, knows that Willa Mae’s cross-dressing lesbian lover robbed the body before it was buried. Parks then leads us to believe that Billy Beede’s fate will be similar to that of her mother or of Dewey Dell. In a departure from Faulkner’s Dewey Dell, Billy Beede’s only motivation for seeking an abortion and the mythical treasure to obtain it was because she has been tricked out of marriage by words. When she travels to meet her lover and marry him, she discovers that he has had no such intentions as he is already
married with children. On her bus journey back to her aunt and uncle, she meets a white woman who tells her where to get an abortion. This posited solution echoes her mother’s charge to her to say “good riddance” to the baby that she herself attempted to abort, managing to kill herself in the process. Still feeling tricked by so many words, Billy thinks her choices are limited to getting a husband or getting an abortion.

Parks’ mastery at re-vision opens up possibility for Billy Beede. The closer the Bundren’s get to burying Addie, the more their family disintegrates. Once her body is buried, possibility diminishes for Dewey Dell: her father takes her money for the abortion and a drug store employee manipulates her into sex and a pseudo-abortion. Even though all of their lives seem the worse for their efforts, all of the Bundens are glad to be rid of Addie’s body. For Billy Beede, possibility can only increase once her mother’s body has been exhumed. When there appears to be no jewels buried with Willa Mae’s body, Billy surprises everyone by crying. In fact, like Darl she seems to have lost her hold on sanity:

I ain’t never seen Billy Beede cry. And I ain’t never seen no one cry like she’s crying now. She may as well be fighting someone, the way her arms move around in the air and the tear-water washing her face like sweat and the stuff coming out her nose. She’s saying things I don’t understand. Words threaded through with a long private string of goddamn yous, the kind of curses that’s said between mother and daughter, I guess. She goes on like that till she can’t breathe. Then she stops and sits there, licking her lips with her tongue and running her arms across her face to dry it. ‘I’m gonna take your mother mother back to Lincoln,’ I says. ‘I’m gonna get her a new coffin, a nice one, and a nice angel headstone. I’ll put her in the
ground real good and all at my expense.’ I expect Billy to smile or say thank you or something but she is looking hard at the wrapped quilt [Willa Mae’s body is wrapped in a wedding ring pattern quilt], thinking. There’s a part of the dress, just a little bit of the hem down at the bottom edge, that didn’t get tucked in. ‘Look where the hem of the dress is at. Sometimes she kept stuff in the hem,’ Billy says. (253-4)

Looking at the body, she connects her mother’s private words to her with the way she used her body to hide things. The jewels are then found in the hem of Willa Mae’s dress, giving Billy the means to pay for an abortion. Ultimately, this is not what Billy Beede chooses for herself, but she first has to make meaning of the mother’s re-embodied words.

Laz is the character who has some part in helping Billy do this. He seems to be Vardaman’s counterpart, but he has a touch of Darl as well. More significantly, Parks makes use of a traditional African American literary trope, the Biblical figure Lazarus. Like Lazarus of the New Testament, Laz Jackson returns from the dead. As a man born not breathing, his very life stands for possibility and rebirth. He is determined to love and marry Billy Beede, but it is only through helping her get Willa Mae’s body -- and a slight manipulation of the truth – that he is able to make this happen.

Like Darl, Laz is an unusual fellow: he wears a wool hat in summer, he talks to himself, and most of the community believes him to be simple-minded. Also like Darl, Laz possesses an odd clairvoyance: he sees the future, but through intention or misunderstanding, he misreads it. Early in the novel, he finds Billy’s panties -- lost while having sex with Snipes in his car – on the side of the road. He asks himself why he was
born, answering “To find Billy Beede’s panties by the side of the road” (17). Though at first this statement reads like a resignation it articulates the form that Parks redefines through Laz’s development. With a telling glimpse into this character’s consciousness, Parks establishes a sense of external determination that she overcomes by bringing Laz back to life, into a new life that he will define. Furthermore, unlike Darl who comes between Lafe and Dewey Dell and uses all means necessary to put an end to the Bundren’s tragic journey and is rewarded for his efforts with residency in a mental institution, Laz resists the forces and forms that would confine his actions and his words.

He also must reconnect the meaning of language with the body. Laz feels that he is not a man because he is a virgin. Though he feels this way, the reader knows that out of all of the men in Billy Beede’s life, he is the one who can and will help her. When Dill Smiles decides to chase Billy for stealing her truck and because getting Willa Mae’s body will unearth Dill’s crime, Laz drives her there in his father’s hearse. This action is necessary on several levels. First, his presence and ability to make order out of the chaotic situation acts as an ironic force of reason. Equally as important is the fact that on his trip with Dill, Laz becomes enlightened about gender and his own manhood.

In “Novels for Everyday Use,” Barbara Christian discusses how Alice Walker explores the effects of society’s definitions of gender on an individual’s form:

> Through her graphic descriptions of the Copelands’ everyday lives, Walker illuminates a basic strategy of racism. Because it is so obvious, we often forget that the most effective way to control anyone is by confusing his or her sex definition according to the norms of society. The masculine thrust in this society manifests itself in forms of power and
acquisition, phantom qualities to which neither Grange nor Brownfield Copeland have access. The female, according to southern norms, should present herself in images of passivity, chastity, and demure beauty and should receive from men the rewards of security, comfort, and respect, rewards that neither Margaret nor Mem Copeland can exhibit. Although physically grown, the black adults in this novel are never treated by the majority culture as men or women or even as boys or girls. They are seen as sexual beings without the human qualities necessary for sex definition, except in purely physical terms. (54)

Christian goes on to assert that Brownfield destroys the woman who tries to make her own definition because it would force him to redefine himself. Furthermore, although the character Grange is made capable of redefining himself, Brownfield is a static character, unable to break patterns and stereotypes: “[H]is soul has accepted the fixed nature of reality as he has know it [. . .] He has kept the saga of degeneration intact. In effect he becomes the white man whom he hates” (71). Suzan-Lori Parks takes up this trope and makes it her own in several ways. First, the presence of white people in this novel is akin to something like background noise or distraction. The characters’ struggle with self-definition is not wholly charged by the presence of white characters. Second, Parks includes a foil for Laz in the character of Homer, who is incapable of breaking a pattern. Rather than representing a character limited to degeneration as inscribed by his not being white, Parks establishes Homer as a character caught pre-defined as a race man. And finally, Laz is able to come to redefinition of manhood by collaborating with varied and strong female characters.
Laz’s moment of epiphany signifies on Vardaman’s “my mother is a fish” section. Just as Vardaman was struggling to define his form in relation to those he knew, Laz struggles with his difference as a man. In the previous section, Laz asks Dill what it is like to have sex with a woman. Dill’s answer, “You got to find that out on yr own,” (191) echoes Janie Crawford’s instruction to Pheoby at the end of Their Eyes Were Watching God. Furthermore, it reinforces the idea that bodily action is necessary to articulate a complete meaning. Shortly thereafter, they pull off to the side of the road to urinate. As Dill walks away to have privacy, Parks deconstructs Laz’s notions of gender in his simple observation, “She pees standing up” (192). For both Vardaman and Laz, definition of the self had been dependent upon the materiality of external bodies. However, Parks suggests through both Dill’s action and Laz’s realization that the body can be used to assert the self and redefine forms. For Vardaman, who could not comprehend his individuality and separateness from his dead mother, the only way he can fathom her death is to define her by something he knows is dead. Laz, however, is opened up to new possibilities by see a woman pee standing up. Parks’ use of the body here disrupts linguistic associations between gender and bodily action.

