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The Narrative of Aging: The Portrayal of the Aged in Toni Morrison and Ernest J. Gaines

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THE NARRATIVE OF AGING:
THE PORTRAYAL OF THE AGED
IN
TONI MORRISON AND ERNEST J. GAINES

A Dissertation Submitted to the School of Graduate Studies and Research

In partial Fulfillment of the
Requirements for the Degree of

Doctor of Philosophy

Ihab M. Freiz

Indiana University of Pennsylvania

August 2011

Indiana University of Pennsylvania
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Summary:

Research on minority aging has been done extensively in many fields such as sociology, psychology, economics, medicine, and so forth. However, the research is still lacking in the literary field and, consequently, minority aging has too often been a missing trope in contemporary literary theory. Although historians, sociologists, and psychologists have largely overlooked the important roles that elderly blacks can play in society, the authors of fiction show that they are central in the community. The dissertation studies the portrayals of the elderly by examining the ways that age and aging are represented in African American fiction. The goal is to highlight the positive aspects of aging and to see how the elderly blacks are able to survive their hard conditions with dignity. Depictions are believed to reflect the images, ideals and values of the African American society that contradict the insidious theme of ageism and the negative stereotyping of the elderly. The dissertation samples novels by both Toni Morrison and Ernest J. Gaines where the topics of aging and old age are evident but not at all dominant. Some of the characters are old, positive and negative depictions being equally divided among them. Issues such as class, gender, race/ethnicity and culture inform the concept of aging in these novels, and the theme of old age is pursued fully and tied precisely to Morrison and Gaines whose works are considered a new “act of emancipation” for a culture some still consider to be “enslaved.”

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“Look how lovely it is, this thing we have done – together.”*

THANK YOU

Ihab Freiz

Indiana, PA

Summer 2011

**This is the call-and-response statement made by Toni Morrison to her listeners in her Nobel Prize acceptance speech of 1993. Morrison’s statement sums it all up for me.*

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They hugged the memories of illnesses to their bosoms. They licked their lips and clucked their tongues in fond remembrance of pains they had endured. They had been young once . . . then they had grown . . . then they were old. Their bodies honed; their odor sour. Squatting in a cane field, stopping in a cotton field, kneeling by a river bank, they had carried a world on their heads. They had given over the lives of their own children and tendered their grandchildren. With relief they wrapped their heads in rags, and their breasts in flannel; eased their feet into felt. They were through with lust and lactation, beyond tears and terror. They alone could walk the roads of Mississippi, the lanes of Georgia, the fields of Alabama unmolested. They were old enough to be irritable when and where they chose, tired enough to look forward to death, disinterested enough to accept the idea of pain. They were in fact and at last free. And the lives of those old Black women were synthesized in their eyes – a puree of tragedy and humor, wickedness and serenity, truth and fantasy.

– From Toni Morrison's The Bluest Eye –

CHAPTER ONE

INTRODUCTION

We must dare to think "unthinkable" thoughts. We must learn to explore all the options and possibilities that confront us in a complex and rapidly changing world. We must learn to welcome and not to fear the voices of dissent. We must dare to think about "unthinkable things," because when things become unthinkable, thinking stops and action becomes mindless.

James William Fulbright

The ancient story goes that Eos forgot to seek immortal youth in her husband when she asked Zeus for an immortal life for him. The fate of Tithonus as a dry old grasshopper chirping endlessly is a reminder that longevity without well-being is a price too high to pay for survival. The myth of Eos and Tithonus is analogous to the story of elderly African-Americans whose well-being is often threatened in mainstream society. The myth can also be perceived as a reflection on the experience of aging among African-Americans: What is it like to be Black and old in America? Are there any cultural factors that make growing into old age a price too high to pay for survival? In truth, in his book, Why Survive: Being Old in America, Robert Butler comments, "it is easier to manage the problem of death than the problem of living as an old person. . . . Death is a dramatic, one time crisis while old age is a day-by-day and year-by-year confrontation with powerful external and internal forces" (1).

The Census Bureau's latest population projections illustrate that the future age structure of the population will be older than it is now. Life expectancy is projected to increase from 76.0

years in 1993 to 82.6 years in 2050. In 2050, life expectancy in the low assumption would be 75.3 years and in the high assumption would be 87.5 years. Blacks have a lower life expectancy than Whites, due to their socioeconomic disadvantages. The Black population will increase over 20 million by 2030. The Black population will double its present size to 62 million by 2050.¹

As generations grow older and as the elderly constitute such a large portion of the American society, more attention is given to revising the current image of aged individuals in America. Allegedly, most elderly are stereotyped more as liabilities than assets, underrepresented in many fields, and negatively stereotyped, or worse, omitted from view altogether. African-American writers provide an array of elderly Black characters who, albeit not idealized, are genuine and true reflections of a long past history of abuse and suffering. Toni Morrison and Ernest J. Gaines are perfect examples of the twentieth-century African-American writers who find it necessary to expose the (mis)representations of the elderly and the inescapable impact of slavery in their narratives. The two authors argue that such narratives are progressive in their effect and are also vital for recovering from the wounds of shame and the traumas of history.

During the past decade, literary studies of aging have flourished, making literature a fertile ground for research. These studies include not only literary works such as dramas, novels and short stories, but also theoretical treatises (to analyze the treatment of aging in literary and popular cultural forums) and books that investigate the topic of aging in literature. This dissertation examines aging in the African-American context as presented by Morrison and Gaines in their work. This chapter explains the genesis of the new genre of the *Vollendungsroman* or the narrative of old age. I start with a definition of terms and age ideologies that will lead us to a clear understanding of the narrative and the behavior of its protagonists – elderly Blacks. In what way do culture and ethnicity thwart or enhance aging?

What are the many roles of the aged and do they vary due to race and gender? The chapter discusses the most intriguing issue, which will be the main focus of this dissertation: the (mis)representation of aged Blacks, primarily females, due to the misalignment between them and the social structures.

This study focuses on specific textual representations of African-American aging and the aged characters. Chapters Two, Three, and Four present close readings of texts by Morrison and Gaines that contain elderly characters who demonstrate positive views of aging contrary to the existing ideologies. These narratives are representatives of many more texts that present a similar preoccupation. These novels provoke new avenues for age studies, and the characters in them are shaped by cultural constructions. As Margaret Gullette has observed: “Age ideology assails its victim in narratives and images” (79). Not only do representations of the aged in fiction reflect how the authors view old age, but they also lead the readers toward new ideas that augment old age redefinition. Though I have limited extensive analysis to only three of Gaines’s novels—The Autobiography of Miss Jane Pittman (1971), A Gathering of Old Men (1983), and A Lesson before Dying (1993)—and five of Morrison’s—The Bluest Eye (1970), Sula (1974), Song of Solomon (1977), Tar Baby (1981), and Beloved (1987)—I have found a wealth of material with which to work.

The Importance of the Study

In the twenty-first century, elderly black folks constitute a large portion of the American society. Authors of black fiction have thus found it important to represent them in their work. My theme is the politics of representations of age, which is a necessary perspective for age studies in the African-American context. My intention is to designate as “aged” or “old” or the more euphemistic “elderly” those people who are sixty-five years of age or older².

Many elderly blacks grew up in rural areas principally in the Deep South where they were objects of discrimination and prejudice throughout their lives. They have reached old age in the post-civil rights movement era where they seem to continue to be an unprivileged minority group. In fact, what make this dissertation particularly interesting are its subjects: the elderly. No one in the literary research field seems to be breaking new ground with the black elderly. The goal here is to create an authentic picture of the pros and cons of old age among blacks, shattering stereotypes and misconceptions in the process. Literary works are analyzed in order to identify and deconstruct the hegemonic ideologies of elderly Blacks in the American society. This dissertation concerns elderly African-Americans; thus, a cultural/historical perspective is vital to understanding their particular experience in the United States. Not only do we need to know what happened in the remote past, but we also need to use that knowledge to make the future of the aging population more predictable and promising. Textual analysis will also be a fertile ground for understanding literature written on aging, a concern probed further by the way gerontophobia has permeated every aspect of modern American culture, particularly among women. Gender, race, and age are aspects of inequality in the United States that are great disadvantage to the Black race. This study will challenge us to think more critically about the power of ageism and how age ideology has permeated the American society at large.

The Rationale for Morrison and Gaines

From among many African-American writers of fiction, Morrison and Gaines show much interest in old age issues. Morrison has been identified as a realist. Her depictions of older characters provide detailed and telling portraits of the African-American experience. Gaines's portraits of older Black women reveal a sense of individuality and strength in dealing with the world. From the neo-slave narratives of Toni Morrison to the historically replete novels of

Ernest Gaines, old age is well-presented in figures such as ancestors, elders, or other archetypes whose perspectives in life contribute much to our understanding and appreciation of elderly blacks. The two writers focus their literary efforts on black history by deconstructing and reconstructing the past. By so doing, they distinguish themselves from earlier generations of Black writers – Richard Wright, James Baldwin, Ralph Ellison, for instance – whose writings were a means of strategically advancing the race. A conventional approach to authors such as Toni Morrison and Ernest Gaines might not respond to their serious engagements with discourses on aging and often fails to realize the authors' perspectives on the concept. Gaines's works are mostly infused with a remarkable gallery of older figures in closed communities.

Literature often uncovers representations of elderly African-Americans whose influence in the community has been overlooked. Richard C. Fallis, in "Grow Old Along with Me," uses Robert Browning's line "the best is yet to be" to dispute the idea that fiction contains little about the old (Browning 338). Fallis writes, "The images of older people in . . . American literature are so numerous and varied, even when they play secondary roles, that they could well deserve a book-length anthology unto themselves" (36). Fallis further notes the increasing emphasis in recent years on fully rounded, fairly realistic images of older people in fiction. While stereotyped figures remain, "the ability to bring aging characters to the center of awareness," he contends, "is the most striking thing about recent fiction" (41). A true understanding of African-American identity requires us to pay greater attention to these elderly characters.

The treatment of the elderly in Morrison and Gaines is particularly graphic and sustained. Morrison and Gaines are varied and effective in their individual treatment of the elderly. Both writers introduce an extensive and consistent cast of old figures in their literature and are successful in making the elderly Blacks central characters. Although Gaines writes

often of elderly Black men and women, he seldom emphasizes both in one novel. He foregrounds his depiction of the aged Black female in two novels: The Autobiography of Miss Jane Pittman and A Lesson before Dying. Elderly black male characters dominate in A Gathering of Old Men. These three novels are Gaines's major works and will be the focus of my analysis in this dissertation. The older women in Morrison's work bring the African traditions to the scene. Pilate and Circe in Song of Solomon, Aunt Jimmy and M'dear in The Bluest Eye, Eva Peace in Sula, and Baby Suggs in Beloved are unique and are the focal points of my analysis of Morrison. Morrison creates portraits of these elderly women as they react in power and determination to their conditions in ways that protect their clan and themselves as well. While she belongs to a feminist tradition, Morrison also features an elderly Black male, Soaphead Church, in The Bluest Eye to explore broad social concerns.

Since the elderly are dominant figures in folklore and since they are revered so extensively, Gaines explains that folklore has become part of his personal life and an integral part of his work as well. In his short story "A Long Day in November," he speaks of tradition and superstition as possible means to deal with failures and frustrations – that is, "When everything else fails, we go back to old things and become almost primitive again" (78). Yet, unlike Morrison, Gaines explains that he hardly deals with myth and mythical characters, and he bases his characters on real, mostly older, people like his Aunt Augusteen. Morrison, however, is fascinated with older people in their insistence to remain true to tradition and the past. Community elders in Morrison's fiction are the essential link between the people and their ancestors. In her novels, she singles out "the ancestors" as deities or family members who have passed away, yet remain accessible to the living. Honoring the ancestor is one essential characteristic of Morrison's fiction. The elders in the community make certain that the younger

generations understand the importance of the ancestors as well as modes of access to them. The connection between ancestors and younger individuals ensures the well-being of the community at large. In Beloved Baby Suggs comes to Denver Suggs as a spirit, an ancestor, and encourages her to move past the boundaries of the yard that have kept her captive and to save her mother. In Tar Baby, for Son, the impoverished strong-minded Black man in the story, the horsemen of Isle des Chevaliers symbolize the ancestral force with whom he must connect in order to define himself. Morrison's novels demonstrate the need for a healthy connection between ancestor and individual to ensure the psychological health and the well-being of the community at large. I will discuss the ancestor figure in more detail in Chapter Three.

Issues of race, history and community deeply preoccupy Morrison and Gaines. Crucial to the concept of a community is the cultural reality of bonding. There is usually evidence of male as well as female bonding in the communities created by the two writers. In A Gathering of Old Men, for example, the community of elderly Black males takes a stand in a rare display of courage and fortitude that none of them would seemingly have ever done alone. Gaines's women also provide the nurture that enables individual and communal survival. Morrison, on the other hand, creates what Martin Luther King, Jr., envisioned as the "beloved community."³ She redefines the concept of nation-building and encourages her readers to re-imagine more inclusive communities that defy the dominant conception of race and nation as exclusive.

Morrison and Gaines are widely celebrated African-American writers. The texts they have authored are now canonized, which testifies to their excellence and dedication to the Black cause. What they write is the drama of the subject in culture: namely, the ways in which individuals live out their lives in relation to culture and community. Both writers do not allow the invisibility often attributed to older Black people to dictate their ideas; instead, they control

the representations of older people through the many roles they assign them. They explore how gender shapes the experience of older Black women in the African-American community and how their political involvement is intended to achieve certain social effects. Their rebellion against the social injustices toward older Blacks enhances their true value.

Morrison and Gaines both paint a stark picture of reality in their novels. However, perhaps due to some underlying optimism on his part, Gaines alleviates the tragic moments with humor, whereas Morrison's use of comedy is stark and seemingly bleak. Morrison writes in the mode of tragedy, whereas Gaines creates humor in the midst of misery, and laughter is integral to his depiction of the deep ironies in race relations. While Morrison honors the ancestors in her fiction, Gaines's central characters display qualities of African-American folklore and the heroic possibilities open to them as they become effective agents of change in society.

It comes as no surprise to see both writers referenced in a serious study as contemporaries to the "giant of Southern, American, and modern literature," William Faulkner.⁴ In her study, William Faulkner's Legacy, Margaret Donovan Bauer examines echoes of Faulkner in works by Morrison and Gaines among others. Bauer, however, discovers that "black writers, women writers, and blue-collar writers of the South . . . provide new perspectives on southern history"(30). While Faulkner "marginalizes and/or objectifies African-Americans and women" (3), Morrison and Gaines both have created a body of literature in which women characters are central, not peripheral. In The Autobiography of Miss Jane Pittman, Miss Jane's role, for example, is certainly more than Faulkner's Dilsey, a family servant (or Mammy) in The Sound and the Fury who has no voice in the novel. Unlike Dilsey, Jane plays the Griot and ultimately survives. Bauer describes Jane's position as extremely powerful. In her assessment she writes, "Faulkner's women do not have even this much voice"

(5). Likewise, it is the woman (Pilate) in Song of Solomon who is determined to effect change in others by teaching them to recognize “the presence of the past” (Hutcheon 12). Bauer praises Morrison and Gaines and confirms Hutcheon’s claim that “[N]o narrative can be a natural ‘master’ narrative: there are no natural hierarchies; there are only those who construct” (13). This said, my dissertation will carefully examine how Gaines and Morrison deconstruct and reconstruct (elderly) characters, themes, and conflicts and thereby myths perpetuated by mainstream writers who claim the master status.

Morrison and Gaines are thus a good match for my project, partly because both have a significant number of Black elderly people in their fiction and partly because both have rarely been singled out or explored in relation to the topic of aging as explained in the review of literature. Some particularly relevant texts are selected in order to explore the various assumptions and dimensions that surround the concept of aging among elderly Blacks. At the heart of my project is a desire to recognize the positive role played by elderly Blacks in facing the disruptions and challenging the ideologies of age and race in American society. Morrison and Gaines are a must-read for new insight into old age, but more precisely they are writers I like to read and think about. They are the ones who seriously engage American and African-American life and culture. This assessment is, of course, itself ultimately subjective and historical.

The Vollendungsroman

Part of my intention in this dissertation is to situate Morrison and Gaines within the context of the genre of the Vollendungroman. This requires us to have a brief introduction to the genre, its diverse aspects, and its characteristics. The novel of old age is often referred to as the Vollendungsroman (from the German “winding up”), a discernable type of literary production

that is centrally concerned with the aged. Constance Rooke points out that aged characters in contemporary fiction play more important roles than they did in the nineteenth century. In this new genre, the characters “seek some kind of affirmation in the face of loss” (Rooke 248). In other words, authors, Rooke argues, do not ignore the realities of aging; instead, they suggest a world in which aged individuals might find new roles to play and thus defy the old stereotypes and the skepticism with which contemporary theory has taught us to view any effort of self-representation in literature.

Identity politics plays a crucial role in the *Vollendungsroman* and in the literature of old age. Elderly characters hold onto the social identity they have constructed over the years. The danger of the loss of identity is best exemplified in characters such as Shakespeare’s Lear in King Lear and the more contemporary David Malouf’s Ovid in An Imaginary Life. One of the great lessons of the *Vollendungsroman* suggested by Rooke is that “we are all terminal cases; the fiction of old age . . . reminds us that the ‘joke’ is on us too” (249). The older person rebels against the loss and is determined to regain his or her hold on things, claim a new identity, and confront an age ideology that is becoming so cruel.

Two dominant themes that are of much importance in the novel of old age are the invisibility or marginalization of the old people and also their reduction to stereotypes. These two themes provide a clear understanding of aging, particularly in the African-American context. However, the elderly are not marginal figures but strong characters with complex personalities. Using the new genre, Morrison and Gaines seek to revise the canon of the stereotypical representations of old age and to overcome the prejudices against older individuals.

Typical to the genre of *Vollendungsroman* is the act of speech. All the speech is performed out loud by the old protagonist. Baby Suggs's speech in Beloved is a strong example since it is the story of a life. Rooke argues, "Storytelling is understood as one of the great devices by which we assert both individuality and our place in the community" (252-53). A life review is thus one of the most common themes of the *Vollendungsroman*. The imagery is particularly interesting. Certain images recur and may suggest the use of archetypes which arise naturally out of the experience of aging. Examples of prominent fictions of old age are William Faulkner's "A Rose for Emily," Elizabeth Taylor's "Mice and Birds and Boy," Doris Lessing's "An Old Woman and Her Cat," Margaret Laurence's The Stone Angel, and David Malouf's An Imaginary Life.

The task of the *Vollendungsroman* genre is felt more strongly when marked by a traumatic event that involves the deconstruction of the self. Because the past in most African-American narratives is traumatic and its difficulties and injustices continue to haunt the black community, the novel of old age offers empowerment and, in the African-American context, it is reminiscent of the so-called trauma narratives of post-World War II which address the psychic disruption of the afflicted Africans or African-Americans, a legacy of slavery and a result of the Africans' dislocation apart from their tradition. According to Cameron C. Clark, such trauma narratives gained popularity in the 1980s and 1990s with the emergence of trauma studies as "a valid disciplinary field of academic study" (4). Clark argues that the confusions of the present are the result of the terrible events that took place in the remote past, yet continued to have impact at present precisely because their power has been denied. African-Americans were traumatized with their sense of powerlessness that eventually harmed their psyches.

Hence, the role of narrative as a means of reflecting on an eventful past seems more appropriate to our study and may ideally bring about empathy and understanding toward elderly characters.

Similar to the *Vollendungsroman* is the trauma narrative. Using trauma narrative as a framework for reading Morrison and Gaines is most appropriate in the African-American context. Of course, thinking of trauma as a serious product of black experience becomes particularly relevant when discussing the neo-slave narratives of Toni Morrison or the autobiography by Ernest Gaines. Barbara Hill Rigney describes Morrison's characters as "both *subjects of* and *subject to* history. . . . [I]n her terms, history itself may be no more than a brutal fantasy, a nightmare half remembered, in which fact and symbol become indistinguishable" (61). Morrison and Gaines are willing to expose the past, believing that harkening back to the past can give hope, which is the cathartic or therapeutic side of the trauma theory. It provides release of tension caused by their overwhelming experiences.

Although the works in this dissertation do not fully represent the winding down or the *Vollendungsroman* described by Rooke, they educate scholars about the nature of aging and its discontents. The new genre not only enjoys the validation of widespread scholarly regard, but can also be considered a standard for other literary forms dealing with old age.

Theorizing Age: Perspectives on Aging

The study of aging among Blacks has lagged behind other sociological narratives of race, class, and gender and has not been theorized adequately. Anne Wyatt-Brown and Janice Rossen contend that "aging is a missing trope in contemporary literary theory" (2). Yet, the study has as one of its main goals to expose the silences that most conventional approaches maintain in this regard. Theories of aging are most relevant to black fiction⁵ since they may explain the relationship between people's subjective experiences and their objective conditions

in the African-American context. Margaret Gullette contends that aging cannot have a single, ahistorical meaning. In her book Aged by Culture, she argues that age and aging are cultural constructs and could, therefore, be critiqued and de-constructed. She writes, “Once we can distinguish between the culture’s master narrative of aging and our own versions, we may conclude that its threats to being and becoming are resistible” (138). Normative ideologies of culture about aging, according to Gullette, must be deconstructed – a distinct premise in this dissertation– before stories of the elderly can ever be entirely free of cultural impositions or before their age identities become complete. This study unmask and confronts old age stereotypes by examining their origins that date back to slavery and arguing that “only when we understand the culturally constructed nature of age can we expose its ubiquitous and stealthy influence” (Heath 24).

Age theory enhances our understanding of key concepts related to age and the aged in works of art. While the aging phenomenon is not a modern circumstance, it has become more persistent in the twentieth century – a concern of both society and fiction. From the start of the 1970s, there has been a significant increase in life expectancy which invites many literary scholars to focus their research on aging. The concept of “age” is relational. Elderly Black characters discussed in this dissertation are thus given the status of “old” based on their lives’ hard circumstances. We may, however, identify sixty as the age most commonly associated with the onset of old age.

Aging is thus a category that is a discursive and ideological construct that is open to theorization. In the 1990s, there has been a shift from *literary gerontology* toward *age studies*.⁶ Literary gerontology studies primarily the elderly through literature and uses humanistic approaches. With the evolving age studies there has developed the “Feminist Age Theory.” The

latter views age as a set of historical and cultural concepts (like gender or race) useful for investigating the origin of age stereotypes and ideologies. Examples of the many scholars who have contributed to age studies are Margaret Gullette (*Aged by Culture*), Kathleen Woodward (*Aging and Its Discontents*), Anne Wyatt-Brown (*Aging and Gender*) among others. If being aged by culture changes identity, how does this affect essentialism and the category “woman” and her “subjectivity”?

When nineteenth century feminism urged women to speak for themselves, they responded through all forms of literature with the purpose of liberating themselves: oral histories, autobiography, fiction, and so on. In the 1980s, there was a shift in focus to the main protagonists identified as “old.” Criticism too concerned images of old women in individual works. Studies of the fiction of female subjectivity have appeared and contested the master narrative of age ideology in counterculture terms such as Constance Rooke’s *Vollendungsroman*, or “novel of completion”; or Barbara Frey Waxman’s *Reifungsroman*, or “novel of ripening”— a concept of age continuum (Waxman 2). Instead of condemning the aged for being subjects of aging discourses, feminist age theorists have helped improve the discursive conditions for older women, believing that their subjectivity, as feminist Sally Robinson has suggested, is not a “being” but a “doing,” both product and process at once (11). More on the concept of women’s subjectivity is in order.

Ageism and American Age Culture Ideology

Scholars explore attitudes toward aging depicted in the writings of various cultures and epochs and attempt to provide alternatives to the late-twentieth-century hostile attitude toward the aged and the obsession with youth. In this study, elderly Blacks challenge the ageism that determines the way elderly men and women are often viewed in mainstream society. The term

“ageism” was first introduced by Robert Butler in 1969 as one form of bigotry similar to racism and sexism, both of which were widespread in the United States at that time. Butler defines ageism as “a process of systematic stereotyping and discrimination against people because they are old” (35). Webster’s Dictionary defines it as “prejudice and discrimination against an age group, and especially the elderly” (63). Erdman Palmore, in his book Ageism: Positive and Negative, argues that ageism can mean any prejudice or discrimination against an age group – an inappropriate negative treatment of members of that age group (6).

When ageism combines with sexism and racism, there is “triple jeopardy,” which constitutes the highest threat to older Black females, more than to anyone else in the American society. The three “-isms” combine to intensify the problems of the elderly blacks and of females in particular. While no consistent image of elderly blacks is dominant in the literature, this study, established in the works of Morrison and Gaines, depicts clearly the discourse of aging in the African-American tradition. It holds truths and views that explain various aspects in the lives of elderly African-Americans and presents the particulars of old age in the context of historical and cultural backgrounds and thus defies ageism. It deconstructs dominant age ideologies and the ageist attitudes in mainstream culture. The study also suggests ways of moving beyond age ideology to create an anti-ageism movement that would fight the disenfranchisement and marginalization of elderly people. “Age is a cause,” Gullette says, “like race and gender, rightfully allies itself with principles of narrative freedom, economic justice, and human rights” (196).

Attitudes toward old age reflected in literature have been a major focus of research of humanists in the United States since the 1970s. The research was prompted in 1972 by the appearance in English translation of Simone de Beauvoir’s The Coming of Age (1972), which

was a relentless indictment, based primarily on literary sources, of Western society's indifference and cruelty toward old people. Beauvoir deals with the challenges of the aged and finds society's attitudes toward the old deeply ambivalent. Her book sets out to break the "conspiracy of silence" surrounding the elderly: "As far as old people are concerned this society is not only guilty but downright criminal. Sheltering behind the myths of expansion and affluence, it treats the old as outcasts" (2). To defeat the conspiracy, Beauvoir thus suggests, "I shall compel my readers to hear them. I shall describe the position that is allotted to the old and the way they live: I shall tell what in fact happens inside their minds and their hearts; and what I say will not be distorted by the myths and the clichés of bourgeois culture" (2). I would like to think that Morrison and Gaines, like Beauvoir, have chosen to wrestle with ageism and continue to challenge those myths and clichés perpetuated against the elderly in mainstream American society.

More recently, historians have suggested that negative attitudes toward older people have developed as medical science and social reformers came to view old age as a disease and a social problem. These attitudes bring about such adversities as marginalization, powerlessness, inferior status, as well as stigmatization. Contemporary literature often continues to rely upon old negative stereotypes and "inherited clichés" concerning the elderly. Black fiction writers now lend humanistic and historical perspectives to provide literary representations of older Blacks that would replace those representations society once embraced.

Feminists, for instance, consider empowered older Black women to be crones, an emblem of successful aging. These crones are endowed with unique characteristics that distinguish and empower them to transcend the limitations that ageism and sexism impose. While the discussion on status or identity may present itself differently for White feminist

scholars theorizing about black politics or issues, the case presents itself differently for aging. A White feminist scholar, for example, can never know what it means to be a poor African-American female, but she can know what it is like to grow older.

Thomas Cole in his introduction to the Oxford Book of Aging remarks that American society is “culturally illiterate about aging” (qtd. in Woodard xv). While feminism is always concerned with the status of women in a patriarchal society, few critics argue that age should take priority over gender. Margaret Gullette suggests that our attitudes toward aging are “a curious cultural case, in which intellectual men and women of mature age thoroughly invest themselves in an ideology that dooms them to increasing mental extinction” (23). We remain, to echo Cole, “culturally illiterate about aging,” carry on what Beauvoir calls “a conspiracy of silence” (2), and are in accord with what Baba Copper calls “the political quiet surrounding ageism” (125), seeing it as evidence of simply more female conformity with patriarchal values.

The resistance of those elderly blacks to life’s challenges has over the generations been a concern. In this study, there is more focus on older Black women than on men or the elderly as a whole simply because the majority of elderly characters featured in the works of both authors are women whose life experiences influence their perception of life during old age. One of the main concerns of older black women is the maintenance of family ties and caring for their young throughout old age. This dissertation includes a number of perspectives on the African-American culture as it influences the experience of growing old. One of the most significant descriptions of being an aging female in the African-American society is contained in the phrase “quadruple jeopardy” – that is, to be old, poor, female, and of minority status. While emphasizing the hardships suffered by aging Black women, I will also focus on the skills and strengths they have developed for survival.

Ageism is circumvented by resistance. Older people have the choice of narrative, a means to get beyond existing ideology critiques. A fictional autobiography is one such narrative that Morrison and Gaines employ in Beloved and The Autobiography of Miss Jane Pittman respectively. Telling one's life story or autobiography strengthens the self by highlighting the positives of lifelong experiences and surviving the pressures that have led most of the aged African-Americans to a distorted self-perception in their later years. Autobiographies illustrate the role of aging in relation to identity politics. Following Gullette, writers often contend that an autobiography transcends ideology critiques: "It's a step in the transformation of consciousness," Gullette argues (137). In this sense, telling their stories becomes liberating to the elderly from the stigma of old age and its overtones.

Among the many writers that have contributed much to understanding the liability of ageism is Audre Lorde. In her speech "Age, Race, Class and Sex: Women Redefining Difference," published in Sister Outsider: Essays and Speeches, Lorde views ageism as one form of difference, and hence oppression. Her approach to human liberation censures ageism as a liability. She says,

If the younger members of a community view the older members as contemptible or suspect or excess, they will never be able to join hands and examine the living memories of the community, nor ask the all important question: "Why?" This gives rise to historical amnesia that keeps us working to invent the wheel every time we have to go to the store for bread. (164)

To Lorde, a liability of ageism is its use to divide and conquer. Lorde asserts that if the generation gap is left intact, the knowledge possessed by older people will remain subliminal,

and the oppression they face daily will remain unchallenged. Her speech at Amherst comments upon the dangers of essentialism/difference that can be threatening to communal cohesion, for “without community there is no liberation” (164). Lorde, therefore, endeavors to unify the audiences by focusing on a shared opposition to such distortions and misnamings as ageism. She says, “But our future survival is predicated upon our ability to relate within equality. . . . We must root out internalized patterns of oppression within ourselves if we are to move beyond the most superficial aspects of social change” (122). A surge of literature credits Lorde’s insight into the concept of *difference* across many social variables including age.⁷

In the African-American context, ideology often results from lack of voice and most likely is caused by racism. Age studies have often struggled to give voice to the aged and bring their unacknowledged experiences to life. Simone de Beauvoir, the godmother of age studies, asserts in The Coming of Age that age is truly a terrain for power and ideology. Gullette in Aged by Culture argues that age is culturally constructed and that age study should concern itself with deconstructing age and noting cultural differentiations with disgust. “Once age ideology is the beast we are after,” Gullette comments, “aging – just like gender and race – becomes less totalizing and we come to realize that there is an advantage there” (111).

In many literary genres, for example, we often notice the lack of images of powerful, adventurous and wise older women and the prevalence of depictions of marginalized, enfeebled, foolish, and wicked older women. By interrogating such ideologies, we might loosen the hold of insidious cultural messages that too often appear to be natural and innocent. The task of ideology critique is fundamental as it is to make the familiar seem a bit more strange and thereby to make us consistently examine any beliefs that have mysteriously become common among people. Chapter Two of this dissertation gives an account of some such age ideologies

where we witness how Black artists endeavor to defy them and create new roles that best identify those elderly characters.

One sure method used by Black writers to deconstruct age ideologies is “storytelling” or “age autobiography.” The elderly are determined not to accept or endorse any negative stereotypes of them. Instead, they create a truer version of their lives that speaks of their old and new selves. Gullette goes a step further and suggests that writing an age autobiography would be grounds for developing a new identity which she calls “age identity” and also a possible resource for narrative (128, 137). Telling one’s narrative with all the positive lifelong experiences defies existing ideologies on aging. An age autobiography strengthens the self and is considered “a step in the transformation of consciousness” (137). Furthermore, age autobiographies help strengthen other elderly people in general: they maintain the image and standards of strong older Black people who manage to survive. The heroes in these autobiographies become role models that show the many possibilities open to older people in general and to Black elderly in particular.

Since I will be reading Morrison and Gaines in terms of older female self-representation and the claim for subjectivity, I draw on feminist age theory to be able to examine the two writers’ work. In the process I will recognize women’s strategies to assert their competency and also to understand the nature of their resistance. The protagonists in these texts of Morrison and Gaines speak against a history of essentialist notions of age, gender, and race. Through their strategic engagement in discourses of ageism, sexism, and racism, these textual figures work toward a new self-representation that deconstructs the normative ideologies of older Black people, primarily women, in American society.

Cultural Mythologies of Gender and Age

Black novelists work against “identity politics.” Their protagonists have no stable or fixed “identity”; rather, they attempt to speak their subjectivity both within and against the regime which places them in positions that deny them their subjectivity. The protagonists in these works step outside representational structures and create an “identity” that helps dismantle ideologies that enforce their inferior status as *other*. Those ideologies, according to Hortense Spillers, “demonstrate a sort of telegraphic coding of which there is no easy way for the agents buried beneath them to come clean” (65). Our purpose here is to expose such “telegraphic coding” in order to consider the ways in which American culture has made it impossible for the older Blacks— as agents — to “come clean.”

In African-American novels, gender ideologies, like age ideologies, are culturally constructed. Such ideologies served to make the abuse and the oppression of African-Americans during slavery and on into the twentieth century appear normal. The White man’s “fear of woman’s emasculating sexual powers,” to borrow a phrase from Deborah G. White (61), produced the Black woman as Jezebel — a cultural construction — to keep male slaves vulnerable or, according to Sally Robinson, “feminized” (144). Such representation not only degrades the Black man, but leads ultimately to devaluation of the Black woman as well. This section will discuss gender as an essential prerequisite for the characters’ claim for subjectivity and will contribute much to our understanding of the development of the Tar women in Chapter Four.

American writers have sought the rewriting of the Black experience with the desire to humanize the Black slave and to prevent White brutality against him or her. The gender divide in the Black community has as its analogue in the mid to late twentieth century the myth of the

“Black matriarchy.” The publication of Daniel P. Moynihan’s The Negro Family: The Case for National Action in 1965, commonly known as “The Moynihan Report,” is instrumental in perpetuating the notion of the Black matriarch or the emasculating sapphire. The Moynihan Report ascribes the failure of Black American manhood to emasculation at the hands of the black woman. No longer Jezebel or Mammy, the Black woman becomes Sapphire: “a domineering Black woman who consumes men. . . . Sapphire emasculates men by the aggressive usurpation of their role as head of the family” (White 165-66). The figure of Sapphire has become so damaging to the black male ego that the myth of black matriarchy has obscured the real power relations in the American culture.

Black feminists argue against misrepresenting the Black woman and work to dismantle the myth that the Black society is matriarchal. Jean Carey Bond and Patricia Peery write, “[T]he so-called Black matriarch is a kind of folk character largely fashioned by Whites out of half-truths and lies about the involuntary condition of Black women” (116). The authors thus critique the Moynihan Report for its sustaining White male dominance at the expense of Black male-female relations. On the other hand, Robert Staples points out that the myth is a prime example of what Malcolm X called “making the victim criminal” (Staples 8).⁸ While Staples’s comment is useful, Michele Wallace introduces the concept of “Black Macho” and the important role a Black woman can play in the Black struggle for racial liberation. Wallace says that the Black man’s acceptance of Moynihan’s Report may suggest that “the existence of anything so subversive as a *strong Black woman* precluded the existence of a strong Black man or, indeed, any Black *man* at all” (Wallace 31; emphasis added).

It is clear now the Moynihan Report sustains White male dominance and gender differentiation within the Black community, which remain the privileges of the White

perspective. Just as slaves were regarded as genderless⁹, so is the Black woman in the twentieth century considered, a strategy that has always already determined the gender politics within ethnic communities. Such complex relations I have sketched out served as the target of a radical critique in Morrison's and Gaines's novels. Because the narratives unfold in post-slavery time, the authors are able to deconstruct such a discursive cultural construction of the Black female, primarily the elderly.

With this brief background, I argue that Morrison's and Gaines's sole purpose is engendering the subject; that is, they deconstruct the dominant age ideology pertaining to African-Americans and thus claim their subjectivity. Stanley Crouch believes that Gaines is a Black writer who avoids reductive representation of Black women. Crouch argues: "Had Morrison higher intentions when she appropriated the conventions of a holocaust tale, Beloved might stand next to, or outdistance Ernest Gaines's The Autobiography of Miss Jane Pittman." Crouch continues to say that the latter "does not subscribe to the belief that social persecution can build moral character or heighten political insight" (43).

Review of Literature

Literature has been influential in forming current views of aging. Fiction written in the twentieth-century is often silent on the subject of aging where the protagonist is rarely an old man or woman and the older characters are often facing decline and deterioration. However, Rausali Murphy Baum in her article, "Work, Contentment, and Identity in Aging Women in Literature," observes that "the aging women in twentieth-century fiction – primarily in works written by women – frequently live with contentment and a sense of accomplishment and continue to develop and realize identities in their later years" (90). A number of literary works written by women, according to Baum, focuses upon aging women and successful aging. Self

discovery and identity formation are dominant themes for women writers, which suggest that “growing older afflicts women much more than it does men” (Sontag 22). The difference in portrayal of the elderly males and females demonstrates how ageism is often socially constructed.

It is interesting to realize that the best-known aging figures in literature are males whose lives are coming apart. I immediately recall such protagonists as Gustav Aschenbach in Thomas Mann’s Death in Venice, Willy Loman in Arthur Miller’s Death of a Salesman, Uncle Ike in William Faulkner’s Go Down, Moses, Dick Diver in F. Scott Fitzgerald’s Tender Is the Night, and Samuel Beckett’s Malone in Malone Meurt. (Of course, old age brings to mind the famous elderly figure King Lear of Shakespeare if we move away from fiction and the twenty-first century). An exception to these aging characters experiencing decline is Ernest Hemingway’s Santiago in The Old Man and the Sea. Examples of famous aging women portrayed in literature are Miss Pickthorn in May Sarton’s fable Miss Pickthorn and Mr. Hare and White in Alice Walker’s “Fame.” Other examples that contribute much to the subject of aging include Margaret Laurence (The Stone Age), John Updike (Poorhouse Fair), Don Robertson (Praise the Human Season), May Sarton (Mrs. Stevens Hears the Mermaids Sing), Gene Stone (Darling I Am Growing Old), and Elizabeth Savage (Happy Ending).