Laz’s assertion of his own form is not complete, however. When he meets Dills sister, Even Napoleon, he is still puzzled by the ways in which Dill transcends traditional notions of gender. He comments that Dill is tall, to which Even responds that she’s not a real man. This leads Laz to comment in his head that Dill is more of a man than he is. Laz feels sexual desire for Even, but he does not know how to ask for it. He discovers he doesn’t need to because Even initiates it. She further upsets his notions of gender roles and responsibilities when he supposes that they will need to get married because they
have had sex. Even dismisses this as “going to town” with having some fun and proceeds to beckon the wild horse that Laz has offered to catch for her. Laz learns that he can be exactly who he is without it making him any less of a “man.” His actions that help Billy Beede get her mother’s and her own body are the actions of a man who loves and endorses a woman who defines her own form. Laz does manipulate the truth about selling Willa Mae’s ring, but it is only to give everyone else what they want while making them believe that they have shaped their own destinies.

Willa Mae fills the role of Addie Bundren, but there are few similarities between the two characters. While Willa Mae is a wild blues woman who tries to perform an abortion on herself, she is not the hateful and spiteful un-mother that Addie is. Parks revisions this character through her interactions with language.

We hear Willa Mae’s voice from beyond the grave, just as Addie Bundren’s voice is heard. But Willa Mae has much more of a presence in the narrative. Willa Mae contributes twelve sections to the narrative, nine of which are songs, two are monologue, and one is a mixed format. The goal of the journey is to get her body, rather than to get rid of it. Furthermore, Billy repeats her words and sings her songs. Unlike Addie, Willa Mae actually leaves her daughter a legacy that she can use rather than a legacy that makes her question her own existence.

There is a tradition of private communication between the mother and daughter communicated through three instances. The first and most pervasive is Willa Mae’s theory on holes. This motif informs much of the language play in the novel and revisions Addie Bundren’s thoughts on shapes to fill a lack. Secondly, Willa Mae shares a secret with her daughter that keeps the legacy hidden and out of the wrong hands. Lastly,
Willa Mae and Billy share a private meaning for the phrase “good riddance.” Although Billy and others initially misread the meaning, re-embodying these words allows Billy to understand their meaning for her own form.

When Faulkner finally lets the reader hear from Addie, it is an explanation for how her family could degenerate into a “monstrous burlesque of all bereavement” (78). She explains how her marriage and her children led her to her beliefs about language. In her explanations, the reader gets a clear sense of how these beliefs shaped the individual personalities of each child. For instance her first child, Cash, is plodding and methodical and seems to lack love for anything except for doing things in a particular manner. After having Cash, Addie feels the disconnect between language and concept:

That was when I learned that words are no good; that words dont [sic] ever fit even what they are trying to say at. When he was born I knew that motherhood was invented by someone who had to have a word for it because the ones that had the children didn’t care whether there was a word for it or not. I knew that fear was invented by someone that had never had the fear; pride, who never had the pride. (171-2)

Addie then describes how a particular word, “love,” is devoid of meaning for her: “I knew that that word was like the others: just a shape to fill a lack; that when the right time came, you wouldn’t need a word for that anymore than pride or fear. [...] So that it was Anse or love; love or Anse: it didn’t matter” (172). The only thing that Addie seems to be able to control is that lack. Rather than showing her children love, she embodies that lack to them in individual ways. They try to fill that lack with various things on their
burial journey, but with their center of identity gone they find there is no substitute for
“mother,” not even “stepmother.”

Addie describes all other words besides the lack as things “outside the circle.” As
she thinks about the shape that “Anse” – not Anse but a living dead man -- would take,
she starts to think about how experience and action has changed the shape of what she is.
She has no word or shape for the fact that she is no longer a virgin; her state is
represented by a blank space in the text, a hole. Eventually, Addie reasons that words
and actions, words and meaning, are unrelated. It didn’t matter to her what she called her
children because she felt there were no words to describe that they had once been a part
of her body and now they were not. In trying to reconcile her identity as a whole person
rather than a self fragmented among her children, she wipes the slate clean by having a
child with another man. Addie then negates that child and her act of robbing him from
Anse with two additional children. She has closed her circle and can live according to
her own father’s precept that we live in order to prepare ourselves to stay dead for a long
time: “And now he [Anse] has three children that are his and not mine. And then I could
get ready to die. One day I was talking to Cora. She prayed for me because she believe I
was blind to sin, wanting me to kneel and pray too, because to whom sin is just a matter
of words, to them salvation is just words too” (176). All that Addie can give to her
children is a lack, that place where words and meaning and action are all divorced. She
has shown how other people have failed her with meaningless words, but her ideology
implodes because she cannot articulate it without words. Through her actions, she tries to
communicate this ideology, but the impulse is simply toward destruction rather than
regeneration. Faulkner does not give this female character the power to shape her own language.

The idea of “The Hole” is something that Suzan-Lori Parks has reshaped throughout her work. In an interview with Wendy Smith, she comments on how this is one of the devices that connects her work:

The other day I was up at Harvard giving a talk [. . .] I was talking about how my works are linked—or Lincoln-ed, I said, and we had a big laugh! In *The America Play* you have the Great Hole of History, and then you have *Topdog/Underdog* with the Lincoln impersonator who's a con man, and then you have Willa Mae, who talks about the Hole as a way to con. The works give birth to each other, in a way, like those nests of Ukrainian dolls. You don't have to think about it; the words just come to you, and the connection with that source, like when Billy says, 'Words shape themselves in my mouth, and I start talking without thinking of what I need to say.' Willa Mae uses it as a con, but Billy is actually talking about the Hole in its pure state; you are in the presence of the Spirit... the Holy Spirit!

In each work, “The Hole” takes on a new meaning, but it always represents some type of lack in human existence. Furthermore, within the context of a work, the meaning of “The Hole” changes shape for each character. For instance in *The America Play*, The Great Hole of History is a type of amusement park that is a honeymoon hot spot. Here the hole is associated with sexual activity, but for one African American character it represents the lack of his own personal and cultural history. He attempts to recreate the hole, but he
keeps repeating the history of white America, remaining like the hole as an absent presence.

Parks has commented that “the Hole” is “the grave, or the portal to infinity, depending on how you look at it.” In other words, her characters are not overdetermined to conceive of the hole as exactly the same as characters from her other works or even characters within the same work. Through the device of “the Hole,” Parks experiments with form and shows her characters doing the same.

Willa Mae’s theory of “The Hole” amounts to the Achilles heel that each of us has. It is the thing that she perceives and manipulates to gain control of people. In her first section, she sings “Big Hole Blues” and comments on her theory: “Everybody’s got a Hole. [. . .] To get the best of a situation you gotta know a man’s Hole. Everybody’s got one, just don’t everybody got one in the same place” (30-31). In describing people who Holes are in their heads, she remakes the meaning of Addie Bundren’s “a shape to fill a lack”: “Now, you may think ‘Hole in the head’ is just another way of saying stupid, but ‘Hole in the head’ means more than that. It means that they got a lack and a craving for knowledge. Not just a lack, now, but the craving too” (31). Whereas Addie saw words as deceptive symbols created by people who have not experienced the things they are trying to describe, Willa Mae has found a way to erase the determinacy of language by re-visioning “hole” as a metaphor for vulnerability.

In the previous section, Billy Beede explains her mother’s theory on “The Hole,” but she does so with a signal difference: “She could see Holes all the time but I ain’t never seen one. Until now. Words shape theirselves in my mouth and I start talking without thinking of what I need to say. It’s like The Hole shapes the words for me and I
don’t got to think or nothing” (27). For Billy, Mrs. Jackson’s Hole takes corporeal form through Billy’s mouth. Billy’s literal hole then instinctively knows how to manipulate Mrs. Jackson’s figurative Hole. Parks places a premium on the value of the mouth for both interpreting meaning and creating language to manipulate meaning. Unlike Darl, for whom language and subjecthood disintegrate as a result of Addie’s theory about language, Billy is able to deconstruct this theory, to take it and make it her own.

Driving to get her mother’s body, Billy remembers another set of words her mother has passed on to her. They used to drive around Texas, headed for places that Willa Mae thought “sounded good.” Before they headed for their destination, she would switch out her real jewelry for fakes and hide the valuables in the lining of her skirt. Billy Beede refers to this as a ritual: “She would take her diamond ring and pearls off and thread them into the lining of her skirt. For safekeeping. Her ‘real stuff’ as she called it would be kept safe and she wore the fakes while she drove. Just in case, she would mention, but just in case of what she never did say” (159). Willa Mae was reportedly buried with these jewels, but the “in case” is clear to no one until they realize what they can each gain from exhuming the treasure. It is not until Billy has the private conversation with her mother’s bones that she remembers that the jewels are probably hidden. And it is not until she re-visions another phrase of her mother’s that she can figure out what her own “in case” is.

Dill is the first character to misread the phrase “good riddance.” When the group is first presented with the necessity of getting Willa Mae’s body, Dill expresses her belief that Billy was glad her mother died: “I’m telling you Billy was glad when Willa passed. Billy said ‘good riddance’ and clapped her hands. I was there. I heard and seen it all . .
Later when Dill confronts Billy about this, Billy corrects Dill’s misreading, “‘I was talking about the baby she didn’t want, not about her” (112). Shortly before the group digs up Willa Mae’s body, Willa Mae discloses her fear that her daughter is repeating her mistakes. However, she keeps herself from worrying about it by reasoning that “you can only dig a hole so deep” (247). At the end of the novel, Billy makes sense of the connection between a new meaning for “good riddance” and Willa Mae’s consolation:

Folks take after they folks. [. . .] The thing about not watching my mother get old is that I wasn’t never sure what I was gonna get, cause if you don’t got yr folks to look at [. . .] then you don’t got a good idea really of where yr headed. When I seen her bones I knew what we all knew, that we’s all gonna end up in a grave someday, but there’s stops in between there and now. (257)

Willa Mae’s footsteps ended with her death, and the only hole left for her was her grave. Billy Beede realizes that Willa Mae left her a legacy necessary for figuring out that she could decide where she was headed for herself. With the new ring that Laz gives her, Billy thinks about the possibilities for her baby and her future. The name comes to her like the words came to her in addressing Mrs. Jackson’s Hole. Billy names her baby into existence and says “good riddance” to the forms and mistakes of the past.

The role of the African American woman and mother is also re-visioned through the way in which Willa Mae Signifies on Addie Bundren. Rather than being an object, Willa Mae is a subject: she doesn’t blame words for her death or her lot in life; rather she uses words to express the truth. Willa Mae knows when she’s been fooled, when she’s
been bad, and when she’s done wrong. She has a private truth with her daughter that ultimately keeps Billy from making the same mistake she did. Billy is able to come to the is/was/will be conclusion through the re-embodiment of her mother’s words rather than by listening to the words of the white woman on the bus. Rather than provoking insanity and dividing the family, Willa Mae’s words are the catalyst for Laz and Billy Beede to commit actions that make family and heal community ruptures.

As she deconstructs earlier forms, Parks endows her characters with a number of linguistic strategies from ambiguity to metonymy. Their actions and words talk to the reader, revealing duplicity and moments where they tell “a kind of truth.” They Signify on the things each other says, both in dialogue and in interior monologue. However, the most liberating interactions with language occur when characters revise meaning and create original constructs. Willa Mae does this with her theory on holes; Billy and Laz also prove their ability to define their own forms through similar linguistic strategies.

Parks often makes Billy Beede revise the meaning of what other characters say when they unintentionally create a different meaning through repeating things Billy has said. In the opening of the novel, Billy is having an unfulfilling sexual encounter with Snipes. Parks gives her a heightened awareness of her body during these moments, not from a sense of pleasure, but rather from a sense of discomfort. Her head repeatedly hits the door handle, and as she is preoccupied with the location of her panties and the headache she is going to have, Snipes both silences and traps her. The “Ow” that Billy expresses capitalizes on the conventional female sexual response -- whether pleasure is felt or not the “ow” is expected – and makes it an expression of pain. Furthermore, Snipes’ response is presented through the lens of Billy’s consciousness, a lens that reads
his “Owww” as a period finishing a statement rather than a verbal accompaniment to the
sexual act. By reconstructing the verbal exchange as a component of the sexual exchange,
Parks is able to circumvent the traps of sexual expectations and question the meaning of
such conditioned responses: “‘Ow,’ I go. Cause now my head hurts. ‘Owww,’ Snipes
go. Cause he’s through” (3). Although she is tricked by his words and even his selfish
attempts at physical pleasure, by the time Billy speaks to the reader she refuses to be
reinscribed by Snipes’ body and words.

Billy establishes an immediate connection with her baby in wondering if the baby
is “sitting in me upside down and if Snipes’ thing is hitting it on its head like the door
handle is hitting me on mines” (3). Throughout the novel, when Billy thinks about her
baby, it is in reference to its corporeal position within her. In order for Billy to make the
decision she does in the end, it is necessary for Parks to establish this connection to the
baby early in the novel. Billy is an independent character, challenging the forces that
would inscribe and define her. It would not be plausible for her to keep her baby simply
because she reconnected her mother’s words with her body; Billy has to do the same for
herself.