Literary interest in the subject of aging in Black fiction existed as early as the nineteenth century with renowned authors such as Frederick Douglass and Harriet Jacobs. Their narratives give a central place in their autobiographies to their grandmothers who actively demonstrate positive aspects of old age. Douglass openly expresses his deep affection toward his grandmother in My Bondage and My Freedom; he writes, “If any one thing in my experience, more than another, served to deepen my conviction of the infernal character of

slavery, and to fill me with unutterable loathing of slaveholders, it was their base ingratitude to my poor old grandmother” (180). Douglass further explains his disgust at the slaveholders’ ingratitude and barbarity when they abandon her and virtually turn her out to die:

When weighed down by the pains and aches of old age, when the head inclines to the feet, when the beginning and ending of human existence meet, and helpless infancy and painful old age combine together . . . my grand-Mother, the devoted mother of twelve children, is left alone, in yonder little hut, before a few dim embers. (181)

Douglass shows how the picture of the abandoned grandmother is indeed a bleak one. He suggests instead that she – a model of endurance and strength – can become a source of empowerment for younger generations.

Harriet Jacobs, in Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl, is also strongly influenced by her maternal grandmother, Aunt Martha. The grandmother tries to assimilate to the dominant white culture, which nevertheless continues to exclude her. Featuring her grandmother, Jacobs is able to accommodate as well as to criticize the differences between women of different races and social standings. Martha is a positive force in Jacobs’s (Linda’s) life and a model of honesty and decency. Loving and family-oriented, she represents an ideal of domestic life and maternal love. She also works tirelessly to buy her children’s and grandchildren’s freedom. At times her maternal power, however, threatens to suffocate her loved ones, a situation which is similar to Janie’s grandmother in Zora Neale Hurston’s Their Eyes Were Watching God.

In her novel, Hurston depicts Janie’s grandmother as occupying an equally important role. Physically ravaged by age, oppressed, and impoverished, Nanny derives her power from her ability to manipulate the system. She has raised and sheltered her granddaughter Janie.

When Janie begins to consider her dreams and desires, Nanny has a different vision. She compels Janie to marry an older man whose sixty acres and a mule make him eligible. For Nanny the marriage represents an opportunity for Janie to sit on the pedestal reserved for southern white women and above the drudgery that has characterized Nanny's life and made the black woman "de mule uh de world" (Hurst 14). But by denying Janie the right to follow her dreams, Nanny inhibits her quest for selfhood. Nanny's history explains her flawed vision. As a slave herself, Nanny was impregnated by her master. In freedom, her efforts failed to protect her daughter. She says, "Ah wanted to preach a great sermon about colored women sittin' on high, but they wasn't no pulpit for me" (31-32). Elderly blacks, as represented in the character of Janie's grandmother, remain a strong social force with an uncanny ability to transform themselves from objects of indifference and even ridicule to objects of regard and esteem. They exercise power over their young and pass on advice to the upcoming generations.

Other elderly characters include Charles Chesnut's Uncle Julius McAdoo, the aged ex-slave trickster in The Conjure Woman, whose conjure tales reveal moments of active black resistance to white oppression. Julius, unable to entirely give up the mental habits of a lifetime of slavery, has attached himself to the old plantation. In the stories, Uncle Julius's purpose is to coach John, a Midwestern businessman who has moved to the South, and his wife Annie about Southern life and culture. On the surface he seems simple and naïve, but he successfully uses his storytelling gifts to outwit his employer. In these stories Julius describes the plight of slaves whose only defense against the inhumanity of slavery lies in Aunt Peggy's conjure spells. Because he continually disrupts the status quo with laughter, outrage and rebellion, Jeanne Smith comments, "[T]he trickster in contemporary women's texts acts both as a figure of cultural strength and as a sign of diversity" (155). The trickster is a compelling figure not only

of cultural resistance and survival, but also of blasting stereotypes of African-Americans, which is the focus of analysis in the next chapter.

The grandmother figure, most often religious, appears throughout Rudolph Fisher's short fiction as a link to the traditional values of the past and a connection repeatedly placed in jeopardy by the sinful nature of Harlem. Fisher often returns to the image of the elderly in conflict with the younger generation. One such grandmother is the protagonist of what is probably Fisher's most widely anthologized story, "Miss Cynthie." The grandmother figure in the stories guides the young protagonists to meet the challenges of modern Harlem where it becomes hard to maintain hope or a sense of integrity.

Alice Walker in her essay "In Search of Our Mothers' Gardens" demands that we must recoup silenced narratives of the elderly: "they are continuing presences; they need only to walk among us in the flesh" (117). Walker takes as her literary inheritance the narratives written by slaves in the eighteenth and the nineteenth centuries to speak of Black Americans being worthy of God's grace. She uses narratives to report what was real in the lives of those elderly figures. In remembering mothers and grandmothers, Walker does "rip that veil drawn over proceedings too terrible to relate" (qtd. in Zinsser 109-10). In the process of recounting the stories of our elders, Walker believes that we may discover ourselves. She writes her famous sentimental note: "In search of My Mother's garden, I found my own" (243). While the world perceives older people as helpless and unworthy, Walker realizes that not only can we learn from them, but in the process we also discover ourselves.

Ethnic writers argue that African-American literature offers a wealth of alternative views that demonstrate the positive aspects of old age. In Paule Marshall's Praise Song for the Widow, for example, as the protagonist reaches old age, she decides to radically change her lifestyle,

returning to the values of her African tradition where the elderly are the repositories of ancient culture. Strong literary depictions of aging African-Americans are also found in and Marian Gray Secundy and Lois Lacivita Nixon's Trials, Tribulations, and Celebrations. The narratives in this anthology are inspired by the Black aging experience and explore relevant aspects of the life cycle of older African-Americans. Some of the authors featured praise and revere the wisdom and the enduring strength and the bravery of old people, whereas others focus on poverty and its devastating effects on disadvantaged African-Americans. Readers find new insight in the African-American experience. The anthology includes fictional and autobiographical literature from a number of noted American writers including Alice Walker ("To Hell with Dying"), Gwendolyn Brooks ("The Bean Eaters"), Toni Cade Bambara ("Maggie of the Green Bottles), Paule Marshall ("To Da-duh, in Memoriam"), Maya Angelou ("On Aging" and "The Last Decision"), Arna Bontemps ("A Summer Tragedy"), Eugena Collier ("Marigolds"), and Lucille Clifton ("Miss Rosie").

Criticism on Aging in the African-American Context

Despite the apparent interest in old age and the aged in America seen in these examples, a systematic critical analysis of the roles of older Blacks in works of fiction is lacking. In the academic realm, some texts or treatises include Morrison or Gaines in relation to the narrative of old age. A quick review of literary materials will immediately show the reader little is included regarding older people. Jill M. Fiore's "'Growing Old Disgracefully': A Feminist Reading of the Crone in Contemporary Multicultural American Literature" is one such exception that carefully shows how empowerment in old age is contingent upon a woman's ability to transcend the limitations of traditional feminine gender roles and to establish a strong identity of her own. Fiore believes that the crone is the true representation of the aging woman

in contemporary America. Her analysis includes a discussion of the specific tasks that mark the crone's journey, such as defying conventional roles, establishing a community of women, serving as elder to a younger counterpart, telling stories as legacy, and having an attitude of acceptance toward mortality. Fiore briefly references Morrison's Paradise in order to address older women's empowerment as based on resistance to normative/ideological roles. She writes "If rejection of the traditional gender role is the first step toward awareness, then acceptance of one's aging self is the beginning of empowerment" (18). Fiore gives a call for authenticity and invites women to follow the path of the crone in order that they may develop a sense of self and reclaim their own power.

Fiore draws on the classic work of Barbara Walker's The Crone: Woman of Age, Wisdom, and Power. Walker skillfully draws together the myths from many cultures, history and changing status of elderly women. We follow the changing image from that of powerful, wise healer to evil witch to useless, invisible body. The author traces the times when the older woman, the crone, becomes a fearsome image. As the wise woman becomes the witch, "the word crone goes from a complement to an insult" (122). The transition thus "established the stereotype of malevolent old womanhood that still haunts older women today" (122). After losing the status of "wise," the image of aging women as evil witches, Walker argues, needs to be replaced with the archetypal Crone – "an empowering image of biological truth, female wisdom and mother right . . ." (144).

In "Remembering Our Foremothers," Karla Holloway and Stephanie Demetrakopoulos draw attention to Morrison's characterization. They both recognize the unique sacred energy and aura Morrison gives to her older women characters. The critics examine older Black women in the context of the political and the spiritual. They are "the givers of life and strategizers of

survival” (qtd. in Bell 2). These Black foremothers are heroes as seen through the African heritage as well as the American Black experience. Holloway and Demetrakopoulos argue that “older women of any ethnic background are lumped into negative categories” (New Dimensions 160). The two critics thus emphasize what Stanley Crouch believes: “[I]n a demoralized subculture everyone is a victim, but women, especially girls, are actually the most defenseless” (203). Age within Black culture, then, is not so much a social issue as it is a mythic and political issue.

Very few criticisms surface on Gaines in relation to aging and the aged. In Critical Reflections on the Fiction of Ernest J. Gaines, David C. Estes includes a number of essays written by different authors and dealing with various issues; while not exclusive to the narrative of old age, they can certainly be applied to the elderly. Most important of these essays is Sandra G. Shannon’s “Strong Men Getting Stronger,” in which she highlights Gaines’s determination to avoid reliance upon stereotypes and explains how Gaines presents his elderly characters as endowed with compassion, conscience and intelligence. Shannon argues that men and women “are interspersed throughout Gaines’s fiction in varying roles. . . . They are not all admirable, nor are they limited to degrading stereotypes” (Critical Reflections 195). Gaines’s elderly characters evolve from long perpetuated myths and misconceptions depicted in works such as Arna Bontemps’s “A Summer’s Tragedy” and Harriet Beecher Stowe’s Uncle Tom’s Cabin to new militants in Gaines’s A Gathering of Old Men and The Autobiography of Miss Jane Pittman, both of which are going to be the subject of analysis in later chapters. Shannon finds that Gaines’s novels, A Gathering of Old Men, in particular, empower older people who are troubled by discrimination throughout the United States.

Overview of Chapters

Chapters Two, Three and Four directly apply the theoretical perspectives outlined in this introduction. The theories are applied to works by Toni Morrison and Ernest J. Gaines in order to see how far their works do or do not reflect the paradigms of aging. Chapter Two, “Shifting Images: Escaping the Stereotypes of Old Age in Black Fiction,” redefines the status of elderly Blacks in society as they re-emerge empowered. In the chapter, the old stereotypes of Mammy, the Matriarch, and Uncle Tom or ageist attitudes toward the elderly are first outlined. The chapter strongly overturns the negative constructions of Black elderly in works of fiction of both Morrison and Gaines. It thus demonstrates how defiance of culture and cultural restrictions sometimes enables the elderly to redefine themselves in society and reemerge authentically empowered. By gaining insight into the concept of aging in the African-American context, we recognize that elderly Blacks have the potential to transcend traditional limitations imposed upon the race. In Morrison’s novels, reclaiming one’s self and the belief in communal power and solidarity fully encompass her belief in the characters’ ability to reject the stereotypes imposed on them. The analysis of literature begins with Gaines’s A Gathering of Old Men to highlight the capacity of older Black characters for transformation through courageous rebellion, through which they will earn respect and dignity within their community. The chapter reveals the various defense mechanisms they use as means of survival with dignity. These vary from social participation to the internal power they acquire to promote a sense of belonging. The old men are carefully drawn as active participants, each driven by the desire to defend the race regardless of his/her seemingly apparent weakness. In Morrison, I will focus on the characters of Eva Peace in Sula and Baby Suggs in Beloved. Like the old men in Gaines’s novel, Eva and Suggs discredit the stereotypes and myths concerning old Black women. They

escape the cultural inscriptions and, at best, renegotiate definitions of self by speaking the unspeakable in their claim for subjectivity.

In Chapter Three, “Archetypal Images of the Elderly in Morrison and Gaines,” the elderly characters are represented in archetypal figures. The three archetypes used in this chapter are the Ancestor, the Crone and the Shaman. The analysis starts with a definition of each of the three featured archetypes followed by a literary analysis of representative characters of each archetype from Morrison and Gaines. The ancestor section illustrates the impact of the presence or the absence of the ancestor. The Crone section explains the nature of the crone. Although it signifies the negative constructs of women in society, Morrison exalts the crone as a paragon of strength and a distinguished model for subjectivity. Morrison also gives her older female characters shaman-like roles in order to enable them to confront the negative cultural stereotypes and perceptions of older Black women. With the power invested in them, shamans stand out as prominent members of the African-American community. The literary analysis features Morrison’s Baby Suggs, Ondine, Pilate, and Eva Peace. In Gaines, however, the chapter features Emma and Louise of Gaines’s A Lesson before Dying. The two seventy-year-old women are drawn as they impact the lives of Grant and Jefferson when they demand Grant to teach Jefferson a lesson in dignity before his execution. These archetypal women symbolize ways African-Americans grapple with their problems and resist white supremacy.

Chapter Four, “Essentializing the Ex-Centric: Gender Representations in Morrison and Gaines,” considers the representation of gender and aging in Black fiction. The chapter explores disruptions and instead suggests the new concept of gender-blurring as an indication of the brutal legacy of slavery in the African-American context. To illustrate the disruptive gender identification (i.e., gender blurring), two literary figurative images are introduced: the tar

women and the aunt. The literary analysis features Aunt Jimmy, Pilate, and Eva from Morrison's text and Miss Jane Pittman from Gaines's. The characters selected for this analysis react aggressively and unexpectedly to the challenges brought to them by the White man.

Chapter Five draws a conclusion on how Morrison and Gaines are similar and different with regard to their treatment of aging in their fiction. Following the authors' perspectives, however, this concluding chapter sums up the major findings of this research with clear understanding of the strengths and advantages of older age in contrast to the taken-for-granted assumption of old age vulnerability or other negative social conditions.

Notes on Chapter One

1. The reader can find more about the aging Black population in the United States by visiting <<http://www.census.gov/prod/2001pubs/c2kbr01-10.pdf>>
2. Typically, age 65 is used in reference to old age, primarily due to the establishment of age 65 as a starting point for receiving Social Security benefits.
3. Martin Luther King speaks of his vision of a “beloved community” at an institute on nonviolence and social change in Montgomery, Alabama, in December 1956. This method was made famous in our generation by Mohandas K. Gandhi and was grounded in the New Testament and in particular in Jesus’s Sermon on the Mount. King’s beloved community is a place where value and being are basic in the meaning of God. In his speech, King said, “But we must remember . . . that a boycott is not an end unto itself. . . . But the end is reconciliation; the end is redemption, the end is the creation of the beloved community” (King 180).
4. Three books pair Morrison with Faulkner: Philip Weinstein’s 1996 What Else But Love?: The Ordeal of Race in Faulkner and Morrison; a 1997 collection of essays, edited by Carol A. Kolmerten, Stephen M. Ross, and Judith Bryant Wittenburg, entitled Unflinching Gaze: Morrison and Faulkner Re-Envisioned; and Patricia McKee’s 1999 Producing American Races: Henry James, William Faulkner, Toni Morrison.
5. I use the phrase “Black fiction” interchangeably with “African-American fiction” based on what Morrison writes in “Rootedness”: “We try to incorporate, into the traditional genre the novel, unorthodox novelistic characteristics – so that it is in my view, Black” (342). Black fiction thus maintains a vital connection to the Black cultural community insofar as it formally appropriates the distinctive features of the lost Black oral tradition.

Some such features that Morrison specifies are “ancestral presence” and “a blending of the supernatural and the mundane that she deems indicative of Black cosmology” (342).

According to Jordan Zachery, Politicians no longer have to use “Black” or “African-American”; instead they rely on the terms “urban” and “inner city” to identify the Black race (30-31).

6. Literary Gerontology includes such categories as: 1) Analyses of literary attitudes toward aging; 2) Humanistic approaches; 3) Psychoanalytic explorations of literary works and their authors; 4) Applications of gerontological theories of autobiographies, life reviews, and midlife transitions; 5) Studies in the creative process. See: The Coming of Age of Literary Gerontology by Anne Wyatt-Brown (1990). On the other hand, “Age Studies” – named by Margaret M. Gullette in a 1993 essay entitled “Creativity, Gender and Aging” – understands age as a set of historical and cultural concepts (like gender and race) useful for investigating the origin of age stereotypes or constructions.
7. Among the most significant book-length examples are Elizabeth Spelman’s Inessential Woman: Problems of Exclusion in Feminist Thought, Martha Minow’s Making All the Difference: Inclusion, Exclusion, and American Law, and Patricia Hill Collins’s Black Feminist Thought: Knowledge, Consciousness, and the Politics of Empowerment. Also, Linda Gordon’s essay “On ‘Difference’” provides an historical background on the discussions of difference in feminism during the late 1970s and early 1980s.
8. Malcolm X speaks of the power of the “irresponsible” press and its image-making role: it can make the criminal look like he is the victim and make the victim look like he is the criminal, a key technique to the practice of racism in White America. See Malcolm X Speaks: Selected Speeches and Statements (1966).

9. Women of color are often seen as genderless because of their historical role as slaves and later as domestic servants. They do not adhere to heterosexist notions about the proper roles of men and women. As Michele Wallace in Black Macho and the Myth of the Superwoman has noted, “the ability to do heavy labor was of paramount importance on the old Southern plantation. Whereas women who were sensitive, delicate, and fragile suffered a great deal in slavery . . . women who were physically strong and robust were highly valued by the slave community” (20).

CHAPTER TWO

SHIFTING IMAGES: ESCAPING THE STEREOTYPES OF OLD AGE

Whenever a Black person was mentioned in these novels, either she was a mammy, or he was a Tom, a good nigger; or ... a bad nigger, when a Black woman character was young, she was either a potential mammy or a nigger wench. For most of these writers, choosing something between was unheard of.

Ernest Gaines, Miss Jane and I

A vast amount of scholarship has critiqued the Black novel's tendency to subdivide African- American identity into readily recognizable character types like the “Mammy” and the figure now known as the “Uncle Tom.” In Toni Morrison and Ernest J. Gaines, however, the elderly characters do not conform to conventional definitions of minority identity. These authors do not accept those stereotypes but instead draw attention to older characters who exist outside those long-established categories. Recent narratives of aging often highlight the visibility of elderly Blacks instead of reductive and naive depictions of them. The purpose is to help loosen the hold of subtle cultural messages of the elderly that too often remain clouded or invisible.

Contemporary African-American fiction has brought into question negative stereotypes and faulty conceptions about elderly Blacks. Like the negative attitudes and stereotypes of race and gender, negative feelings and thoughts about age also exist. It has been observed that elderly Black characters demand new and more positive images than those of “Uncle Toms” or “Mammies,” all of which have had a sustained and insidious impact on mainstream society’s views of elderly Blacks and which have, by and large, reinforced Black marginality in American society. Instead, defiance and solidarity have become new tropes to explore in the

lives of elderly Black characters who no longer represent society's negative views of old age, nor do they feel demoralized or burdensome to others. On the contrary, these characters maintain their dignity and sense of self-worth. Recent positive depictions of elderly Blacks surely defy the assumptions of their ineffectiveness or incompetence and demonstrate how they remain unswervingly steadfast in their pursuit of life.