Billy and Laz participate in a double-voiced strategy that reconceptualizes Addie
Bundren’s theory about language. When Cora Tull – a religious neighbor of the
Bundren’s -- tells Addie that she is not a “true mother,” Addie ponders the futility and
meaninglessness of words spoken by people who have not experienced those concepts
and how action is dissociated from language:

[I] would think how words go straight up in a thin line, quick and
harmless, and how terribly doing goes along the earth, clinging to it, so
that after a while the two lines are too far apart for the same person to straddle from one to the other; and that sin and love and fear are just sounds that people who never sinned nor loved nor feared have for what they never had and cannot have until they forget the words. (173-4)

Billy first comments on the connection between words and actions in response to a conversation with Myrna, the white woman she meets on the bus. Myrna is telling her about abortion and how she got the “last laugh” on her husband by aborting their sixth baby. Her voice is so low that Billy comments, “Like she’s dragging her words behind her on a rope” (63). When Myrna becomes confidential again on the subject of abortion, she lowers her voice, and Billy makes a similar comparison: “Her voice on the rope dragging in the dirt behind her” (65). While it first appears that Billy will heed the words of this woman whose actions come before her words, she significantly remembers that her mother has told her something about the impulse to destroy the self: “Mother tolled me once how when a person jumps off a bridge, on their way down, before they hit the dirt or the water or whatever, they got plenty of time to reconsider. I remember her telling me that. And I remember not believing it. Folks fall too fast” (65). Without saying it at this juncture, Billy lets the reader know that she does in fact believe it. In reconsidering, Billy open up possibilities for herself and for language; she creates her own metaphors and proves there is an easy distance in connecting meaning with action and words.

When Laz suggests marriage to Billy before she has had time to reconsider the abortion, he immediately regrets the way the words sounded: “I wanted to words to come out sounding more debonair, but they didn’t” (118). As she walks farther away from him, he makes his own meaning for Addie’s assertion that “words go straight up in a thin
line”: “I ain’t never asked nobody to marry me before and the words are hanging in the air like a clothesline between us. The line is getting longer and longer. I start walking again, kind of trotting to catch up” (118). Although the line gets longer and sags later, there is still a connection between these two people and a connection between Laz’s words and his actions. He offers Billy the money she asks for, promising that if she marries him he’ll have it. While he seems to manipulate the truth when he uses the money for his savings to make everyone believe he has sold Willa Mae’s ring for them, he has actually proven to Billy that all words are not dragged behind people on ropes, nor are they meaningless constructs dissociated from action. Laz proves that language and form work together for human connection rather than faithlessness and destruction.

Billy Beede remembers that Willa Mae mortified both her lesbian lover’s flesh by revealing her gender and her own flesh by administering her own abortion. This abortion is what killed Willa Mae. In fact, Billy Beede has denied her own body – she never enjoyed sex with the father of her baby – and she is about to maim herself through abortion. When she gets her mother’s body, though, Willa Mae’s songs are reunited with her body. Billy Beede then asserts control over her life through her act of unifying physical awareness with language.

For Billy Beede, the lesson is to love the body and not let anyone exploit it. In fact, all characters in this novel learn the lesson that truth cannot be divined when the body is separated from the word. While Billy Beede was tricked out of marriage by words, and perhaps tricked into it by Laz’s manipulation of words and truth, ultimately she is not tricked by her mother’s words. Parks powerfully suggests that the words of the mothers should be exhumed, acknowledged, and put to use in asserting awareness and
dominion over one’s own form. The characters learn this lesson and free their bodies and their words from racial and gender chains; it is left up to each reader to take it and re-make it.

In the closing section of the novel, Billy Beede concedes that expectations were upset: “It didn’t turn out like we planned” (256). This is significant on a number of levels. First, the money gained from selling the ring was enough “to give everybody something” (256) but not enough to get “all we thought we’d get” (257). Billy’s Aunt June, the Anse figure, gets her wooden leg, and her Uncle Teddy gets a new church. Dill is crushed to discover the ring she had stolen from the body many years before is actually a fake. Finally, Billy Beede rejects the solution to pregnancy offered by the white woman. On the journey home, she feels the baby and starts to think of a name. In a gesture that embraces the life in her body, Billy Beede Signifies on Darl’s play with is/were/are to imagine new possibilities for language and gives her dominion over her own form: “Not pick out a name though, just let one come to me without thinking. Like it had a name already, and if it had a name already then it already was. And if it already was then it was always gonna be” (257). She has upset the expectation engendered by her association with Dewey Dell, who in the end was tricked by the words of MacGowan into an exchange of sex for a pseudo-abortion. This novel ends with a Dewey Dell figure who can have communion both with her dead mother and her unborn child because she has the means to re-vision them as both “always gonna be.”

The reader cannot, however, ignore Billy’s claims that once Laz sells her mother’s ring he proposes and gives her a ring, and that five years into the future, he will return her mother’s ring to her. Rather than selling the ring, he empties his savings so
that the family can re-bury Willa Mae’s body. Furthermore, where Laz might have offered Billy Beede the money for an abortion, he uses it instead to re-bury her mother. They have exhumed the past and the myth associated with the form, examined it, put it to use, and are able to replace it in their own ground. What Laz does allows Billy to choose him free of gratitude and indebtedness and ultimately reinvests the ring with meanings of love and agency.

Digging up the mother’s body allows the characters to confront the form of the myth. It first appears that the story was just a myth as none of the jewels are where the mother, Willa Mae, told Dill to put them. Laz offers to facilitate the reburial of the body as his father owns the funeral parlor, but Billy is intent on looking for hidden signs. Once Billy knows where to look and Laz knows what he is looking for, they uncover the treasure hidden on the body: “I don’t know what I’m looking for exactly. I am looking for a wife, I am looking for Billy Beede’s hand in marriage. And there it is. In what’s left of the hem of the dress I find the diamond ring” (254). The myth that is represented by the ring allows the Beedes to write their own ending.

The singing body is the mother’s main portion of the narrative in Getting Mother’s Body. Although her body is buried, the reader hears her voice through her blues songs and occasional commentary strategically positioned between other characters’ sections. This voice is disembodied, but there is a lesson here for Billy Beede. In order for her to take the words and make them her own, she must dig up her mother’s body to re-embbody her voice. Much like Alice Walker’s Meridian Hill, Parks uses the character of Billy Beede to show the process of connecting to the past and
finding one’s individual role in promoting possibility on both the personal and social contexts.

The position of Willa Mae’s sections is as important as what they say, for their location stands significantly for the mother’s physical presence in the narrative. Her songs come between those of different characters; most often Billy and/or Dill precede or follow one of Willa Mae’s sections. Willa Mae’s first song, “Big Hole Blues” comes between Billy’s explanation of her mother’s theory of “The Hole” and Mrs. Jackson’s unwitting description of how Billy manipulated her Hole. The next song, “Willa Mae’s Blues,” is positioned in a triad in which she, Billy Beede, and Snipes’ wife Alberta each offer their own version of the blues. Other selections from Willa Mae speak in warning to her daughter or explain a theme that other characters are exploring. Perhaps the selections most significant to Billy and Laz creating their own forms occur when Willa Mae is positioned between these two other characters. This is the only configuration repeated in the novel, and its occurrence three times develops the importance of the mother’s form and words to Billy and Laz asserting control over their own forms.