A recurrent theme in the novels of both Morrison and Gaines is the stereotypical reduction and marginalization of elderly characters. In deconstructing the stereotypical view of the elderly, Gaines and Morrison explore the various positive and idealized images of elderly Blacks (even when they play secondary roles) that deny the negative constructions and the various misconceptions about them. The two authors draw those elderly as dedicated, courageous men and women who are integral parts of their communities and who are able to maintain power and self-respect despite society's effort to suppress them and continue the status quo. Morrison uses themes such as the reclamation of the alienated self, the quest for legacy, and the community as chorus in an attempt to express her characters' rejection of the societal stereotypes imposed upon them. Gaines, on the other hand, debunks some of the stereotypical views that he personally has encountered. He seems to reinforce positive views about aging and thus includes admirable older characters in his writing as a first step in challenging these stereotypes and misconceptions. The two authors address the political, national and cultural problems that threaten the very core of the Black community, ageism being one of them. Readers begin to think of older blacks as militant and independent, which in turn help readers create or enhance the positive view of elderly Blacks.

This chapter also explores the various defense tactics which elderly Blacks use as a means of surviving with dignity or aging disgracefully. The novels depict Black elders as active

participants in the construction of the community, driven by the desire to defend the race regardless of their apparent weakness. By the end of the chapter, we affirm the positive realities of the black culture concerning older people rather than accepting the absurdity of rigidly-conceived stereotypes about them.

The Problem of Essentialism: Establishing the Myths

For he [Fanon] shows clearly that this irresponsible violence of the colonized against the colonizer] is neither sound and fury, nor the resurrection of savage instincts, nor even the effect of resentment: it is a man re-acting himself. I think we understood this truth at one time, but we have forgotten it – that no gentleness can efface the marks of violence; only violence itself can destroy them. . . . When the peasant takes a gun in his hands, the old myths grow dim and the prohibitions are one by one forgotten. The rebel's weapon is the proof of his humanity.

John Paul Sartre, in Preface to Wretched of the Earth by Frantz Fanon

The problem of essentialism in African-American culture still exists today. In simple terms, essentialism is a generalization stating that certain traits of the elderly do exist regardless of the context. Henry Louis Gates, Jr., clearly describes the dangers of ascribing positive or negative attributes to any group. The sense of difference as defined in popular usages of the term “race” has been used to describe and even inscribe differences of language, belief systems, artistic traditions or even natural attributes (such as age); all are damaging, even toxic, stereotypes. The problem of essentializing undergirds the wish to make manifest the existence of ageism and all its implications. Essentialist theories of age are the beliefs that social groups possess a distinctive essence that is unchangeable and is indicative of certain traits. Believing in fixed group characteristics is, however, associated with negative societal perceptions. The idea

of categorization is basically psychological and does not carry any positive or negative connotation by default. Age attitudes interplay with racial beliefs in shaping societal perceptions and lead to prejudice.

In his approach, Gates attributes notions of 'Blackness' and 'Black art,' to essentialism both in form and function. Gates argues for the particularism or exceptionalism of the African-American experience that it derives from political and cultural circumstances unique to African-Americans. He moves to the heart of his argument to say, "Literary images are combinations of words, not of absolute or fixed things" (254). He rejects the idea because if Black art is assumed to document social realities" it must always be politically oriented.

We may agree that the idea of essentialism was abused during the colonial era by suggesting that different races were limited by their very specific essential natures and, therefore, were not to be considered equal, which is not of primary concern to us in this dissertation, except that my use of the term retains the original Aristotelian idea of the essential nature of things but applies it more to challenge the discourse of negative constructions of elderly Black men and women that was prevalent in the late nineteenth century and continues into modern times as a legacy of slavery. Understanding essentialism will help us be wary of ageism and its pending negative impact on America.

To resolve such misconceptions in literature, writers commonly challenge essentialism by producing older characters with roles and abilities radical enough to defy the stereotypes attributed to them. Morrison and Gaines have been unequivocal on this question of essentialism. They do not want to essentialize African-American identity. Their goal instead is to seize all unexamined assumptions against elderly Blacks by developing a historical account of African-American experience that consider the politics of identity formation within the African-

American culture at a particular historical time. So instead of reinforcing cultural stereotypes about the African-American identity, the two authors, Morrison and Gaines, use deconstruction as a method of argument.

Cultural Images: The History and Meanings of Black Imagery

The Mammy and Relations of Power¹

In the second half of the nineteenth century, the various incarnations of the mammy figure, for example, have had a profound influence on American culture. This chapter probes these images as they existed between the 1820s and 1935. During that time period, “Mammy” (who took care of slave children while their mothers worked in the field or in the master’s home) became the most widely recognized representation of the (older) African-American women. Kimberly Wallace-Sanders considers the aesthetic value of mammies in that “they wielded considerable authority within the plantation household, and consequently retained a measure of respect in the slave quarters (6). She also defines the term as “a uniquely Southern term of endearment . . . eventually replaced the slave woman’s name” (6-7). In this study, I use the ‘Black mammy’ and the ‘elderly slave woman’ interchangeably.

The word "Mammy" (aka, “Auntie,” "Negro Nurse," and "Colored Nurse") was originally part of the nineteenth-century lexicon of ante-bellum plantation literature and folklore that continued to have a large effect on the American psyche. Arguably the most recognizable stereotype of the elderly Black female in America, “Mammy” has influenced a wide spectrum of perceptions about Black women. She is a literary creation that came into existence from writers who romanticized slavery and bygone days. Phil Patton, who contributed a story about Mammy in the September 1993 [American Heritage Magazine](#), acknowledged that the myth,

born in the minds of slavery's defenders before the Civil War, continues to have a troubling hold on people's imaginations as one of the most powerful American icons.

The mammy, whose image persisted from pre-Civil War to the 1960s, was the prototype of the contented slave. Bell Hooks argues that the mammy's greatest virtue is "her love for White folk whom she willingly and passively served" (84). The passive, submissive mammy image was created by mainstream writers to justify slavery as not evil. Perhaps, the earliest literary representation of the mammy stereotype is found in Mary Eastman's Aunt Phyllis's Cabin. A faithful, obedient domestic servant, the mammy symbolizes "the dominant group's perception of the ideal Black female relationship to the elite White male power" (Collins, Black Feminist Thought 72). Said to provide better care for her White employer, the mammy often ignored the needs of her own family. She symbolizes the "good" black mother, for "even though she may be well loved and may wield considerable authority in her White 'family,' the mammy still knows her 'place' as an obedient servant. She has accepted her own subordination" (Collins 72-73, 75).

Black feminists and scholars have identified a number of images and symbols prevalent in literature that serve as models for (older) Black women in America. In her description of the mammy figure, feminist literary critic Barbara Christian equates the earliest mammy character with the stereotype established later. Christian sees the mammy as "a normal part of the Southern fabric. Enduring, strong, and calm, her physical characteristics remain the same" (Black Women Novelists ii). The mammy image also serves to maintain oppression of gender. Christian comments on the mammy's gender significance: "Mammy, harmless in her position as a slave and unable because of her all-giving nature to do harm, is needed as an image, a surrogate to contain all those fears of the physical female" (Black Feminist Criticism 2). The

mammy image is thus asexual, typical of Morrison's elderly female characters we are going to discuss throughout the dissertation. .

Mammy is a literary but also a cultural phenomenon – the African-American woman who nursed White children and who sustained Southern households ever since slavery. The mammy is said to have replaced the “uncle” figure at the time when Black men were believed to become a threat to White womanhood. Literature has developed the Mammy figure as an older African-American female who is maternal and loyal to her white family. The image of the “Mammy” is treated in many works of literature. Models of Black mammies are represented by Frederick Douglass (My Bondage and My Freedom), and Harriet Jacobs (Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl). Examples also include Lutie Johnson in Ann Petry's The Street; Granny Huggs in Kristin Hunter's God Bless the Child; Mildred in Alice Childress's Like One of the Family; Rosa Lee in Barbara Woods's “The Final Supper”; and Granny Jane in Charles Waddell Chesnut's The Marrow of Tradition. William Faulkner dedicated his 1942 story collection Go Down, Moses, to his mammy. Dilsey in The Sound and the Fury as well as Molly in Go Down, Moses and Louvinia in The Unvanquished are Faulkner's recreations of the mammy figure. In these works and many others, the writers provide a true, realistic portrait of the old Southern Mammy, a Black Woman defined by service, loyalty to her White family, and maternity.

Most attempts to deconstruct the contented mammy have focused on her role as the faithful, obedient domestic servant, overlooking her role as surrogate and biological mother. The ideology behind the mammy image places no value on black women as mothers of their own children. African-American writers dismissed such stereotypes as half-truths. This work tries to do justice to the image and uncover the mammy's real significance. However, because of theories of nineteenth-century racial essentialism, African-American women were thought to

be innately superior in their abilities as caretakers of white children. In a 1924 study by Francis P. Gaines of Southern plantation life found that “There can be no doubt that with the peculiar African capacity for devotion, the old mammy dearly loved her charges” (qt. in Wallace Sanders 8). The important point here is that “African capacity for devotion” to white children was part of the stereotype.

The imagery has been so realistic that it cannot be dismissed from the American experience since it greatly affected early-twentieth-century conceptualizations of the South. The Mammy quickly appeared in twentieth-century media.² Gaines’s Miss Emma and Tante Lou in A Lesson before Dying and Morrison’s Pauline Breedlove in The Bluest Eye are the most memorable mammy characters. Both authors explore the details of the mammy tradition through these characters who seem to be responsible for holding the memories of the old South in their relationships with their white families. These characters call to mind the downfall of the old South, the old ways and the old relationships. Nevertheless, throughout the novels the reader is forced to recast the mammy from a vibrant, enduring symbol of antebellum loyalty to a more human and temporal reality. In Gaines’s A Lesson before Dying, the author has replaced the fat, healthy mammy of southern plantation lore with a frail and aging mammy figure. Gaines establishes Lou’s humanity by insisting that she is vulnerable to all human weakness. So much is made of Tante Lou’s and Miss Emma’s roles as the strong black women that it is easy to underestimate the meaning of their own decline and the breakdown in their ability to continue enduring the fight for Jefferson.

Emma’s harsh treatment of Grant is reminiscent of Aunt Cloe smacking her small children in Uncle Tom’s Cabin or of Faulkner’s Dilsey in The Sound and the Fury, when giving Benjy [the White boy] a birthday cake and thinking that Luster [her own child] is eating

more than his share. She warns him, “Reach it again, and I chop it right off with this here butcher knife” (70). It seems that Gaines’s attempt to portray a humane, dignified mammy character is hampered by his inability to transcend the mammy stereotype. Gaines is unable to save Emma from reminding us of the stereotype; her roughness with Grant as well as with Jefferson parrots prototypical mammy behavior. However, allowing her to grow into old age, Gaines de-emphasizes her relationship with the White families, which helps the reader more fully appreciate who she is when she is with her own family where her loyalty (her heart and soul) belongs. It is her moments at home that truly make Emma a radical mammy character.

The aggressive quality of the Mammy manifests itself at her own house, which is the case in The Bluest Eye. Pauline Breedlove, albeit not elderly, exemplifies well the mammy figure. At her own house, Mrs. Breedlove is a tyrant, a fact which Morrison stresses through the use of numerous graphic descriptions and disturbing language. The ideology behind the mammy image places no value on Black women as biological mothers. We see Mrs. Breedlove knocking her daughter Pecola down in the kitchen of her white employers when she spills the blueberry cobbler, but Pauline turns, immediately, to soothe the little white girl who nicknames her Polly: “Her words were hotter and darker than the smoking berries. . . . Over her shoulder, she spit out words to us like rotten pieces of apple” (107). Having no tenderness for her own black child but lots of “hushing and soothing the tears of the little pink-and-yellow girl” (109), Pauline finds satisfaction only in working for the Fishers, a white family that lives in a clean, affluent world, a world in total contrast to the one in which Pauline exists. Polly does not let anything from her home life seep into the Fisher home. That her role as mammy detracts from the quality of mothering Pauline gives her own daughter is not surprising, given the historical precedent set in the plantation household. When Morrison introduces a mammy-type, the character internalizes

the mammy image and becomes so true that the reader believes she has never belonged to her own race or to herself in any way – a social construct that is recurring in Black literature.

The Matriarch

Closely related to the image of Mammy is that of the Matriarch, so termed in the sixties by Daniel Moynihan. Barbara Christian observes that the “invidious” black matriarchy mythology appeared to be but “another variation of the Mammy” (Black Women Novelists 78). From the 1960s to the 1990s, the matriarch was one of the main stereotypes of Black women, taking the place of the mammy. While the “mammy” exemplifies the Black mother in White households, the “matriarch” symbolizes the mother figure in the Black home.

“Bad” Black mothers hurt their families and impede racial progress. Images of Black women as matriarchs proliferated. Society represents and infiltrates into people’s minds the myth of Black matriarchy in the deconstruction of the black family. George Lipsitz argues, “The problems facing communities of color no longer stem primarily from discrimination but from the characteristics of these communities themselves, from unrestrained sexual behavior and childbirths out of wedlock, crime, welfare dependency, and perverse sense of group identity and group entitlement” (24). Dick Hebdige in Subculture and the Meaning of Style argues: “These images can gain acceptance by the wider society, and in some cases, by members of culture to which they are ascribed” (57-58). These discourses among many others owe their origin to the Moynihan Report.

No longer does the matriarch live in the slave quarters; instead she has a home of her own in the ghetto. “She is not a protector of white society,” argues Julia S. Jordan-Zachery, “rather, she is the purveyor of all that is threatening to white society” (42). Daryl C. Dance in “Black Eve or Madonna” acknowledges the role of Black matriarchs as pillars of strength in the

black community for centuries. Looking back over the history of the Black American mother, Dance writes, “She [the Black matriarch] emerges as a strong Black bridge that we all crossed over on, a figure of courage, strength, and endurance unmatched in the annals of world history” (131). Black men and women alike cling to the image of the infallible black matriarch because, according to Patricia Hill Collins, it “praises Black women’s resiliency in a society that routinely paints [them] as bad mothers” (174). Mother glorification dispels those negative stereotypical images associated with matriarchs and instead praises them for raising their offspring strong and courageous enough to continue to fight for social equity.

Representations of the matriarch type abound in a number of twentieth-century texts. They are found in works such as Ralph Ellison’s Invisible Man and Gloria Naylor’s The Women of Brewster Place. Mary is the stereotypical Nanny figure or black matriarch in The Invisible Man, who serves as a semblance of home that helps the protagonist cope with his sense of homelessness, stands up for her beliefs, and provides perspective from an older generation. In Naylor’s The Women of Brewster Place, Mattie, the matriarch has a dream in which the seven women unite to tear down the wall that the city legislature built. In the novel, they speak together to tear down the definition of the African-American family created by Moynihan.

Morrison's depiction of matriarchy is a fundamentally profound act of resistance. It is essential and integral to black women's fight against racism and a means to achieve well-being for themselves and their culture. Their empowerment is what makes possible the better world we see. In the character of Pilate in Song of Solomon, Morrison imagines an alternative to the dominant ideals of femininity that prove so restrictive to her other women characters. Unique as she is, Pilate represents the type of independent black women whom Morrison calls the

“ultimate survivors,” speaking to all Black women who “have this uncanny ability to shape an untenable reality, mold it, sing it, reduce it to its manageable, transforming essence which is a knowing so deep it’s like a secret” (Morrison, “A Knowing So Deep” 32). Morrison’s tribute reminds me of the matriarch in Sula, Eva Peace, whose sacrifice is heroic, yet deemed necessary. She gives up a leg in order to survive and give her children life. Demetrakopoulos in “Sula and the Primacy of Woman-to-Woman Bonds” notes, “There is not even remorse for Eva, just commitment—passionate and self-sacrificial – for life that has quality” (83). To our dismay, however, distorting the responsibilities of maternalism, Eva murders her son and watches her daughter burn.

Whereas White males look favorably upon the mammy, Black men often subject the matriarch to scorn and ridicule. Involved excessively in the lives of her family members, the matriarch is cast as the strong Black woman who often seeks to control by force and duress. In the Breedlove household, the male figures – husband and son – are either absent or emasculated. African American writers, therefore, revive the Black grandmother as matriarch. Her role in the African-American community was much remarkable. In his book, The Negro in the United States, E. Franklin Frazier³ speaks of the grandmother’s position and prestige on the plantation and in the master’s house:

The Negro grandmother’s importance is due to the fact not only that she has been the “oldest head” in a maternal family organization but also to her position as “granny” or midwife among a simple peasant folk. As the repository of folk wisdom concerning the inscrutable ways of nature, the grandmother had been depended upon by mothers. . . . Even grown men

and women refer to her as a second mother and sometimes show the same reference and respect for her that they accord their own mothers. (117)

When the black woman reaches that ultimate matriarchal role of the grandmother, she often takes a new part, serving as a guardian or protector of the younger generation. In contemporary African-American fiction, the Black grandmother stands today, as of old, as the “oldest head” in the maternal black family, as will be shown in the analysis of some selected texts of Morrison and Gaines.

Uncle Tom and the Functioning of Race and Gender

A faithful companion to the Black Mammy is the long suffering, dark-skinned Uncle Tom, the hero of Harriet Beecher Stowe’s 1852 anti-slavery novel Uncle Tom’s Cabin. Both Uncle Tom and the Mammy are stereotypes which captured the Black essence during slavery as discussed in the above section. In Stowe’s novel, Tom agrees to be sold to pay his master’s debts. Refusing to run away, he goes off with a slave trader, preaching Christian obedience and humility, virtues that sustain him through many trials until he is finally beaten to death on Simon Legree’s plantation as a punishment for refusing to renounce his faith in the Bible and its teachings.

For Stowe, Uncle Tom embodied all the virtues of humanity that made slavery intolerable. James Baldwin in “Everybody’s Protest,” however, considers Stowe’s portraiture of Uncle Tom racist: “It degrades what it means to be black in America,” Baldwin argues (13). Since the 1940s, calling an African-American “Uncle Tom” has been an insult, a slur indicating that the person is a coward who is dependent upon and subservient to Whites. Lucinda H. MacKethan defines the stereotype as “a Black person who has no pride in his or his own personhood, one who lives to serve masters, one who accepts and cultivates White paternalism,

as did the Uncle Tom of Stowe's novel" (921). The stereotype thus strays from Stowe's intentions for a Christ-like title character, and the figure has become scorned in our popular memory. It is thus so offensive, as explained by Joseph Furnas, that any of the American Negroes at the time of slavery would rather be called "nigger" than "Uncle Tom." Benjamin F. Hudson, in "Another View of 'Uncle Tom,'" finds the term in present-day jargon synonymous with:

[e]verything that is base, cowardly and contemptible. It is used to designate a person who, through fear or desire for personal gain, betrays the trust of those whom he represents, who acquiesces to the wishes and dictates of a more powerful group, who is generally without scruples or principles, and who is always lacking in moral courage. He is, therefore, worthy of all of the scorn, ridicule and contempt that is heaped upon him. (79)

As attested by Stowe, however, Tom reflects the humility of the Negro and his docile and religious nature on which basis enslaving him is wrong. Stowe's characterization of Uncle Tom was attacked by Whites, and a whole new genre, the *Anti-Tom* novels⁴, started. The most severe attack on the figure was written by Furnas in Goodbye to Uncle Tom. Furnas charges that the portrayal of Blacks in Uncle Tom's Cabin draws on degrading racial stereotypes that have continued down to modern times. He publicly stated that "The devil could have forged no shrewder weapon for the Negro's worst enemy" than Uncle Tom (51). Similar views are found in Time on the Cross: The Economics of American Negro Slavery. Social scientists and authors Robert William Fogel and Stanley L. Engerman marvel at the exceptional power of ideology to obliterate reality and accuse Stowe of having misrepresented slaves and their instinctive qualities because of racist myopia and of disseminating a stereotype that continues to haunt

Blacks today and reigns supreme (215). To use the title “Uncle Tom” in this degrading manner is unfair to the figure that Stowe created. Yet whatever Stowe meant with her character in 1952, the name of Uncle Tom cannot be separated from the many dangerous messages that his meekness and simplistic acquiescence carry. Given the basic Christian virtues, her Uncle Tom would be a credit to any race in all contexts.

Morrison and Gaines: Breaking the Myths

Morrison and Gaines go considerably far in their critique of the stereotypes discussed above in relation to old people. In order to establish a positive self-image for their older characters, they skillfully depict the interplay of race and identity in the African-American psyche. For Gaines, this initiative follows a thorough understanding of cultural ties and provokes a sense of appreciation for the rich tradition of African-American culture. For Morrison, the core of Black identity is revived not by creating new myths but by rediscovering the old ones. The characters derive their wholeness by rejecting the fallacy and materialism of the mainstream culture, by embracing the African-American past, and by insisting that one’s identity is grounded in cultural and ancestral truths.

Morrison is fully prepared to deconstruct those mythological conceptions of elderly Blacks. While the reader hardly recognizes the presence of the mammy in her writing, it is still featured in her first novel, The Bluest Eye, in the character of Pauline Breedlove. While Pauline does not represent the category of older people, nevertheless she is presented in stereotypical semblance. Morrison’s elderly characters, however, drastically depart from the stereotypical mummies since they embrace increasing degrees of militancy. Ondine in Tar Baby, for example, confronts and scolds the White mistress for not raising her son properly.

Gaines also finds many novels, short stories, and plays – all written by white writers [Twain and Faulkner] – untrue and unreal to his own experience. Nonetheless, he does not care for the way Black characters are drawn. In “Miss Jane and I,” he explains, “Whenever a Black person was mentioned in these novels, either she was a mammy, or he was a Tom, a good nigger; or . . . a bad nigger. When a Black woman character was young, she was either a potential mammy or a nigger wench” (26). Gaines introduces Miss Jane as a suitably representative slave mother who challenges the stereotypes that appear in Louisiana plantation fiction. Miss Jane is a mother whom Blacks can be proud of because of her loyalty to her children as well as to the whole Black community. Her depiction thus counters the portraits of mammy defined in most literature.

Identity and the Struggle for Ethnic Survival in A Gathering of Old Men

I am an invisible man. No, I am not a spook like those who haunted Edgar Allan Poe; nor am I one of your Hollywood-movie ectoplasms. I am a man of substance, of flesh and bone, fiber and liquids – and I might even be said to possess a mind. I am invisible; understand, simply because people refuse to see me . . . That invisibility to which I refer occurs because of a peculiar disposition of the eyes of those with whom I come in contact. A matter of the construction of their *inner* eyes, those *eyes* with which they look through their physical eyes upon reality.

Ralph Ellison, Invisible Man

The invisibility Ralph Ellison so effectively denounces has tragically influenced the ways many scholars have revisited history in antebellum America from the Revolution to the Civil War. The invisibility of older Blacks has typically resulted from ideological and racial

biases. While Gaines reminds the reader of Ellison's concept of invisibility, the old men in A Gathering are nevertheless determined to be heard, seen, recognized and challenged as individuals who can take a stand, not as stereotyped or insignificant.

Clearly, many studies have analyzed Blacks collectively in relation to slavery in the South or segregation in the North. Gaines clearly deconstructs these studies. In a 1983 interview with Mary Ellen Doyle, Gaines objects to Richard Wright's Native Son as the blueprint for Black literature: "There are other things to write about," he says (qt. in Lowe 150). Gaines contends that Harlem and Chicago had been much richer resources a hundred years before Wright's book and the 1940s. The protest theme would have been only one of many literary endeavors that Black writers could pursue.

This section begins my analysis of Ernest Gaines's A Gathering of Old Men (1983) to illustrate how the novel clearly opposes the ageist myths and stereotypes in Black America. Gaines's portrayals of positive role models provide alternative images to traditional negative stereotypes often attributed to elderly Blacks. The novel offers healing to the old Black folks who survive the violent, yet cathartic, encounter with the repressed past traumas and frustrations.

In general, Gaines's novels and short stories focus on the people and the folklore and the society of rural life in Louisiana. His tales are set in old plantations; his narratives retell post-Civil War African-American history. With his personalized tales – told from the perspective of one character – Gaines seeks to record their previously overlooked experiences. A Gathering of Old Men, set in rural Louisiana of the 1970s, centers on eighteen African Americans in their 70s and 80s armed with shotguns to claim responsibility for the murder of a Cajun sharecropper in the quarters, thereby thwarting the local sheriff's murder investigation. Old and lost in time,

there seems to be little or no hope of survival or amelioration in this Southern plantation. The old men are perceived as too far from being militants. In an attempt to cease further promulgation of this fallacy, Gaines places them at the very center stage of his novel and powerfully challenges the notion of these men's alleged impotence. Gaines envisions the possibility of positive change for his characters, even those who are caught in the most difficult circumstances. Sandra G. Shannon, in "Strong Men Getting Stronger," writes that "Gaines has developed a reputation for giving voice and significance to the least likely individuals – those who are too quickly viewed as irrelevant, apathetic, or simply undeserving of recognition" (195-96). Gaines gives voice to the "undeserving" old men – who gather with their sole purpose to gain voice. Gaines uncovers the worth of these old people, too long marginalized and devalued and, in so doing, further reminds us that the Black movement is for self-assertion and identity awareness.

Elderly Blacks in Gaines's fiction feel competent that they are able to defend their rights and protect the rights of their own. Their exposure to the many negative stereotypes throughout the years has led them to internalize such misconceptions to the extent of self loathing. They wish to see themselves able to engage in a positively valued behavior. It is still possible to avoid being reduced to a negative stereotype and move toward self-actualization. The majority of elderly Blacks maintain positive feelings of self-worth by drawing a sharp distinction between their inner self and the societal views of aging. There is also the potential for some to behave in a way that epitomizes the prevailing stereotype, but they may, however, threaten and provoke anxiety, which Gaines tries to overcome in A Gathering of Old Men.

The plot of A Gathering is not complicated. Beau Boutan, a Cajun farmer on the Marshall plantation, lies dead in the yard of Mathu, an old black man known for fighting White

racism. Candy Marshall, surrogate daughter of Mathu and the partial owner and general overseer of the plantation, believes that Mathu killed Beau. To protect him, Candy decides that the best course of action would be to send for the Black men in the vicinity to come to Mathu's with as many twelve-gauge shotguns and empty shells as possible. With numerous men and guns at the crime scene, Candy believes that the local Sheriff will not be able to solve the crime. All of these men, though in their seventies and their eighties, are ready to risk their lives and confess to a crime they did not commit.

The real story of A Gathering is the old men's retelling and reinterpreting of their experiences. They explain that they killed Beau because of what they have suffered— a sister raped, a son executed for a crime he did not commit, and a brother killed for beating a tractor in a race. By giving them a voice, Gaines illustrates the redemptive change of the spirit of these old men, which he presented by contrasting their prior passive acceptance of the status quo of the old South with their total embrace of the change. Inspired by their past Southern experience, they redefine the new era in redemptive and self-affirming ways.

The question of identity formation is at stake. So much has been said about the "identity" problems created for those who suffer the degrading conditions to which many elderly blacks are exposed that it makes consideration of this matter imperative in this study. The reader perceives the internal personas of these highly-spirited old men as they narrate their stories. Because the concept of identity speaks to the condition of many African-Americans throughout history, I will explain its dimensions in relation to race and gender as well. The term "identity" may translate into "invisible," as used by Ellison in Invisible Man. Margaret Gullette in Aged by Culture uses a similar term "identity stripping" to refer to persons who are perceived with little or no attention and, therefore, suffer from communal neglect or

marginalization. In A Gathering, Lou Dimes realizes the change that occurs to Mathu. He says to Candy, his fiancée, concerning old Mathu, “That old man is free of you now. He doesn’t need you to protect him anymore, Candy. He’s an old man and what little time he’s got left he wants to live it his own way” (184). Mathu helped raise Candy, the plantation owner, and thus she has the desire to protect him. Because Mathu experiences a renewed sense of identity, he no longer accepts Candy’s protection or even affection. At the same time, it should not be overlooked, as we see later, that such positive identity is seen against the background of hurtful prejudices which restrict elderly Blacks in the use of their intellect. Identity formation here is one aspect of the struggle for ethnic survival. The individual is inwardly liberated from a more dominant identity or culture, a step toward identity construction and self-awareness. Sweet victory is here suggested when those elderly Blacks act their liberation from the inside out. Their stories reveal their ethnic identities that could not be erased by the trauma of slavery or racism. They are indeed fascinating portraits of a few influential elderly African-Americans who exist in literature.

The old men in A Gathering of Old Men are seen in a positive but equally stereotyped light. Their defiance of Mapes and the Cajuns can be perceived as to limit their individuality. The need to counteract ageist stereotypes remains a concern even when views of the elderly appear to be positive. The belief is that stereotypes, both positive and negative, affect the social treatment of the elderly in society. Stereotypes are often situated in a larger context over which the author has little or no control. In the plantation culture, for instance, Blacks could not defend themselves or their kinfolk against the Whites’ power. Gaines’s old men ingeniously provide alternative images to traditional negative stereotypes. Positive versus negative stereotyping,

however, is only a partial answer. Yet the fact remains that the old men's unity helps fulfill their dream of sound and healthy interpersonal relationships within the Black community.

Through unity, the old men strike back with vengeance and ultimately defy the negative stereotypes about them. Mary Ellen Doyle in Voices from the Quarters: The Fiction of Ernest Gaines, argues that the novel, because of these men, is considered "a reversal of stereotypes" (178). The reader can see the fear of elderly Blacks yet sense the Black dignity and its potential. Such reversal can clearly be noticed in the change of attitudes of both Whites and Blacks. Elderly Blacks, conditioned by stereotypes, formerly viewed themselves as oppressed, helpless, and dependent, a group of people who were always in need of protection and support. A change of stereotype, however, entails a transformed vision and a change of minds. In their confrontation with Sheriff Mapes and his deputy, the old men strongly voice their rejection of the demeaning stereotypes that have negatively influenced them for ages. They are no longer convinced that a commitment to non-violence will bring peace to the land, nor are they convinced of the effectiveness of violence. However, left to choose between the two, the old men choose violence and stand up to Mapes. They gather on the porch rather than crawl under the beds, a sign of their renewed courage and hope for revival and the new sense of dignity that is born to them. Mat makes this statement to Chimley after learning about Beau's murder. Mat believes that Beau's murder has presented a special opportunity to both Chimley and himself – namely, the opportunity to redefine themselves: "I'm seventy-one, Chimley; seventy-one and a half. . . . I am too old to go crawling under that bed. I just don't have the strength for it no more" (30-31).

In their twilight years, Mat and Chimley suddenly feel empowered to stand up as they never have before. Both now are old men who have spent much of their lives being

psychologically and physically abused by the White racists of the South. Suddenly with the crisis at hand, God grants both men one last opportunity to make something of themselves. By confessing to Beau's murder, by standing up for their friend Mathu, and by not yielding to the Cajuns, the men throw off their identities as cowards and bravely stand up for something. Because the men will be able to salvage their dignity before dying, Mat believes that Beau's murder is a blessing from God. Both Mat and Chimley rejoice in getting the chance to show the men that they truly are strong. After Mat arranges everything, his wife, Ella, eyes him suspiciously and demands to know what is happening. Mat refuses to tell her and insists that it is men's business. Ella tells Mat that he is crazy and that he is not going. Mat responds with anger and tells his wife that he is finally standing up for something like a man after the years of abuse, toiling in the fields:

He works in mysterious ways. Give an old nigger like me one more chance to do something with his life. He gived me that chance, and I'm taking it, I'm going to Marshall. Even if I have to die at Marshall. I know I'm old, maybe even crazy, but I'm going anyhow. And it ain't nothing you can do about it. Pray if you want to. Pray for all us old fools. But don't try to stop me. So help me, God, woman, don't try to stop me. (38)

The change happens when the old men realize or confess their own fearful concepts of both races. The point of the novel is that Whites see Blacks through the stereotypical grid which Blacks have been conditioned to accept; what they do not see, however, is the Blacks' real view of the Whites. This blindness leaves them vulnerable to the Blacks' use of knowledge of White expectations. This fact costs Beau his life and shocks all the Whites in turn so that they must

alter their view of elderly Black people. Whereas Myrtle used to call elderly men in the quarters “frightened little bedbugs” (15), unable to view them as men in the quarters, she now perceives their docility sharply altered as she witnesses their transformation that fills her with awe and foreboding: “I had never seen anything like this in all my life before and I wasn’t too sure I was seeing it now” (15).

Mathu is introduced as defiant and unable to succumb to any dehumanization imposed by society upon his race. Mathu remembers the plantation history, which is an emblem of past suffering and shame and also a potential for future change. In his assertiveness and dignity, he poses great threat to mainstream society. He greatly influences his peers to rebel. Because of him, they take the stance they feel they should have taken many years ago. Gaines portrays the old men in their gathering “with shotguns . . . standing, squatting, sitting. . . . And waiting” (59-60) as an invincible wall – an indication of solidarity and determination.

Charlie Biggs is best characterized in the novel as Big Charlie. The characterization conjures the stereotypical image of the Black brute. Regardless of his age, “[h]e was the quintessence of what you would picture as the super, big buck nigger” (186). Degraded by social conditions, Charlie’s might is insignificant and is met with scorn and ridicule, native enough to kill and destroy his oppressor. Mathu instills in Charlie the lesson that a man should stand up for his freedom and fight misuse rather than flee. Mathu inspires Charlie to put an end to his escapist methods and come to the conclusion that “they comes a day when a man must be a man” (189). When Charlie kills Beau, he becomes the man he ever wants to be, and he demands the respect he feels is his due. He believes it is never too late to gain recognition and overcome all the heavy burdens of subjugation and oppression.

Besides the reversal of age stereotypes, there is also a “role reversal.” Mary Ellen Doyle comments on the storyline, “That is an immense change from blindness to vision, and from vision to voice and action” (180). A complete reversal of expectations beyond belief and an unexpected change have happened. The old men represent such a reversal. When Black old Tucker dares Mapes to kick him and Deputy Griffin to stop his defiant talk, it is Griffin whom Mapes puts down; it is Tucker who says to Griffin, “You through, boy?” (95). Tucker screams at Griffin and calls him “boy,” a stereotypical White-to-Black address. Also, the women come and speak just as defiantly to Reverend Jameson and to Mapes and his deputy. David C. Estes, in “Gaines’s Humor: Race and Laughter,” sees that Griffin and Reverend Jameson measure the growth of the men and the humiliation and defeat of the White power (243-44). The shift in dominant voices has been made more significant in the novel than the essential action, which is “the gathering” itself. Obviously there has been a change in minds and a resultant change in personal and power relationships.

Gaines’s old men, in accepting the responsibility for the murder of Beau Boutan, affirm not only their ability to speak up but also their ability to act. Considered cowards their entire lives, they all defy the Sheriff and the Boutans in taking the blame for the murder of Beau Boutan. Gaines underscores the repressive nature of the past by noting that it took Charlie Biggs, the Black old man who killed Beau in self-defense, fifty years to assert his manhood. By giving voice to the long-silenced old man Charlie, Gaines deconstructs longstanding stereotypes of older Blacks as cowardly and submissive. His transformation rightly testifies most strongly to his redefinition of Black manhood. On a textual level, Charlie's transformation after committing the act is compared to that of Richard Wright's Bigger Thomas in Native Son. In fact, the name

that Charlie asks everyone to call him in this chapter, “Mr. Biggs,” suggests Wright’s Bigger Thomas.

The author not only invites the reader to re-examine the heroism among elderly Blacks, but he also challenges an era in literary history when most depictions of the elderly in general, regardless of their gender, race or ethnicity, suffer from the numbing effects of negative images and stereotypes. Elderly Blacks in particular are twice as yoked, and therefore the narrative suggests a revival of Black consciousness prompted by the efforts of men at the end of their lives. The theme of resistance dates back to several French existentialists – Jean Paul Sartre (1905-1980), Albert Camus (1913-1960), and Simone de Beauvoir (1908-1987) – whose outlook was shaped by their involvement in the resistance to Nazi occupation during World War II. For the old men in A Gathering, it is only through resistance that they can claim their freedom and give their lives meaning and value. Camus claims that people can take control by rebelling against what they take to be evil and threatening by raising consciousness among the oppressed, a point made by Albert Camus in The Rebel: “Does the end justify the means? That is possible. But what will justify the end? To that question, which historical thought leaves pending, Rebellion replies: the means” (292). Camus’ The Rebel traces the concept of “man in revolt” through literature and history, offering his own perspective on the ideals of society. The values that Camus advances are those central to human fulfillment: freedom, dignity and beauty.

The old men realize they can only live fulfilling lives if they are capable of pursuing these interests without servitude and falsehood. However, the White Cajuns, represented in the novel by Mapes and his Deputy Griffin, strive to keep the status quo through unequal political power, but they also want the old men to want to live no better than their ancestors. Throughout

history, African Americans have passionately pursued justice through rebellion only to threaten their own survival. The old men have come to believe that their efforts to solve some problem may create new ones. While hoping to moderate the desires of the superior Whites, the old men discover that a peaceful and nonviolent approach proves ineffective. Since no solutions are possible and action is quite impossible, the old men, following Sartre, “end up dwelling in their human degradation and taking pure subjectivity as their starting point” (Sartre 31-32). Their subjectivism is their own choice because they become fully convinced that they cannot do otherwise. The old men’s subjectivism⁵ holds the mere fact that they are content with their status, which they believe to be good. It gives a weak basis for dealing with some empirical problems in their community like racism, ageism and classism.⁶

Gaines contradicts the pessimistic view of living in defeat with no hope for living with dignity. He underscores the symbolic changes in the old characters, who, after Charlie’s courageous act of murdering Boutan, are transformed into men capable of involvement and commitment. They are no longer the old Tommers, but they can live their lives with dignity in solidarity with their fellow men. Gaines presents his older characters as non-stereotypical and even heroic, who can control their own destiny and even become positive models for future generations. With the old men’s display of courage, White Cajuns are left wondering, “[W]hat them niggers been drinking to make them all so brave?” (204). In the courtroom, Lou Dimes narrates:

You’ve never seen a sadder bunch of killers in all your life – on either side.
 Everybody had something wrong with him – scratches, bruises, cuts, gashes.
 They had cut themselves on barbed wire, tin cans, broken bottles – you name it.
 Some had sprained their ankles jumping over ditches; others had sprained their

wrists falling down on the ground. And some had run into each other. Everybody was either limping, his arm in a sling, or there was a bandage around his head or some other part of his body. (211)

Whereas there is irony in Lou Dimes' description of the old warriors, they have the opportunity to assert their humanity and their personalities. Their revolution earned them the respect they are due and, as Valerie Babb comments, they "[I]n so doing, stood the conventions of their social system on end" (130-31). The new dignity they have seized guarantees the creation of new independent selves. At the end of the book, the old men become proud and their stance has purged them of the impotency they have nurtured for long. More importantly, it has purged them of the self-loathing they have harbored. By confronting their past, they manage to restructure their present and find hope for a better future.