The first occurrence of this configuration appears roughly halfway through the novel. Before Willa Mae’s song, Laz goes to Dill’s house to get a runt from her latest litter of pigs. Dill is in a rage because Billy has stolen his truck to drive to Arizona and get her mother’s body. Laz offers to drive Dill in his father’s hearse, presumably to prevent her from killing Billy as she has threatened to do. As they are driving, Laz starts talking about Willa Mae and women in general. He reveals to Dill that he doesn’t know what it’s like to be a man, that he is a virgin. Even more embarrassing, the promiscuous Poochie Daniels has turned him down.
Willa Mae then starts into her song, “Ain’t the long road long,” with no commentary or introduction. This song is not a lament; rather it is a statement of obvious fact that builds up to an ironic consequence. There is a message in it, however, for Dill, Laz, and Billy. For Dill, her mistreatment of Willa Mae results in her bodily absence. Laz recalls her songs, however, and as Willa Mae sings this is all that is left of her:

Ain’t I gone
Ain’t I gone
Long gone longer than yr legs is long
Ain’t the way you treat me
Just a mistreat-treating
All that’s left is this here song. (157)

For Laz, who wonders what it’s like to be with a woman, this song reinforces something he already knows. Willa Mae and Billy Beede will move their bodies from mistreatment, and they will not be silent about it.

Driving a familiar stretch of road in the next section reminds Billy of things her mother said. Her Aunt June, a combination of Anse and Addie Bundren’s characteristics, attempts to goad and judge Billy in her passive aggressive way. Thinking of her mother at this juncture, however, allows her to assert her relationship with her. She tells June a tall tale, and as her mother would do she “ices[s] the cake.” Although the story she tells is a wild fabrication, through it she constructs her own kind of truth about her mother, one that no one else can control. Willa Mae’s song is an affirmation of her presence in Billy’s life; while she is gone for Dill, her songs help shape where Billy is headed.
Furthermore, Willa Mae’s voice here helps Billy to remember the private truth of where Willa Mae hid her “real stuff.”

The next occurrence of this configuration is near the end of the novel. In Laz’s section, he is again wrestling with his manhood. He sleeps with Dill’s sister, Even, and his received notions about sex and gender are upset. When they are having sex, Even says “Lazarus” in his ear repeatedly, bringing back to life his manhood by invoking this name. When Laz closes his eyes, all he can see is Billy Beede. He feels as if he has taken advantage of Even and at first believes he has to marry Even because he has had sex with her. Even laughs this off and proceeds to call her wild horse to her even though Laz has offered to catch it for her.

Willa Mae then enters with a song about the consequences for the things she has done wrong:

Deep down in this hole
I got to thinking
About the promises I made but ain’t been keeping.

Deep down in this hole
I got to thinking
I got drunk and I done cried myself to sleep.

Deep down in this hole
It’s a cold cold lonesome hole
I made my bed
Now I’m laying in it all alone. (218)
Although there is no engagement promise between Laz and Billy, he has declared his love for her and his intent to marry her on several occasions. He has, however, promised to help her get the money she asks for. Laz could easily become distracted by Even, but instead he uses this experience to redefine his manhood and keep his promise to Billy Beede.

In the next section, Billy is in the car with Homer, her amorous and selfish cousin. The entire trip, he has been trying to get Billy to have sex with him and promise him more of a share of the treasure. In fact, in this section he writes down a plan for dividing the treasure in which he would get fifteen percent. Billy refuses, telling him that he can only have five percent. She then remembers how and why her mother was trying to get rid of the baby she was carrying. At first, Willa Mae ate herbs that made her vomit. Billy Beede misunderstands, thinking the baby is in her stomach and will be regurgitated. This doesn’t work, so Willa Mae resolves to “fix herself.” She tells Billy to say “good riddance” to the baby and promises that their troubles would be gone and that they would be in California by the end of the week. Homer then tries to engage in foreplay with Billy, but she is adamant about the five percent. He tells her that would be fine if she gives him sex.

Homer’s actions and her mother’s broken promises make her start to doubt the myth of the jewels. In the next section, she reveals her fears to her Uncle Teddy. Teddy sees that Billy has the same resiliency as her mother; in fact she echoes many of Willa Mae’s words. He doesn’t want to tell her that she’s like her mother, though, because that has only enraged her earlier in the novel. She is afraid of following in her mother’s footsteps, and that sentiment is echoed in Willa Mae’s words and songs.
By the time the Laz, Willa Mae, Billy Beede configuration occurs again, it is clear that both Laz and Billy Beede are defining their own existence for themselves. Billy attributes her lack of a sense of direction to the fact that she lost her mother, and because “Folks take after they folks” (257), she doesn’t have any model to tell her where she’s headed. In some respects Billy is lucky, for as her mother’s last song indicates, time and life keep going on:

Don’t the Great Wheel keep rolling along
Don’t the Great Wheel keep rolling along
I stopped in yr town this morning,
But tonight, this gal, she’s gotta be gone.
Don’t the Great Wheel keep rolling right along. (255)

Her mother’s words and songs lead her to several discoveries. There was truth in what her mother had to say; seeing the jewels in the place on her body where Willa Mae told only Billy they would be proves this to her. Seeing her mother’s bones and hearing her voice leads her to the conclusion that we all end up in the grave. But it also makes her realize that she can control for herself what happens before she turns to bones.

Laz has some part in this realization. He keeps his promise by getting her the money. Furthermore, he does it in a way that both lets her have control and lets her, eventually, reconnect with her mother’s ring. By pretending to sell the ring, but actually emptying his savings account, Laz makes it possible for everyone to get something from the journey. He gives Billy her mother when he buries her in their hometown of Lincoln. He gives her Willa Mae’s words too by saving the “real” ring.
But Billy has made her choices for herself. In the end, she is able to connect her mother’s legacy and words to her form as well as to her unborn child’s form. Just like the words came to her when she discovered Mrs. Jackson’s Hole, Billy lets the name for her baby come to her: “Not pick out a name though, just let one come to me without thinking. Like it had a name already, and if it had a name already then it already was. And it already was then it was always gonna be” (257). Although her mother is dead, her presence is felt in this manifestation of the gospel ideology. Willa Mae neither directs nor corrects Billy’s footsteps; rather, she provides the impetus for making one’s own form.

This impulse is there for the communal body as well. In the context of the novel, everyone who went to La Junta, Arizona to dig up Willa Mae’s body got something. They were all seeking to replace a structure: Uncle Teddy wanted his church, Aunt June wanted a prosthetic leg, Dill wanted her truck and her secret back, and cousin Homer wanted both sexual experience and the money that he thought would help him achieve social status and respectability. But as Billy Beede tells us in her last section, it didn’t turn out like they planned. Uncle Teddy can never get back the church he lost; he can only get another one. The same holds true for Aunt June’s leg. Cousin Homer gets ten dollars and Aunt June’s flowery words in a thank-you note. In the end, Parks uses Homer to demonstrate the pitfalls of allowing others – particularly the dominant culture – to define you: in the service of trying to prove himself better than a Beede he deteriorates into the stereotype of a self-serving, overly sexed, mama’s boy who is fixated on upward mobility.
Dill actually wanted to be reunited with Willa Mae’s body. Billy figures out that Dill had stolen the fake jewels and started her pig farm with the proceeds. The real thing that Dill gets is a private truth with Willa Mae’s body, or as Billy calls it, “something between them” (256). This something between Dill and Willa Mae is also something between Dill and Billy Beede, which she decides to keep secret. For Billy, who never knew her father and only ever had Dill as a father figure, this private truth among these three people helps her re-place her lost family structure.

Laz drives Dill to La Junta so that he can protect and retrieve Billy. He is the only character who is proactive in retaining what he actually wants. Although he makes the trip to get Billy, he is also surprised in what he replaces: Laz is able to discard all definitions of manhood, make his own definition, and apply it to his own body.