To return to my initial statement above, I wish to explain how A Gathering of Old Men emphasizes the positive aspects of growing older, or what age critics call "successful aging." In the novel, elderly Blacks are able to maintain a positive sense of subjective well-being and ultimately achieve what Erik Erikson refers to as "ego integrity"⁷(356): to maintain a positive sense of self despite their exposure to negative stereotypes or their long-lived history of social injustice. The plot of A Gathering of Old Men predicts radical social change. Doyle in Voices from the Quarters argues that "the novel presented Gaines with a special challenge in that its protagonist is not a single but a collective person, a group of men" (189). The critic's idea of a collective protagonist in the novel requires a group of militants with a single cause. Gaines is careful not to present the old men as "all alike" but as individuals, which he considers essential for social change. The core issue is "the inaccurate labeling because group homogeneity is assumed and individuality is not taken into account" (Braithwait 317). More challenging,

however, is seeking to support the varied personal traits of the nineteen old men by the content of their characters. In the novel they are all able to assert their individuality and their militancy as they stand together in unity, suggesting a promising social order to come.

In their gathering, the men glimpse a possible new self-image: “Now when we’re old, we get to be brave” (32). They start to motivate each other to take action and find their “last chance.” By so doing, they are also able to defy all of society’s expectations including those of their wives. To their wives, however, when they suddenly display their feelings of fury and anger, they appear “old fools” “gone crazy” (36-7). Even to the White folks – Candy, Miss Merle, Mapes, his deputies, and all the Boutans – “it is a reversal of expectations beyond belief,” says Doyle (*Voices* 181). In their desire to defeat the old picture of submissiveness and acquiescence, these old men do not even allow religion to discourage or dissuade them from change. They have become the conscience of their people. Doyle argues, “The treatment of Reverend Jameson is not presented as necessarily admirable but more as comprehensible with the desire to cast off all past symbols of subservience” (182). The women also join their men in solidarity against the Whites. Both men and women speak up just as defiantly to Reverend Jameson – the one Black character who seems unwilling to accept the possibility of change in the new social order – and to Mapes and his deputy. They tell Jameson to shut up and go back home, even physically threatening him. Such words and such disrespectful behavior from a Black person to a minister, highly unusual, embody their new stand against oppression and injustice. Not even religion can change their ruthless minds.

The end of the novel counters almost all the assumptions about elderly Blacks in the quarters. The assumption that Mathu is the murderer of Beau Boutan is wrong. Ironically, Charlie, the man who has long been considered the weakest of all, killed Beau. He fights back

against Beau's abuses; he decides not to flee and returns to confess what he had done. No longer scared of Luke Will, he fights against the would-be executioner. Charlie's transformation indeed redefines Black manhood. The community is astonished at his transformation – first, as the murderer of Beau Boutan, and next as the fiercest fighter in the final shootout with Luke Will. Ever since Charlie returned from the swamp, he has acted like a man who knows no fear. His bravery impresses everyone so much that others want it too. All the people pay homage to Charlie for his bravery, courage, and manhood by laying their hands on his body.

Charlie is the tragic hero in the novel. In making a choice and sticking by it, he fearlessly exercises his free will and innate power. In depicting a situation in which Charlie runs away, Gaines establishes a flaw in the individual character and in the meantime emphasizes his predestined and inescapable quality at the novel's conclusion. For much of the final encounter, Charlie behaves like any of the other old men who stand up to Mapes. He is finally seen as both defined and consumed by fate. He is destined to die as the result of free will rather than fear or necessity, the reality that gains him the status of a tragic hero, and only he, rather than the others, has obtained the inner harmony unrealized by the other old men even though death was his reward for a lesson well learned. Having Charlie die such a heroic death, Gaines makes him part of the "gathering of the old men": with his death, he bestows honor unto all the other old men as well. Gaines's elderly characters vividly transcend the African-American experience and stand for all humanity. The author successfully creates fiction that is both personal and universal while maintaining dignity and self-esteem as his constant theme.

The old men in Gaines's novel are immensely successful in the development of a positive self-image and confidence. In the novel Gaines depicts those old men releasing their pent-up anger at the Cajuns/whites who refuse to acknowledge their humanity. Their "identity

crisis” has already become more of an illusion of modern myopia than it is a true picture of the self-image of Blacks. In order to redeem their humanity and bring order to their lifelong chaos and turmoil, they are prone to act in a masculine manner since they had been forced to abandon their virtues of gentleness and tolerance and needed to be human.

Jean Paul Sartre, in his preface to Wretched of the Earth by Frantz Fanon, offers a relevant statement that may contribute to our understanding of A Gathering of old men: “...[T]his irresistible violence is neither sound and fury, nor the resurrection of savage instincts, nor even the effect of resentment: it is man recreating himself. . . . When the peasant takes a gun in his hands, *the old myths grow dim* and the prohibitions are one by one forgotten. . . . The rebel’s weapon is the proof of his humanity” (18; emphasis added). There, then, is the heart of the matter: “There are no masculine and feminine virtues. There are only human virtues” (21-22).

In sum, the hero’s [Charlie’s] return to the scene and his ultimate death are projections of man’s plight in life. The event of Beau’s murder is a major factor in the old men’s new awareness of themselves. We are left in a state of mind that characterizes the tone of the narrative. But more important, to see the effect of the events on those old men is to feel the impact of the book’s theme with dramatic force. When transformed into narrators, however, their spirit and dreams of willful action become evident. Through their gathering and storytelling, they are able to obtain a measure of respect and security.

Gaines integrates Black history with storytelling and thus controls the novel’s panoramic scope and creates a kind of morality play in which Charlie is the tragic hero and each of the other old men is an Everyman figure. Gaines’s novel provides a much needed interpretation of the psychology of those elderly men and the negative images that have become a continuing

controversy. Not only does Gaines's work provide a credible rationale for the negative behavior of the black man, but it also stands with that of Toni Morrison, defying the myths about Black males by exploring the racial past and its effect on the characters. While the novel ends with renewal, it is not necessarily a promise for a better future.

Transcending Age Stereotypes in Sula and Beloved

As I see it, it is through the process of making artistic forms – plays, poems, novels – out of one's experiences that one becomes a writer, and it is through this process, this struggle, that the writer helps give meaning to the experience of the group.

Ralph Ellison, "Shadow and Act"

Art has little or no significance unless it is related to life and the struggle of people. As often represented in Toni Morrison's fiction, an older woman character combats oppressive social forces and resorts to violence, not in the interest of feminism, but merely as a survival tactic. Morrison clearly depicts the characters of Sethe and Baby Suggs (Beloved), and Eva Peace and Ceceil (Sula), among others, for the same reason. Maternal violence proves liberating to these characters as well as to the reader. In their violence, the women express that living conditions around them have already become intolerable and a nonviolent attitude would no longer serve them. They have to be proactive and not passive.⁸ Morrison's goal is to demonstrate the ways in which societal mores lead to such crimes.

Amid such violence, Morrison brings dignity to suffering and to old age, the core idea in Fiore's "Growing Old Disgracefully." In the African-American context, it is acceptable to suffer because it promises salvation and ultimately brings about change in one's character and perspective in life. Because of their strengths and long suffering, not only do we realize anew

the sacrifices that our grandmothers made for us, but also to the whole world Morrison shows that neither age nor illness should deter anyone from living a full, productive life. The author invites such older characters into her fiction with the potential to transform individual consciousness as well as to assert the transformative power of the rituals of healing into her narrative.

Like Gaines's A Gathering of Old Men, Morrison's Beloved has a very specific political and moral purpose. Morrison writes Beloved to intensify the moral indignation of the world against the institution of slavery. Morrison is often recognized for her focus on lawless characters whom she calls "the ones who make up their lives" or "find out who they are" (Step 20). The latter notion – finding out who they are – suggests modernist authenticity, while the former – making up their identity – points the reader toward postmodern-constructed blackness. Kimberly Chabot Davis, focusing on Beloved, says that "the novel exhibits a postmodern skepticism of sweeping historical narratives," but "retains an African-American and modernist political commitment to the crucial importance of deep cultural memory" (242). Morrison creates an active character and believes that culture is itself a powerful form of identity, and it is the essential difference that distinguishes Blacks from Whites.

Older women in Morrison's fiction are also empowered by bitter circumstances. In Sula, while Eva feels proud in having been able to bear the burden and survive the horrific past, she can't help feeling the bitter grudge. Further, the roughness of her life makes her insensitive and even intolerant to others' vulnerabilities or even to Hannah's plea for love. The older generations, she believes, perceive such quests as Hannah's to be foolish and selfish. In one instance, when Hannah asks her mother Eva – who literally sacrificed a foot to support her children – whether she ever loved her, Eva responds,

You settin' here with your healthy-ass self and ax me did I love you? Them big old eyes in your head would a been two holes full of maggots if I hadn't. . . . Wasn't nobody playin' in 1895. Just cause you got it good now, you think it was always this good? 1895 was a killer, girl. Things were bad. Niggers was dying like flies. . . . What you talkin' about here, girl? I stayed alive for you, can't you get that through your thick head. (68-69)

It is evident then that Eva believes that mother love involves sacrifice rather than pure affection. She contends that material conditions often interfere with the maternal expression of love: "No time. . . . Not none" (69). The burden of history falls inevitably on the black woman as mother: "Everybody all right . . . 'cept Mamma. Mamma the only one ain't all right" (68). In Circles of Sorrow, Lines of Struggle, Gurleen Grewal comments, "Each generation's struggle is different and relatively incomprehensible to the next" (51). A survivor herself, Eva displays no sign of vulnerability or regret when she decides to torch her son Plum or when she watches her daughter Hagar burn.

Eva, the matriarch in the Peace family and a symbol of black folk wisdom, represents the binary division of good and evil in the novel. The reader is totally ambivalent as to how to respond to her abandonment of her children, her loss of a leg, and her torching of Plum. Because the business of survival is an everyday concern for Eva and all black women in the 1920s, should we admire her ability to survive, or should we condemn her monstrous actions regardless of her good intentions? In my opinion, Eva's sacrifice is heroic in that she devises her own means of coping.

When we first meet Eva, the grandmother, we might at first mistake her for the ordinary stereotype of Black women in literature. Yet shortly afterward we realize that any comparison with the “mammy” or the “loose woman” image is immediately put to rest. Eva is by no means stereotypical, unlike many of those we find in literature burdened by the legacy of a distorted life of slavery; they are weak, dependent and incapable of leading an articulate lifestyle. Eva is the matriarch who is willing to save her children at all costs. In her essay, “The Contemporary Fables of Toni Morrison,” Barbara Christian writes, “Far from being the big-breasted, kind, religious, forever coping, asexual, loving-white-folks mammy, Eva is arrogant, independent, decidedly a man-lover who loves and hates intensely” (31). In the character of Eva Peace, Christian argues, “silence, subjection, humiliation, and submissiveness change to figural constructs toward self-esteem” (31). Morrison offers her readers an emotional experience of the power that elderly black people can achieve when they transcend their social constraints and structural conditions. Having embraced their integrity, older blacks do not fear death and instead defend their own lives against all prevalent threats including racial, physical, or economic threats. Most important, through Morrison’s characterization of grandmother Eva, Morrison weaves in a specific pattern the community’s belief system, which Eva, the matriarch, is to impose onto other characters. The cursed label of “pariah” is given to one whose behavior seems so different from, so at odds with, the pattern.

Morrison describes Eva as “creator and sovereign” (30), which ignites the reader’s curiosity to examine the nature of Eva’s character. Later in the novel, the author gives an elaborate description of Eva’s acts of self-mutilation, torching her son and watching her daughter burn, all of which, although gruesome, represent the harsh reality of the lives of African-Americans. The physical brutality against herself or her kin symbolizes the anguish of a

society long tormented by painful memories of slavery. Being the matriarch in the novel, she is domineering and she has no reason to be otherwise. In her essay, “Sula and the Primacy of Woman to Woman Bonds,” Demetrakopoulos thinks of Eva as

[a] portrait of archetypal feminine strengths that goes beyond the author’s intentions. Eva has built a life and home as best she could when the only act of free will open to her was self-mutilation or letting her babies die. . . . In spite of it all, her character is one of self protectiveness, gracious regality, magnanimity, deep intelligence, and great courage. And her sharp tongue is salt with wisdom. (61)

Not only is Eva Peace a complex, non-stereotypical character, but her monstrous act is indeed a sacrifice as well as an act of selflessness. Her reaction can be understood to be an innate response to the harsh conditions and clear evidence of her genuine quality. In her old age, Eva grows more twisted but more complete nevertheless. Completing the self in old age is crucial to Morrison while depicting Eva. “She must be seen as a full, individuated, complex old woman,” argues Demetrakopoulos (63). Eva Peace is often stereotyped as the devouring mother and yet represents the wise grandmother. She reigns at home in full matriarchal glory.

Regarding Eva, Maggie Galehouse in “New World Woman” writes,

Eva had been the reigning matriarch of her own family/community for years and she is powerful and independent and fierce in her role. Even though she is not part of a couple herself, to simply reject the notion out-of-hand is incomprehensible, even to her. It is an accepted template for women’s lives, even though it is, more often than not, a failed or malfunctioning model. (353)

Another case in which Morrison deconstructs stereotypes is Baby Suggs, Morrison's primary representative of strong elderly black women. Morrison introduces the character of Baby Suggs in Beloved. Unlike Eva Peace, Baby Suggs manifests a different approach in dealing with the problems she faces in her old age. Though a minor character in the novel, Grandmother Baby Suggs is most memorable for the role she plays in the book. To understand Baby's large contribution in the novel, it is necessary to trace part of her story. A slave named Halle obtains permission from his owner to work for pay on Sundays so that, years after Halle had married Sethe, he could buy freedom for his mother, Baby Suggs, who decides that "because slave life had busted her legs, head, eyes, hands, kidneys, womb, and tongue, she has nothing left to make a living with but her heart – which she put to work at once" (*Beloved* 87). She later becomes an "unchurched preacher, one who visited pulpits and opened her great heart to those who could use it" (103). Baby Suggs passes on the bittersweet wisdom of her long years in stories she tells to her granddaughter Denver and her daughter-in-law Sethe.

Baby Suggs' old age defines her historical awareness and consciousness. Morrison brings genuine historical moments to life through Baby Suggs, who successfully shoulders the responsibility of reflecting the past with all its harsh memories. "What she called the nastiness of life," Morrison tells us,

[w]as the shock she received upon learning that nobody stopped playing checkers just because the pieces included her children. Halle, she was able to keep the longest. . . . Her two girls, neither of whom has their adult teeth, were sold and gone. . . . God take what He would, she said. And He did, and He did, and He did, and then gave her Halle who gave her freedom when it didn't mean a thing. (23)

Through the character of old Baby Suggs, the novel resembles the traditional slave narratives of Frederick Douglass and Harriet Jacobs. Besides, Baby Suggs not only experienced the past, but she also survived its cruelties and viciousness. She is a true witness of the multiple psychological scars of slavery and its heinous reality. Controlling her anger is one of Baby Suggs's strengths. While such a quality can be misinterpreted as if she could be a typical mammy, since mammies are known to be timid and acquiescent, controlling her rage is, on the contrary, Suggs's survival mechanism. An older woman, Baby Suggs has been in slavery and has had opportunities during which to develop strategies for surviving the assaults upon her injured soul and body. It's indefinite how much suffering, loss or dehumanization one can take before breaking, but with Baby Suggs it is never the case. The fact is that Morrison imbues her with the same characteristics inherent in many of her literary ancestors. With spiritual strength as her primary virtue, Baby Suggs does not give up: even when she ostensibly quits, her strength remains her distinct feature.

The tendency of Morrison has been not to restore the original mammy/Uncle Tom but rather the opposite: she retains the character in harmony with the present use as well as in defiance of the old. Besides Suggs's apparent physical strength that is always attributed to mammies, Morrison adds a metaphysical dimension, i.e. strength of imagination, to her self-determination. She assumes the role of an encourager to her black neighbors, giving them the same strength that she has had to rely on throughout her life.

It is through the character of Baby Suggs that Morrison teaches morality and clarifies the categories of good and evil in the narrative. Old Baby Suggs marks the transition from trauma to recovery. Having been herself physically deformed, Baby Suggs preaches and urges her followers, members of the black community, free or enslaved, to love themselves since the

mainstream society will not. Because Suggs is calling for love, she has become the shaman in Morrison's novel – a leader and a preacher. She has become a ritual guide to healing which, according to Stanley Crouch in his review of Beloved in 1987, takes place in three stages: “the repression of memory that occurs as a result of slavery; a painful reconciliation with these memories; and lastly, the cleansing process or the rebirth of the sufferer” (40). She conducts her ritual of healing in a place called the “Clearing” – a metaphor that suggests a process of cleansing and rebirth. It brings the unconscious memories into the conscious mind and then transcends their debilitating control. Baby's ritual in the Clearing is a model of the process of healing that Paul D and Sethe must undergo to free their hearts, from the inside out, of past pain and shame.

One distinctive feature of Suggs's character would be her stoicism. Her old age endows her with wisdom and a sincere heart of love. She is known in the community as “holy.” When the ghost that haunts the house startles her and her household, she suggests that they move away. She thinks that almost every house in their community is packed to its rafters with some dead Negro's grief. She even thinks that she has more of a challenge since she had eight whom, she believes, would be worrying somebody's house into evil. Suggs's spiritual power has earned her the name “holy” among her people. Having been freed from 60 years of slavery, she opens her great heart to those who are in need of love. She creates a ritual of her own to heal former slaves, and she becomes the “unchurched preacher” (87), whose mission is to heal former slaves and enable them to reconcile with their memories.

John Duvall contends that Baby's role as the preacher of the flesh reveals her as “the synthesis of Morrison's previous presentations of the artist figure” (126). Morrison features an artist who can truly heal the community in a way that no younger person can. This being said,

“Baby Suggs,” according to Duvall, “weds the aesthetic to both the spiritual and the ethical, suggesting the enlarged public role Morrison could carve out for herself in order to comment more broadly on racism in America” (127).

In addition to Baby’s role as a healer, she also acts as the ancestor (which is the primary focus of the next chapter) in her counsel to Denver. Judylyn Ryan in Spirituality and/as Ideology in Black Women’s Literature argues that this ancestor role is what “propels the recuperative direction of the plot” (283). Denver’s active love summons Baby Suggs’s guiding voice to walk forward despite fear and pain. Held within the boundaries of 124 Bluestone, Denver is trapped by fear and the judgment of the community that shuns her mother. It is not until Baby Suggs ghost appears that Denver is brave enough to wonder off the property: “But you said there was no defense. ‘There ain’t.’ Then what do I do? ‘Know it, and go on out the yard. Go on’” (Beloved 281). Although Baby Suggs gives up struggling at the end of her life, her knowledge of the past and spirit make possible Denver’s emergence into the world. With old age comes the understanding which, in time, leads to the power to endure and change.

Thus Morrison, through elderly characters such as Eva Peace and Baby Suggs, creates a powerful and intensely personal representation of slavery in America. In this way, she indirectly critiques historical methods prevalent in the United States. She counters a fact-based objective system with a ritual method, based on healing rituals in which the acquisition of knowledge is a redeeming experience. The task Morrison sets for herself is to write this experience back into the record to reconstruct history. She points the way to combat the persistent intellectual and spiritual oppression of African Americans and other Americans and bring about freedom to the heart and imagination of her people, as Baby Suggs dreamed.

The two older women who share the spotlight in this chapter – Eva Peace and Baby Suggs – have much in common. Their breaks from the expected codes of behavior enable us to transcend the usual depictions of older black women in African-American literature, thereby discrediting numerous stereotypes and myths concerning either race or age. Eva contradicts all traditional matriarchs, for there are no specific morals informing her actions, yet she is paradoxically matriarchal in the power she wields over the lives of her children. Baby Suggs makes up part of the nurturing female ancestry that sustains Sethe and Denver. Her preaching and her spiritual vision invest the world with meaning that heals and enables generations of blacks to seek reconciliation with their memories, reconstruct the past, and re-conceptualize the future. Like Eva, Baby Suggs despises rules and prohibitions that define morality. Instead, she preaches the guidance of a free heart and imagination:

She did not tell them to clean up their lives or to go and sin no more.

She did not tell them they were the blessed of the earth, its inheriting meek or its glory bound pure. She told them that the only grace they could have was the grace they could imagine. That if they could not see it, they would not have it. (88)

For Baby Suggs there exists the helpful possibility of love that appears to embody ideals of self ownership. With Suggs's last words, "the present becomes tolerable and the future possible regardless of the past (22).

In conclusion, the black mammies and the Tommers are persistent stereotypes and imposing icons that have continued to be a ubiquitous presence in American literature in reference to older black people, yet this study shows that the heart of the matter is the anxieties and presumptions that result from the embodiment of such myths. The two authors have given

us some insight into those imposing icons and their powerful gaze that tells us that there are many layers of those figures to be uncovered. Having deconstructed the ongoing stereotypes of older blacks, the two authors suggest that older blacks hold onto an essence of self against forces that would stereotype them, force them to conform, or dehumanize them. They also provide us with newly-constructed positive self-images that will testify to the authentic change that has taken place in their lives and to the means by which optimism and self-confidence can be maintained.

Notes on Chapter Two

1. Alongside the Mammy, Jezebel and Sapphire are the most widely recognized stereotypes associated with U. S. Black womanhood. Both figures, however, are not necessarily old and are, therefore, not included in my discussion of age stereotypes. The Sapphire stereotype takes its name from the character featured on the television series *Amos 'n' Andy*. See Melvin Patrick Ely's *The Adventures of Amos and Andy: a Social History of an American Phenomenon* (2001). Other pervasive, demeaning myths are promiscuous Jezebel as well as the "bitchy" twentieth century Sapphire. Scholars including Patricia Morton, author of *Disfigured Images* (1991), Beverly Guy-Sheftall, author of *Daughters of Sorrow* (1994), and Michele Wallace in her essay "Negative Images," (1990) all contribute to my understanding of the negative characterizations of black women through historical writing and the popular media.
2. Most important are Louise Beavers's Mammy role as *Aunt Delilah* in *Imitation of Life* (1934); Hattie McDaniel's in *I'm No Angel* and *Gone with the Wind*, for which she won the Oscar; Ethel Waters's in the 1949 film *Pinky* and in *The Member of the Wedding* in 1952.
3. In *The Moynihan Report*, the author discusses "the tangle of pathology" in the Negro community (a phrase borrowed from social-psychologist Kenneth Clark's description of Harlem ghetto life and by which he means the tendency for women to fare better interpersonally and economically than men and thereby to dominate family life. Robert Staples also speaks of the myth of Black matriarchy. He writes: "Referring to Black women as matriarchs is not only in contradistinction to the empirical reality of their status but also is replete with historical and semantic inaccuracies" (8). Staples states that the term matriarchy was first employed in a study by J. J. Bachofen in 1861. Staples

writes: “He was attempting to present a case for the high position of women in ancient society. His conclusion was that since free sexual relations have prevailed during that time and the fathers of the children were unknown, that this gave women their leading status in the period he called “mother-right” (8-9).

4. Anti-*Tom* literature is pro-slavery because of its contradiction to Stowe’s work. Also known as the Plantation Novel, the new genre became enduring in the Southern literature. Stowe’s attack on the 1850 fugitive Slave Act in Uncle Tom’s Cabin was a central concern. The anti-Tom novels are mostly focused on the subject of runaway slaves. Sarah Meer in *Uncle Tom’s Mania* argues: “The novels attempt to blame white agitators for Black discontent, so they turn to black face for images of carefree and contented slaves” (76). Examples of the genre are Aunt Phyllis’s Cabin by Mary H. Eastman, Tit for Tat by “A lady of New Orleans,” The Ebony Idol by Mrs. G. M. Flanders, The Lofty and the Lowly by M. J. McIntosh, Ellen, by V. G. Cowdin, and Little Eva: The Flower of the South by Philip J. Cozans.
5. Subjectivism is the antithesis of (moral) realism. The old men in A Gathering are subjectivists: they claim that their moral precepts should be adjusted to or based on circumstances and the status quo independent of personal opinion. This is a cognitive approach to moral claims. As such, it is possible for a moral claim to be true or false, at least in the context of those standards.
6. In her recent editorial “Ageism: Rhetoric and Reality,” Fay Lomax Cook says, “If we label attitudes as ageist if they are overly negative (‘negative ageism’) or overly positive (‘positive ageism’), the term could come to signify very little” (293). Erdman Palmore suggests that a balanced view of ageism must recognize both its negative and positive

forms. Such attitude corresponds to Erick Erikson's notion of "ego integrity" (268). It is "the ego's accrued assurance of its proclivity for order and meaning." According to Erikson, the possessor of integrity is ready to defend the dignity of his own lifestyle against all physical and economic threats. (Erikson 357).

7. The word "proactive" was originally coined by the psychiatrist Victor Frankl in his 1946 book, Man's Search for Meaning, to describe a person who took responsibility for his or her life, rather than looking for causes in outside circumstances or other people. Much of this theory was formed in Nazi concentration camps where Frankl lost his wife, mother, father and family, but decided that even under the worst circumstances, people can make and find meaning.

CHAPTER THREE

ARCHETYPAL IMAGES OF THE ELDERLY¹

The heroic is hidden in the lore. The archetypes have this sort of glory, such is the triumph of this flying African. . . . In those figures and in those stories, the movement is away from the Br'er Rabbit stories, being the kind of wit rather than power. . . . There are hundreds of those stories, and they linger on. They were nourishing stories.

Conversations with Toni Morrison

In the last chapter I noted that old age among African-Americans had been depicted more as a stereotype than a natural stage of life. Black writers, as a consequence, feel that their duty is to correct the false image of the older Black person promulgated by essentially white literature. Indeed few if any of these White writers even so much mentioned it as a problem. Such a state of affairs could hardly be expected to continue without challenge. The fiction of Toni Morrison and Ernest J. Gaines gives the older Blacks a sense of cultural worth that no longer allows them to sit complacently still for their stereotypical portrait, unaware of its actual dangers or deficiencies. Objections to stereotyped characterizations are being voiced as the African-American writer faces the enormously difficult challenge to create positive characters. Timothy B. Powell's "Toni Morrison: The Struggle to Depict the Black Figure on the White Page" applauds Morrison for her success both in her unique characterization and also in her oral narrative strategy which creates a (w)holy Black text (qtd. in Middleton xi; emphasis added). The pun in Powell's phrase, argues David Middleton, "credits Morrison with countering the negation implicit in traditional archetypal assumptions" (xii). In speaking of her fictional characters, Morrison herself once said to the Cleveland Plain Dealer, "These are the

kind of characters who never had the center stage in anybody else's book. . . . Now they are there in their glory" (qtd. in Mobley "Folk Roots" 2). On the other hand, Gaines shows his concern with black history and community, and his work highlights the accompanying shift in his use of characters and fictional techniques to suit his evolving vision. From early works such as Bloodline (1968) to his last novel, A Lesson before Dying (1993), the author re-figures black masculinity in order to create a revised gender representation of Black literary subjectivity. His protagonists depart largely from the psychologically and culturally maimed Bigger Thomas of Richard Wright's 1940 classic Native Son.

On a theoretical level, Black feminists also aggressively condemn the negative images of older Black women to secure their rights. Trudier Harris in From Mammies to Militants: Domestics in Black American Literature examines the difference between self-perceptions of Black women contrary to their mainstream portrayal.² Harris's work suggests that black women should hold onto an essence of self against forces that would stereotype them, force them to conform, or dehumanize them. Older black women in the literature thus find themselves fighting just to live and/or to give life.

Older Blacks in the literature are presented as individuals as well as types. Black writers manipulate popular stereotypes about older Black characters and create instead archetypal images that may communicate a more realistic rather than an artistic picture of them. Morrison and Gaines demonstrate a high degree of commitment to changing the social and political conditions of older blacks in America so that they gain recognition. Archetypal imagery is especially appropriate when speaking of Morrison and Gaines. The term "archetype" was coined by Psychologist Carl Jung and was made generally popular by Joseph Campbell in his studies of mythology.³ By definition, archetypes are mythical constructs which the ancients called

"goddesses" and "gods" and are viewed as figures of power and strength. Literary authors often use the archetypes to describe a model character. They are fictional type-roles, more symbolic than real, yet they bear some significance to the stories. "It is the primal strength and effectiveness of those archetypal images that make them attractive and exciting wherever they appear," says Stefan Stenudd. Some of the archetypes often used in literature include the *hero*, who pursues a great quest to realize his destiny; *the self*, the personality striving toward its own completion; *the mother*, primarily in the sense of our need for her; and *the father*, primarily an authority figure, often inducing fear; *the sage*, the wise old man, one who has profound knowledge; *the god* as the perfect image of the self; *the goddess*, the great Mother or Mother Earth; *the scapegoat*, suffering for the shortcomings of others; and *the trickster*, most recurring in African-American narratives and often a villain pushing toward change as the perfect image of the self.⁴

Female characters – says Joanna Russ in her 1972 essay "What Can a Heroine Do?" – are restricted to certain plot patterns and excluded from stories which make them simultaneously active and heroic. Portraying complex, strong female characters at an old age helps better express explicitly feminist concerns; Russ writes, "Make something unspeakable and you make it thinkable" (16). The new genre of the *Vollendungsroman* has the potential to represent older women following more courses of action than are allowed in traditional texts. It is thus used as a means to move beyond representing older female characters as romantic. Likewise, the authors of fiction tend to control derogatory stereotypes of aging and refer to more archetypal images to produce heroes who are independent yet contemptuous. As this technique is common in the genre of the *Vollendungsroman*, this chapter is mainly structured

around a number of older characters with the sole purpose of presenting the reader with a new reading of the works of Morrison and Gaines as acts of resistance.

Before discussing the three archetypes – the ancestor, the crone, and the shaman – that are the focus of this chapter, I will address some critics' views on this matter. Karla Holloway and Stephanie Demetrakopoulos in New Dimensions of Spirituality claim that much of Morrison's work embodies a celebration of African archetypes (160), which may enable African values to survive the chaos of Western culture. Many diverse African traditional structures are indeed at the core of Morrison's fiction. Holloway's and Demetrakopoulos' historical approach to literature informs their discussions on the African and Black female values that Morrison portrays. While Holloway focuses on the necessity of survival within the world of black women in the face of patriarchy, Demetrakopoulos argues that Morrison brings forth memories of foremothers, "strong and gritty, tough and tenderly protective" (5). The latter focuses primarily on the universal feminine in Morrison's works and admires the archetypal histories of women; she metaphorically expresses her infatuation with the strong female type in Morrison's fiction: "I [Demetrakopoulos] find myself at the bank of a river drinking of the collective stream of feminine strength; and I knew this was what I was thirsting for without consciously knowing my need" (147).

Annis Pratt, in Archetypal Patterns in Women's Fiction, contends that there is not much critical attention given to female archetypes: "Male archetypalists, alternately attracted and repelled by *the feminine*, had difficulty in getting enough perspective upon it to admit it into their thinking" (7; emphasis added). Morrison disagrees with Pratt and produces some talented and independent female protagonists in her fiction. Miss Eva in Sula is one such example who is very determined, resourceful, triumphant and able to speak the unspeakable. Such an

archetypal female figure adds prominence as well as power to the older Black woman, particularly in the patriarchal realm. However, such power, Pratt argues, "conflicts with cultural norms, and influences the narrative structures" (16). There is also the mythical supernatural power attributed to the older women which renders them more adequate for their fictional roles. These older women are said to live in the underworld and, among other things, "hear complaints brought by mortals against the impertinence of the young to the aged . . . and punish such crimes by hounding the culprits relentlessly without rest or pause," says Robert Graves (122).

Further insight into Morrison's use of archetypal imagery derives from Helene Cixous's "The Laugh of the Medusa."⁵ The impertinence of the main protagonist is Morrison's exact appeal in her fiction. It represents the irreverence that may contribute to her exciting representations of women. Cixous urges women writers to represent vivid images of tough women who are never broken. The Medusa, whom Graves describes in The Greek Myths as possessing "so ugly a face that all who gazed at it were petrified with fright" (239), laughs at her condemnation and refuses to be ashamed of what she is. This portrait seems particularly apt in my discussions of the aged, whose physical signs of aging – wrinkles and so forth – are framed as ugly. Cixous does not explicitly discuss this image, but her essay is very much concerned with this type of feminine character facing oppression. Morrison's brutal female images, I maintain, tap into every woman that is similar to Cixous's description; Eva is one example due to her capacity for evil-doing and her acknowledgement of the darker side of her femininity. Morrison explained this theory in conventional terms in her conversation with Robert Stepto in 1976: "Living a good life is more complicated than living an evil life" (qtd. in Taylor-Guthrie 14). In her statement, Morrison justifies her choice of lawless and adventuresome female

characters, which she believes would help the characters know all there is to know about themselves. They become experimental, perfectly willing to think the unthinkable.

An examination of how Morrison portrays older women not only shows them as adventurers, but also as survivors. Since her characterization is based on African values, Morrison's older female characters struggle to survive in a White culture that is both ageist and sexist. Holloway has shown that Morrison's older women bear tremendous spiritual/political significance as foremothers whose survival ensured the survival of others, brought others into being, and gave others strategy. These older women are "magical" because of their will to survive, because of their embodiment of the mythology and wisdom of Africa, and because Morrison imbues them with physical qualities that are larger than life and that can enhance their survival and, by extension, the survival of the larger Black community. Countering the mainstream depictions of older Blacks, Morrison's novels enact a healing power offered through the African-American ancestors: "timeless people whose relationships to the [other] characters are benevolent, instructive, and protective" ("Rootedness" 343). She seems bent on effecting a cultural cure through her neo-slave narrative genre and also through the invocation of the protective power of the timeless ancestor figures.

It becomes possible that African traditions in America can be perceived as being opposite to American traditions. It is possible that age within the Black culture is not so much a social issue as with the White culture, but instead more of a political issue. According to Morrison, the political perspective encompasses the whole of the Black community and its culture in a survival mode, regardless of age. Morrison's emphasis on survival seems critical, and true womanhood lies in women's connection to their lineage as embodied in these old female figures. They are not as much fictive as real.

The Ancestor ⁶

The archetypal imagery of the older people, primarily women, in African-American literature can finally be said to include three distinct archetypes: the ancestor, the crone and the shaman. My analysis will begin with the ancestor with the purpose of freeing elderly Blacks from the social construct of the stereotype into a new phase that may be interpreted as “archetypal.” In light of the African concept of ancestry, the study of older characters coincides with the tradition of ancestors as culture-bearers. In African traditions, “ancestors are important because they provide access to the spirits who intrude for the benefit of social cohesiveness into people’s lives” (Peach 102). Morrison, however, modifies this use of the ancestor and transforms it into a clever literary device that explores multiple ways in which characters relate to their predecessors and, by extension, their communities. With the ancestor in their midst, people live in harmony with each other and enjoy the collective sense of community. Morrison writes: “The city is wholesome, loved when such an ancestor is on the scene” (“City Limits” 39). Thus the city becomes “home” if the ancestor is a functioning source of power: “The ancestor must defy the system . . . provide alternative wisdom, and establish and maintain and sustain generations” (“City Limits” 43). She also identifies the use of the ancestral figure in contemporary African-American literature as it signifies cultural integrity. “What beguiles me,” Morrison writes, “is the way in which the absence or presence of the ancestor determines the success of the protagonists. For the ancestor is not only wise; he or she values racial connection, racial memory over individual fulfillment” (“City Limits” 39). Morrison continues to say that “the devastation of the protagonist never takes place unless he succeeds in ignoring or annihilating the ancestor” (“City Limits” 43). Building on this description, I read the older characters of her novels not just as elders, but rather as specters/spirits actively haunting

characters and repairing mental damage. Each specter serves as a bridge for the people she haunts, connecting individuals to cultural and personal history and generations to one another. The "endless work" which the souls "were created to do down here in paradise" is to create historical and personal connection (Paradise 318). Through the use of the ancestor, Morrison draws upon a rich legacy of storytelling and mythmaking which may serve as transforming tools that empower many African-Americans in their struggle toward self-definition.

Ralph Ellison speaks explicitly of the importance of such an ancestor in the African-American tradition. In "The Art of Fiction," he states that the ancestor helps "preserve and describe those rites, manners, customs and so forth, which ensure the good life or destroy it; and it projects this wisdom in symbols which express the group's will to survive" (172). For most black writers the presence of the ancestor creates livable space in the city. In his book Sweet Home, Charles Scruggs defines the ancestor as "the person who connects past and present and embodies a sense of historical continuity and communal wisdom" (174).

Having defined the archetypal image of the ancestor, I maintain that such an ancestor role is clearly manifested in the works of Morrison and Gaines. In their work, a kaleidoscope of older characters is presented as archetypes, all of whom function as ancestors in relation to their kinship. A literary analysis of some of these elderly characters reveals their function as ancestors: Baby Suggs (Beloved), Sydney and Ondine, Therese and Gideon (Tar Baby), Pilate (Song of Solomon), and Tante Lou and Miss Emma (A Lesson before Dying).

The Presence/Absence of the Ancestor in Morrison

Morrison underscores the historical context of and the necessity for the presence of the ancestor in her fiction. Morrison's stance in revisiting slavery is an impetus which helps the

Black community in her fiction not only to withstand but also defy the continued attacks with a new perspective. In her preaching, old Baby Suggs of Beloved does not deny the reality of the past – that ancient power – as an instrument of healing nor does she reject her role as the God-given mediator between now and then.

Baby Suggs becomes a holy figure and preaches self-love to her people in the clearing, where all the black people in the area come to hear her preach. Her sermon is abounding with wisdom and healing power. Baby Suggs is the grandmother in Morrison's Beloved. Having experienced life to its fullest, she sees black life as not just about suffering. Black people also have to feed their appetites for joy and beauty, gasping with gratitude about being alive at the present moment. Being the ancestor and grandmother, Baby Suggs have ideas that are traditional and revolutionary at the same time. An elder and tradition-keeper, she speaks of the need for self-integrity in the face of present-day challenges. Through an authoritative approach to life, Suggs preaches wisdom and integrity in life, a means toward expressing self-control, loving oneself, and acting maturely and responsibly despite all of life's misfortunes.