Laz upsets all expectations, perhaps even his own. In his seeming simplicity and association with death, he stands for that presence which seems to be a lack. No one thinks him capable of saving the day or redeeming the situation, and nobody expects that Billy will marry him. He proves that he is perfectly sane, that he can dig up a body just as well as he can bury one, that he is capable of action, and that he is a man of a different order.

His rebirth is associated with Billy’s epiphany about a name and her baby. When he has sex with Even Napoleon, she speaks his name “Lazarus,” calling him into life and his own notions of manhood. Laz then retrieves Willa Mae’s ring. On the ride back to Lincoln, before Laz supposedly pawns the ring, Billy looks at this ring and the name and presence of her baby comes to her. Billy and Laz then had something between them.
They have both taken up the words of Willa Mae and re-embodied the possibilities of language.

*Getting Mother’s Body* both reaches out to its literary foremothers, including Faulkner, and demonstrates the possibility of asserting control over one’s own form. Parks Signifies on both the African American women’s literary tradition and the iconic status of William Faulkner’s *As I Lay Dying* in her iteration of the gospel ideology. The new voices among African American women novelists aren’t bound to follow in the footsteps of Hurston, Walker, or Morrison. This does not, however, empty their forms of significance or meaning; there are lessons and promises in the words of mothers, both literary and corporeal. These words are neither empty nor fallacious as were the words of Addie Bundren. Furthermore, Addie Bundren’s form does not restrict the forms of African American women. Parks uses this form to question what we think we know about language and to reshape it to embody possibility rather than death and oppression.
CHAPTER V

A DYNAMIC RECURSIVE TRADITION:
NEW VOICES BLENDING WITH THE OLD

As practitioners of the gospel ideology, Toni Morrison, Alice Walker, and Suzan-Lori Parks remind us of those things that must be passed on for individuals and communities to thrive. Survival is not enough, for it is an acquiescence to oppression and domination of form. Both the body and language can be the means by which individuals and communities are oppressed. But if individuals heed the impulses of the gospel ideology, they can ensure that creative and expressive acts flourish and overcome the debilitating effects that racism and sexism have on language and the individual.

African American woman not only face the oppression of racism and sexism. Along with African American men, they are confronted with the DuBoisian notion of double consciousness, and they are working through the complications of the individual’s assertion of self in tension with the community. A common pitfall here is the development of a shifting self rather than a dynamic self. The shifting self is a self that changes depending on context and is always threatened as an individual by a community. To empower the self to grow and change rather than to let context dictate one’s behaviors and one’s thoughts about the self is the struggle.

The problems of self-definition also inflict corporeal and linguistic forms. Even in the twenty-first century, racial stereotypes in America abound. Every day, black women face and fight against those stereotypes that threaten to inscribe them. It is still a
dangerous thing for a black woman to be a sexual, confident, and empowered being. Furthermore, when definition exists only at the community level, linguistic ground is fertile for the development of stereotypes and oppression.

Creative, expressive acts are vulnerable to the same types of oppression. African American women writers traverse controversial territory if characters and plots do not enforce dominant values or the values that the dominant culture dictates for the African American community as “acceptable.” This begs the question, then, if one is not free to use one’s body and language in ways that empower self and community, why bother to create or express at all? The answer quite simply is found in the impulse for the individual and the community to thrive.

The gospel ideology reinforces community and individual dignity because it is grounded in a cultural legacy. Writers such as Morrison, Walker, and Parks create contexts and characters that demonstrate to readers the importance of this ideology and legacy in freeing the self and the community from oppression and mere survival. The gospel strategies and traditions and the ancestors, both literary and real, provide writers and readers with the means to articulate the self by remaking a language inflicted with racism and sexism.

These writers discussed in this study contribute individual expressions within the context of the African American womanist literary community. Expression of the gospel ideology does not stop with them. In fact, this literary community is flourishing with new writers such as Yolanda Barnes and Edwidge Danticat. Both of these women add to the chorus of writers wrestling language from oppressive chains while maintaining their individual forms.
In *When It Burned to the Ground*, Yolanda Barnes has created a community in which characters are both palpable and mythical. In the microcosm of Piedmont Street, Barnes allows the characters to become flesh, to reveal themselves through their own voices. As the novel progresses and the characters and community take presence, they resonate with the profundity of Biblical martyrs and sinners. Yet these are people outside of history, riddled with marvelously human flaws in their actions toward the community.

Although the novel’s inspiration comes from the Los Angeles riots of 1992, it defies categorization as historical fiction. Rather, it is Piedmont Street’s story of what happened when it turned on itself. Myriad characters come together to lend their voices and differing perspectives on life, discrete events, and even each other. They have lost their ancestors, their bodies, and their original communities. Because nothing else exists to destroy, they turn inward. In the end, the reader is left with a woman sweeping ashes from her porch to view the destruction each individual in the community helped to cause. This woman is left to bear witness to a thing that was necessary for a new order.

These characters are remarkable in their diversity and their seeming lack of attachment to the author. Each voice and perspective is so strikingly different that the bulk of what one draws from the novel comes from the discrepancies among characters’ perspectives. Barnes masterfully withdraws her presence and moral judgment from the novel so that the reader is forced to grapple with the right and wrong, the indeterminacy of good and evil, and ultimately add his or her own voice to the story.

In a cast of major and minor characters, several stand out in their fulfillment of the novel’s prophetic vision. We first meet Daniel, the street preacher who is tolerated yet ignored and misunderstood by the community as he warns them that their destruction is
coming. The last character to appear is Bernadette, the ambitious and unconfined phenomenon whose success and individuality incites her destruction. Bernadette is the figurative bad half to the persona of Eve. Eve’s good half is Cecile: she is a good girl just down on her luck, who at her lowest point of powerlessness discovers her destructive potential. And yet Barnes makes the notions of “good” and “evil” suspiciously ambiguous; Bernadette may very well be the necessary “evil” for the community’s redemption.

If there is a character through which the author’s voice can be heard, it is perhaps Daniel. As a composite character of Old Testament prophets, Daniel ignores his calling, runs from the voice of God, and eventually accepts the call to preach. The people of Piedmont Street sometimes love Daniel, hate him, and mock him, the narrator of his section tells us. Despite their feelings toward him, they rarely respond to his call. His sermons sing to the street, not in a call for repentance, but as a warning of their impending doom for not heeding the call of God. They are cursed with disease and torments, and here Daniel prophesies Bernadette’s loss of sight. It is too late for the street to repent for gambling away their children’s grocery money, for harboring evil, and for loving sin more than virtue. But as readers, we can respond to the call of Barnes’ novel by seeing what we have previously refused to see.

Bernadette infuriates the community and excites their jealousy. As they reflect upon their own misfortune, they either attribute it to Bernadette’s inexplicable success or to her disruption of the status quo within the community. She is irreverent, she disregards the unwritten rules of decency and community-minded action, and she is driven by an
intangible force that, for a while, makes her immune to the gossip of the community. Her
destruction, however, is first foretold in her childhood by a “crazy” neighbor:

‘I been keeping a watch on you, Bernadette.’ [...] ‘I know just what you are.
When you played with the other children, shouting and tearing up and down
the block, I spotted you. The others here don’t know yet. Just me. I see you.
You not really one of us. You never mean to be happy with what we have. But
we’ll be the ones to suffer for your misdeeds.’ (158)

This prophecy sets the tone for Bernadette’s life; she is repeatedly warned about the
dangers of ambitiousness and selfishness. When Piedmont Street seeks a scapegoat for
their misfortunes, their judgment of this alleged “witch” hurts them the most. In this
regard, Bernadette serves a similar function as does Sula in Morrison’s novel, Sula.

In between these characters’ sections are the voices of characters whose
interactions with other community members reveal their participation in the destruction
of Piedmont Street. Cecile fits here, as her ability to be good crumbles with the harm
dealt to her by thieves. She is the first of these characters to retaliate with fire. What we
see eventually is that these examples of retaliation are not self-contained, independent
acts that befall one person; the individual acts are participants in a spirit that sweeps
Piedmont Street all at once.

Barnes’ range of language and metaphor is brilliant and purposeful. Several
metaphors are woven throughout the novel, and the way that she adapts the use of these
metaphors to the voice of multiple characters establishes them as linguistic strategies of
the gospel ideology. Chief among these metaphors is the bird of paradise, symbolizing
among many other things the duality of human nature.
In addition to the diversity and authenticity of voice, Barnes is masterful in her prose and poetry. The role of song is at the forefront of this novel, structuring both the entire text as well as portions embedded in individual sections. Daniel’s sermon is reminiscent of, and yet very different from, James Weldon Johnson’s *God’s Trombones*. What is expected of Daniel’s sermon is an antiphonal structure between him and his listeners. His message, however, is something to which those addressed cannot respond. And yet the sermon is beautiful in its use of repetition and its lyrical quality:

Yes, the devil wants to claim this place.

He is on his way!

Listen.

Right now he is on the march, the march, the march.

He has much ground to cover, but he moves swiftly.

Oh, the devil goosesteps this way.

His face is set in smugness for victory he presumes.

Listen to me. Oh, for your own sakes,

you must listen.

My Friends and Neighbors!

What will you do when Satan’s army arrives carrying torches? (29-30)

In this debut novel, Yolanda Barnes claims a spot among her literary ancestors and contemporaries. It is a marvel in voice, structure, theme, and story. Barnes writes in the context of that tension between the individual and the community and among the
impulse that Ralph Ellison defined as the “jazz impulse.” She subtly yet powerfully reminds the reader that this individual definition must not be done at the expense of the community. The gospel ideology provides the metaphors and strategies to draw upon a cultural legacy in which the individual must contribute a positive and affirming voice to the community.

While Barnes attends to the interactions between individuals and community, in *Breath, Eyes, Memory*, Danticat is concerned with the preservation of individual voice. In the Afterword to the 1994 edition of the novel, Danticat addresses the necessity of individual stories:

> I write this to you now, Sophie, because your secrets, like you, like me, have traveled far from this place. Your experiences in the night, your grandmother’s obsessions, your mother’s ‘tests’ have taken on a larger meaning, and your body is now being asked to represent a larger space than your flesh. [. . .] I have always taken for granted that this story which is yours, and only yours, would be read as such. But some of the voices that come back to me, to you, to these hills, respond with a different kind of understanding than I had hoped. And so I write this to you now, Sophie, as I write it to myself, praying that the singularity of your experience be allowed to exist, along with your own peculiarities, inconsistencies, your own voice. (236)

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7 In *Shadow and Act*, Ellison defines the jazz impulse as an idiom for relational self-definition. Jazz is, “an act of individual assertion within and against the group. Each true jazz moment (as distinct from the uninspired commercial performance) springs from a contest in which each artist challenges all the rest; each solo flight, or improvisation, represents (like the successive canvases of a painter) a definition of his identity: as individual, as member of the collectivity and as a link in the chain of tradition” (234).
Though community is never far from the thrust of Sophie’s story, Danticat’s comment here, along with Sophie’s story, suggest that individual stories must be told and witnessed if expressive acts are to be kept from reinscribing black forms.

In Sophie, Danticat has constructed a woman who is haunted by the physical and sexual violence her grandmother and mother have faced. The novel begins in Haiti with Sophie living with her aunt, Atie, because her mother, Martine, has gone to America for opportunities and to make money to support her daughter, sister, and mother. Sophie is the product of a sexually violent act – her mother was raped by a masked *macoute* – and her mother never lets her forget that. When Martine sends for Sophie, their reunion is somewhat awkward yet poignant. Although Sophie comes to know her mother as a nurturing individual, she also comes to bear the burden of bodily shame and violence.

Martine is plagued by violent nightmares in which she relives her rape. Sophie comforts her and brings her back into the present every time these nightmares disrupt her sleep. Danticat leaves the reader with the distinct impression that Sophie’s presence has triggered these nightmares. In telling her daughter about the purpose of the tests, Martine explains that her own tests ended early because she was raped and became pregnant with Sophie:

‘A man grabbed me from the side of the road, pulled me into a cane field, and put you in my body. I was still a young girl then, just barely older than you. [. . .] I did not know this man. I never saw his face. He had it covered when he did this to me. But now when I look at your face I think it is true what they say. A child out of wedlock always looks like its father.’ (61)
This interchange establishes the context in which Sophie’s tests will begin. It is a context that is based on both fear and pain of the past.

Furthermore, Danticat draws a chilling portrait of the perpetuation of sexual violence through the “tests” that Martine conducts on Sophie. These so-called “tests” involve a probing of the vagina to ensure that the hymen is intact, thus signaling virginity and pureness. They are the same tests that Martine’s mother conducted on her, and they are borne out of fear, shame, and possession. Sophie’s grandmother explains this practice to her:

‘If a child dies, you do not die. But if your child is disgraced, you are disgraced. And people, they think daughters will be raised trash with no man in the house.’ ‘Did your mother do this to you?’ ‘From the time a girl begins to menstruate to the time you turn her over to her husband, the mother is responsible for her purity. If I give a soiled daughter to her husband, he can shame my family, speak evil of me, even bring her back to me.’ [. . .] ‘Now you have a child of your own. You must know that everything a mother does, she does for her child’s own good. You cannot always carry the pain. You must liberate yourself.’ (156-7)

While these “tests” signal a number of abuses against the body, Danticat demonstrates how, though they are intended to protect the victims from shame, they inculcate fear and loathing of the body and perpetuate a cycle of abuse. In an attempt to free herself from her mother’s possession and enter into a relationship with the man she has been secretly seeing, Joseph, Sophie takes her own virginity with a pestle. Through this act, though yet another attempt to free the body from shame and inscription, Danticat furthers the cycle
of sexual violence engendered by the very first tests done upon the very first victim. However, the act retains its individuality. Danticat makes Sophie maim her own body with the resolve that her mother will never inflict another test upon her.

Ultimately, this is a move that temporarily severs the relationship between mother and daughter. Sophie flees her mother’s house and marries Joseph. In the next section of the novel, Sophie and her newborn daughter are making their way to her grandmother and aunt in Haiti. There is a great deal of healing that goes on in this section. Danticat also reveals the things that have been left unsaid in the previous section. We learn that Sophie is ashamed of her body, that she feels revulsion about sexual contact, that she suffers from bulimia that is closely connected to sexuality, and that she has left her husband so that she may heal herself. Martine comes to Haiti to bring Sophie and the baby back to Joseph, but Danticat does this only after she allows Sophie to reconnect with her cultural legacy in a way that has previously been precluded by abuse of the body.

All is not well back in America, however. Martine learns she is pregnant by her boyfriend, Marc, and the pregnancy arouses her terror and shame. She contemplates abortion and talks about this with her daughter. As a matter of conversation, she communicates her wishes for her funeral to Sophie at a family dinner, and after the dinner she calls Sophie to tell her she has made a decision about the baby. Sophie assumes that her mother is going to have an abortion; she never thought that her mother would kill herself as well by stabbing her own stomach seventeen times. As she prepares for her mother’s funeral in Haiti, Sophie contemplates how at last in death she can free her mother’s body from externally imposed definition:
I picked out the most crimson of all my mother’s clothes [. . .] It was too loud a color for a burial. I knew it. She would look like a Jezebel, hot-blooded Erzulie who feared no men, but rather made them her slaves, raped them, and killed them. She was the only woman with that power. It was too bright a red for burial. If we had an open coffin at the funeral home, people would talk. It was too loud a color for burial, but I chose it. There would be no ostentation, no viewing, neither pomp nor circumstance. It would be simple like she had wanted, a simple prayer at the grave site and some words of remembrance.

‘Saint Peter won’t allow your mother into Heaven in that,’ [Marc] said. ‘She is going to Guinea,’ I said, ‘or she is going to be a star. She’s going to be a butterfly or a lark in a tree. She’s going to be free.’ (227-8)

Danticat powerfully suggests that a connection to the mother must be intact, and that one must ensure that the mother is free before the self can be made free. It is the same sort of action that Billy Beede takes in Getting Mother’s Body.

After she buries her mother, Sophie runs to the cane fields where the macoute raped and impregnated Martine. To observers, Sophie seems like a madwoman, attacking the cane stalks and pounding them until they cannot snap back at her. Her grandmother shouts, “Ou libere?” Are you free?”, and her aunt responds in affirmation, “Ou libere!” (233). Through Sophie, Danticat then explains the significance of this passage. She defines Haiti as a place “where nightmares are passed on through generations like heirlooms,” where the one carries the past “like the hair on your head” (234). Sophie then defines her mother: “My mother was as brave as stars at dawn. She too was from this place. My mother was like that woman who could never bleed and
then could never stop bleeding, the one who gave in to her pain, to live as a butterfly. Yes, my mother was like me” (234). This was what she had been trying to tell her mother in the cane fields, in the place where she literally came from, but the words would not come out of her mouth. Danticat uses the grandmother to affirm for Sophie that she is free and to suggest why Martine had not been free:

‘There is a place where women are buried in clothes the color of flames, where we drop coffee on the ground for those who went ahead, where the daughter is never fully a woman until her mother has passed on before her. There is always a place where, if you listen closely in the night, you will hear your mother telling a story and at the end of the tale, she will ask you this question: ‘Ou libere?’ Are you free, my daughter?’ My grandmother quickly pressed her fingers over my lips. ‘Now,’ she said, ‘you will know how to answer.’ (234)

The answer to this question, for Danticat and for Sophie, is found in the gospel ideology. When Sophie lays down the pain, and realizes that she carries part of the burden herself as her grandmother once suggested, she is able to liberate herself.

In using the gospel ideology to assert the individual’s voice as a means to both connect with the ancestors and the past and to free one’s self from their pain, Danticat speaks to the themes many other writers in this tradition have addressed. Later novels, such as Getting Mother’s Body, respond back to the issue of the mother’s body and her freedom from cultural definition and oppression. Most notably, Danticat engages in conversation with Gayl Jones’ Corregidora and Toni Morrison’s Beloved to explore the possible dangers of one person or one form representing an entire community’s story.
In *Corregidora*, Gayl Jones explores the tensions between individual self-definition amidst the pain that is passed down through generations. The blues singer Ursa Corregidora is haunted by the legacy of the slave-owner Corregidora, who is both her grandfather and great-grandfather. Stories of his abuses visited on her grandmother and great-grandmother have shaped her life and what she has been led to believe is her destiny: her entire life she has been told to “make generations” as a witness to what Corregidora has done because all written records of his offenses have been burned. When Ursa is made sterile, she is no longer able to bear witness to the past of her ancestors.

In memories of her mother, Ursa realizes that she does not know her own story. Her grandmother’s and great-grandmother’s stories, bodies, and sexuality have defined Ursa’s mother’s life. At times, Jones makes the mother’s voice synonymous with the grandmother’s and great-grandmother’s; in fact, she makes this explicit by having Ursa comment on it. Late in her forties, Ursa visits her mother to get her story. Knowing her mother’s story, reconnecting to the story of her own creation, rather than simply surviving the pain of her ancestors’ pasts is the key to Ursa being able to bear her own witness and be freed from an injunction that she cannot meet, to make generations.

In *Beloved*, Denver is fascinated by the story of her birth. And although Morrison clearly makes the character Beloved stand for so much more than the ghost of the baby Sethe killed, Denver’s fascination with her own story is the thing that signals her ability to step outside of the yard. Morrison uses the relationship between Beloved and Sethe, where her past and guilt feed upon Sethe nearly making her a ghost, to demonstrate that a
character like Denver will not be subsumed by the pain of someone else’s past. She acknowledges it and reconnects with it, but eventually she will not allow it to define her.

To further this point, Morrison reinserts Denver into the community that has been haunted by the pain of slavery. But they each have their individual story, and they each have their individual contribution to the sound that breaks the back of words. Morrison asserts that the past must be remembered, not as an instrument of oppression, but as a means to pass on each individual’s story. The story that is not to be passed on is the one in which one story becomes everyone’s, where stereotypes and oppression are redeployed.

*Breath, Eyes, Memory, Corregidora,* and *Beloved* address the ways in which the communal story threatens individual voice. As long as the harm done to the body in previous generations is the primary concern, these authors demonstrate through their characters that one cannot tell or sing one’s own story. The danger is that in attempting to eradicate oppression and external definition, one story is passed on for the entire community to remember and in turn this suppresses each subsequent individual’s story and self-definition. And in the chorus of the literary community, it is the blending of unique and individual expression that comprises the richness of the sound. There can be no conversation, no call and response, if the response is threatened by the call.

The notion of being free is then directly related to how one defines the self. There is always the tension between the danger of forgetting the past and the danger of being overcome by a legacy of abuse and oppression. Being free, or getting free, is not a mere choice of the terms in which one uses to define the self. Freedom requires an intact relationship with the ancestor and cultural legacies. Freedom requires, as Baby Suggs
tells the reader, a love of the hands and the flesh. Freedom requires physical exercise of
the right to self-expression. And freedom requires remaking the language and all forms
of expression so that they never bind the hands that hold them. It is a dynamic and
perpetual process.


Christian, Barbara. “But What Do We Think We’re Doing Anyway: The State of Black Feminist Criticism(s) or My Version of a Little Bit of History.” *Changing Our