By inspiring her people to see themselves as new creatures in body and mind, Suggs serves the mother/god role, shaping and nurturing new life. She is the image of the tribal Mother or Goddess-Queen that is found in most ancient literature. In a transformed usage of power, Baby Suggs encourages her black neighbors' strength similar to the kind of strength she has had to rely upon throughout her life. In the Clearing, Baby Suggs, filled with idealism and ready to change the world, speaks the grandmother's wisdom and instructs her people in an improvised sermon:

Here, she said, in this here place, we flesh that weeps, laughs;
flesh that dances on bare feet in grass. Love it; love it hard. Yonder

they do not love your flesh. They despise it. They do not love your eyes; they'd just as soon pick'em out. No more do they love the skin on your back. Yonder they flay it. And O my people they do not love the skin on your back. Yonder they flay it. (88-89)

With those deep words of bitterness, Baby Suggs launches the power to save oneself within the confines of one's own body and mind and by so doing deny to the slaveholders what they have claimed as property. In the Clearing, they have effectively cleared a space to re-integrate themselves and recoup the values that can possibly sustain them. Suggs's words are as powerful as Ralph Ellison's critical statements in his saga, The Invisible Man, that serve as the catalyst for his own metamorphosis; Ellison writes, "I am invisible simply because people refuse to see me" (3). The psychological implications are profound as the two authors speak consciously of the way in which blacks see themselves. The moral of these two novels is that self-image and self-acceptance eventually determine the way we respond to life's duress.

Morrison attributes much importance to the ancestors in the African-American community since they provide protection and give the people instructions for coping with adversity. The ancestor thus becomes a guiding force and functions as the repository of African American culture. Middle-aged ex-slave Paul D plays the role of the ancestor in Morrison's Beloved and is essential for Sethe's peace and comfort.⁷ Contemplating her own life as an enslaved woman, Sethe finds "the notion of a future with him . . . was beginning to stroke her mind" (42). Much as Pilate, the ancestral figure in Song of Solomon, gives Milkman hope and a future, Paul D, the ancestor in Beloved, returns to offer Sethe balance and stability, a sense of the past, the possibility of a renewed life and hope for the future. He must help Sethe regain her confidence in herself: "You your best thing, Sethe. You are" (Beloved 273). As the ancestor, his

best understanding is achieved through historical remembrance of his slave family – the Sweet Home men – and through recognition of where he and Sethe fit together in the face of slavery and racism.

In Morrison's Tar Baby, the ancestor is represented in the old character of Ondine as authentic earth mother (who clearly understands the values that are the foundation of Black folk culture) and the old mythic figures of the women of Eloë that appear later in the novel. Jadine, the young protagonist, is Morrison's image of the new Black woman who is represented in the novel as the antithesis of Black folk and community values. Set on a small Caribbean island called l'Arbre de la Croix – “an exotic example of the flawed garden” (Byerman 208) – Tar Baby depicts a divided community that cannot provide role models for the younger generations. The novel will also explain the negative consequences of the absence of the ancestor. Jadine, having received her education both in America and in France (where she studied art and modeling), becomes literally and culturally an orphan. She adopts Valerian's (her sponsor's) Western values and attitudes instead of her “ancient properties.”

Ondine describes her own abdication of responsibility and abandoning Jadine, her niece: “I never told you anything at all and I take full responsibility for that” (242). In their conversation, however, Ondine, while representing the maternal figure, defines the role of a daughter: “A daughter is a woman who cares about where she comes from and takes care of *them* who took care of her” (281; emphasis added). Jadine rebelliously answers, “I don't want to be like you” (282). Sydney and Ondine are left puzzled: “Old Black people must be a worrisome thing to the young ones these days. . . . I think we are going to have to bury ourselves, Sydney” (283-84). Son, also stressing the indictment, views Jadine as “cut off from her roots” which would ultimately result in “an impoverished and distorted identity” (164-65).

Morrison's insistent message is that Jadine's prodigality results from the absence of the ancestor – the role model in her life – which deems necessary the regeneration and renewal within oneself and in the large community. Jadine's orphanhood also symbolizes the absence of the ancestor in her life – usually a parent or a grandparent who would pass on to her the nurturing she needs to lead a significant and meaningful life. This ancestor is also represented in the old women of Eloë and those of the race who have contributed to Jadine's well-being and toward whom she should feel the real responsibility. Now that Jadine is too far gone to assimilate these folk values of Black culture, she feels unprotected and lonely: The old women of Eloë "seemed somehow in agreement with each other about her, and were all out to get her, tie her, bind her. Grab the person she had worked hard to become and choke it off with their soft loose tits" (262). These old women seem to prod her with her sense of responsibility to them and to the past. Nowhere are the dynamics of Morrison's narrative more complicated, though clearly articulated, than in the description of Jadine as she stands in the "circle of trees" where the Caribbean island swamp literally entraps her:

The women hanging in the trees looked down at her . . . and stopped murmuring. They were delighted when they first saw her, thinking a runaway child had been restored to them. But upon looking closer they saw differently. The girl was fighting to get away from them. The women hanging from the trees were . . . arrogant – mindful as they were of their value, their exceptional femaleness; knowing as they did that the first world of the world had been built with their sacred properties; that they alone could hold together the stones of pyramids and the rushes of Moses's crib; knowing their steady consistency. . . . They wondered at

the girl's desperate past struggle down below to be free, to be something other than they were. (Tar Baby 183)

For Morrison, the women in the trees or the "night women" symbolize the older and wiser ancestors she seeks to affirm – the mothers and grandmothers to whom she dedicates the novel. "Mindful as they were of their value, their exceptional femaleness; knowing as they did that the first world of the world had been built with their sacred properties" (183), these women have no tolerance for Jadine, who has compromised the ancient knowledge; they spit at her, chastise her; become the "night women" who thrust their withered breasts at her "like weapons" (225). They are "the Diaspora mothers with pumping breasts" who "with a single glance from eyes that had burned away their own lashes, could discredit your elements" (248). These are the "tar women" I will discuss in Chapter Four, for they alone could "hold together the stones of pyramids and the rushes of Moses's crib" (183). Unless Jadine assimilates herself to these old archetypal mother figures in pursuit of a meaningful life, she will remain lost and deluded. These old mythic figures are conservators of tradition.

Sydney and Ondine in their old age have solidified their own sense of race, class, and cultural roles by naming themselves "Philadelphia Negroes – the proudest people in the race" (61). The term has its source in the title of W. E. B. Du Bois's book, Philadelphia Negroes. Sydney assigns himself power and authority as one of the emancipated blacks in Du Bois' book. Following Du Bois, the Childses confirm their racial pride and identity and counteract the social values imposed by White society, thereby setting an example for their young niece as proud African-Americans. Although Ondine does not know her niece very well, she is aware of Jadine's need for nurturing. In the story Jadine has no cultural memory; when she comes to the Isle des Chevaliers, she seeks out her extended family, Sidney and Ondine, in order to develop a

sense of who she is. But because she cannot create these things once she is grown, Jadine cannot take her place in the line of history and becomes the tragic hero in the novel whose fatal flaw is the absence of the ancestor in her life.

By the end of the novel, the older characters of Ondine and Sydney remain fixed on the island. Jadine is en route to Paris where she will no longer need to constantly seek safety, yet her ultimate destination is “uncertain.” The African woman who sees her on the street in Paris spits on her in disgust (46), old blind Marie Therese calls her “unworthy,” and Jadine herself feels “inauthentic” (48). Her “matrophobia” – rebellion against the imposed female image – makes her vulnerable and incapable of standing on her own feet. The novel thus becomes a warning against the negative consequences of losing one’s past and alienating oneself from the fountain of life, that is, the ancestor.

Another ancestor figure is Pilate Dead in Song of Solomon. Morrison endows the character of Pilate with characteristics that enable her to challenge her own brother’s, Macon Dead’s, rude and brutal attempts to dominate his whole household. Pilate is able to bring stability and complete reversal to the Dead family condition where women hold inferior positions and are dominated by the despicable materialist father, who enjoys the power the women give him. As we come to know Pilate, we recognize the broad aspects of her character: not only as the ancestor – in her retention and use of African traditions – but also as the surrogate mother to her nephew Milkman. Since the maternal figure and the ancestor are used interchangeably, Pilate serves as a moral guide or a vessel of cultural values in the novel.

Morrison depicts Pilate as the ancestor or culture-bearer who embodies ancient properties and ancestral memory. Pilate demonstrates an inner strength that exists when one lives a life fully connected to the wisdom and stories of the ancestors. As a culture-bearer, she

possesses the power to preserve her African heritage and culture. In keeping with the African culture, Pilate seeks to repair the relationship of Macon and Ruth at the latter's request, believing in the sanctity of the African family. Ruth is enslaved in a life of neglect and abuse by her husband. Although her family life is anything but perfect, Ruth still has the characteristics of a good housewife and mother. Pilate plots with Ruth, Macon's wife, to make possible Milkman's birth against his father's will. (I will consider Pilate's conjuring as her means to help Ruth against Macon later in this chapter.) Pilate and Ruth represent strength, pride, and purity for the African-American woman. They have overcome harsh realities and survived with dignity. Pilate's "defect" – that is, the lack of a navel – enables her to channel her rage into more constructive living. Pilate has learned to love and value herself, regardless of others' criticisms. She demonstrates forgiveness and love starting at the home of her brother.

Pilate also embraces the past and her ancestors as useful sources of information that are valuable and worthwhile. We recognize her courage and power within the African context and classical mythology. Viewed from these perspectives, we find that Pilate is both a Griot – a storyteller – and a community elder, charged with preserving the cultural memory of her people. As the “custodian of the culture” (Arhin 92-94), her role is to pass on stories to future generations. Joseph Skerrett, in “Recitations to the Griot” points out the importance of Morrison's transformation of the native myths and folktales: “Milkman's parents – Macon and Ruth – are not effective informants for Milkman. Their narration of their own parts of the mystery of his heritage is partial, egocentric, defensive. . . . It's only Pilate for whom storytelling is not self-dramatization, self-justification or ego action” (194-95).

Pilate's roles as a Griot and a community elder are well demonstrated in her relationship with her nephew Milkman. When Milkman first meets his aunt Pilate, “the tall Black tree,” he

observes that “she was all angles . . . one foot pointed east and one pointed west” (Song of Solomon 38, 36). This simply indicates that she embraces both Eastern and Western (African and American) traditions and values. Her connection to African practices and values gives her a legendary status, makes her defy virtually every stereotype of older black women, and exemplifies Morrison's rejection of any binary thinking. She represents and transmits the African American beliefs and values to the community. While Morrison stresses the importance of community over self in matters of growth and identity-formation, she, on the other hand, reveals the troubled existence of the young because of fragmented familial/ ancestral relationships and the need for an older person whom Milkman can look up to and learn from. With the help of his Aunt Pilate, Milkman starts his journey into the depths of his ancestry, where he comes to understand his place in the world. Because she is able to preserve the ancestral memory and culture of the black race, Pilate proves to be essential for Milkman's emotional maturity and psychological well-being. Milkman puts commitment first and shows allegiance to Pilate, who persistently reiterates that “You can't fly on off and leave a body” (Song of Solomon 147, 332, 333). With a renewed sense of self, Milkman begins to realize how important relationships are and that responsibility is a more valid way to find freedom and take flight. As Gay Wilentz notes, "In the end, [Pilate] bequeaths to Milkman not only his birthright but a legacy which allows him, too, to fly" (126).

We have seen that Pilate is not only a Griot and culture bearer, but also a surrogate mother to Milkman. Unsatisfied with his parents' guidance, Milkman seeks out the counsel of his old aunt Pilate. An experienced older woman, she provides Milkman with the means to transcend his narrow vision of the Dead family narrative. Not only does Pilate become his guide, but also the mother who could nurture him and preserve his life. At the end of the novel,

he grows up to become an adult: capable and loving. Her role is to educate him into the culture, advise and guide him in his quest for a new identity. Although she makes him whole, she is in no way perfect, for she is neglectful in her relationship with her simple-minded daughter, Reba, and her granddaughter, Hagar. A feminist herself, Morrison is concerned about both the negative and positive images imposed by society on black women and endeavors to replace them with what she believes would be an ideal standard. Her portrayals of mothers are often gritty and sometimes disturbing. Unlike her black male counterparts, Morrison's depictions suggest that she feels that the black mother does not need protecting; therefore, she does not romanticize her mother figures.

Many supernatural powers are attributed to the maternal type. The latter asserts her connection to their ancestral past and signifies both continuity and tradition. Pilate was "believed to have the power to step out of her skin, set a bush afire from fifty yards, and turn a man into a ripe rutabaga – all on account of the fact that she had no navel" (Song of Solomon 94). Yet, because of her physical defect, she is feared, shunned, and treated as if she is evil. It is also Pilate who represents the ancestral past, and Morrison herself identifies Pilate as the ancestor figure in Song of Solomon. Joanne M. Braxton in her essay "Ancestral Presence: The Outraged Mother Figure in Contemporary Afro-American Writing" writes, "Pilate embodies the heroism, self-sacrifice, and the supernatural attributes of her historical and mythical counterparts" (307). With the strengths of both the maternal and the ancestor, Pilate challenges her granddaughter's boyfriend. She speaks to him in the language of an outraged mother, one from the heart. While holding a knife to the edge of his heart and her arm around his neck, she says to him,

Women are foolish, you know, and mamas are the most foolish of all. And you know how mamas are, don't you? You got a mama, ain't you? Sure you have, so you know what I'm talking about. . . . We do the best we can, but we ain't got the strength you men got. . . . You know what I mean? I'd hate to pull this knife out and have you try some other time to act mean to my little girl. Cause one thing I know for whatever she done, she's been good to *you*. Still, I'd hate to push it in more and have your mama feel like I do now. . . . (94)

The outraged mother bravely defends her child; lacking the physical strength does not deter her from defending her loved ones even at the cost of her own safety. Song of Solomon idealizes strong women and condemns with disapproval those female characters who depend on men for survival. Old as she is, Pilate is no exception. That she lacks a navel is a testimony to Morrison's desire to invest her character with the power to "literally invent herself" (Tate 128). Pilate reinvents herself and her life. She chooses how to live her existence. Jane Campbell in Mythic Black Fiction: The Transformation of History notes that Morrison dares to move into a mythic realm where her characters are "not merely superhuman but supernatural" (141). Morrison also endows Pilate with an uncanny willpower over others. Pilate is able to fend off her brother's attacks on his wife Ruth and also scare off the young man bullying her daughter Reba. Such is the nature of the Black mother in Song of Solomon. The novel idealizes strong women, and thus Morrison elevates Pilate to an excellent role model. Surviving by her own means and wits, Pilate shows strength and lives up to her namesake, Pontius Pilate, who presides over Jesus' crucifixion.

In Morrison's Song of Solomon, the reader also meets the ageless woman Circe,⁸ who causes a detour in the narrative and acts as Milkman's informant and helps him reconstruct his past. Pilate and Circe are the guides for Milkman through history. Like the African Great Mother, both women are identified with nature, significantly living on the edge and marginalized, Circe in an abandoned mansion and Pilate as a pariah in her community. These women represent the ancestors who preserve the oral African tradition and nurture the young protagonist. While Pilate establishes herself in the novel as a strong female "whose deeds and stories bring healing and knowledge to her community" (Moblely 2), Circe signifies the mythic narrative of the hero's quest. On one level, she functions as she does in the *Odyssey*: she sets the hero Milkman (Odysseus) on his path to symbolic rebirth. It is Circe to whom Odysseus returns after his visit to the Underworld, so in a sense she too functions as a midwife in his rebirth. Her nurturance extends to her capacity of serving as a guardian or protector: she not only tells Odysseus that he must make his trip to Hades, but also, once he returns, explains what he must do for the remainder of his voyage. Milkman similarly learns important information from Circe: the names of his ancestors and their history.

Milkman meets Circe when he visits Danville in search of the gold. His grandfather's friends have assumed that she is dead, since she was "a hundred when I was a boy" (237). The accent on her extreme old age is suggestive of the antiquity of the tale from which Circe is imported (book 10 of the *Odyssey*). Milkman's meeting with her is, however, a transformative experience. Now that he knows his ancestry, Milkman's view of the world and of himself changes. It is during the nighttime hunting expedition with the elders of the town that Milkman experiences his epiphany in the woods and he comes to understand how thoughtlessly he had treated various women in his life and how valuable his cultural heritage is to his sense of

identity. Circe stands tall in this part of the story. In his optimistic reading of her role, Philip Page in Dangerous Freedom: Fusion and Fragmentation in Toni Morrison's Novels suggests that Milkman "reaches the womb of his family [the cave] by embracing the terrifying but guiding Circe who models Milkman's quest by fusing Western and African-American cultural traditions, life and death, and present and past" (100). From Page's critical perspective, Milkman is able to put together the two cultural traditions, African and European, in harmony at the end of the tale, where the old is disassembled and the new takes its place.

"Because I Said So":

The Ancestor in Gaines and the Challenge of History

Gaines shares with Morrison the same interest in the ancestor, painting in favorable light older women characters who are strong and independent. Gaines's female figures are further dedicated to the safety and the well-being of their men. Their task is fraught with conflicts and tension as is always demonstrated so clearly in Gaines's fiction in general and in A Lesson before Dying in particular. The story of A Lesson unfolds with the young black male Grant Wiggins much agitated by the sadistic behavior of his great aunt Tante Lou. Tante Lou continues to have considerable influence on her adult nephew, Grant Wiggins. After receiving his college education, Grant returns to the quarters to teach and live with his aunt. At times, she attempts to control him with "her looks." Grant says, "She looked at me the way an inquisitor must have glared at its poor victims" (99). Regardless, Grant feels respect and duty toward his aunt, but he becomes agitated when she forces him to visit the young Black convict Jefferson regularly during the months prior to his execution.

Contrary to the typical aunt figure in Gaines's fiction, Tante Lou succeeds in forcing Grant to comply with her demands. Earlier "aunt" figures seldom retained that kind of power

over their already grown-up "boys." She is also Miss Emma's best friend, having worked with her in the big Pichot house as a washerwoman. Both women keep Grant in line with their stern nature and devout faith.

Although in her seventies, Miss Emma strikes a formidable appearance. She weighs nearly two hundred pounds and commands respect from everyone she knows. Even her late husband called her Miss Emma. Miss Emma used to cook for the plantation owner, Henri Pichot. She knows that Jefferson has limited intelligence but wants him to learn to read and write before he dies. More important, she wants him to understand that he is a man and not the "hog" that his defense attorney says he is. A religious woman, Miss Emma prays for Jefferson's soul and relies on Reverend Ambrose for spiritual guidance for her and Jefferson.

The grandmother figure in Gaines's fiction is never passive or acquiescent, yet they are assertive and even aggressive. Miss Emma and Tante Lou remind their employers of the service they have provided them: "I done done a lot for this family over the years": "Tell [the sheriff] what I done done for this family, Mr. Henri. Tell him to ask his wife all I done done for this family over the years" (22-23). She thus demands favors in exchange for their years of service. "Let the teacher go to him, Mr. Henri" (22). Realizing that her request is unusual, one not likely to be granted under normal circumstances. Miss Emma promises to return the next day to beseech him once more for permission for Grant to visit Jefferson. She will not be easily dismissed. Miss Emma threatens, "I'll be up here again tomorrow, Mr. Henri. I'll be on my knees next time you see me, Mr. Henri" (23). Miss Emma subverts the notion of the selfless mammy who happily and faithfully performs services for her employers because making them happy brings her great joy. She expects to be repaid for her years of service: "This family owes me that much, Mr. Henri. And I want it. I want somebody do something for me one time 'fore I

close my eyes. Somebody got do something for me one time 'fore I close my eyes, Mr. Henri” (22).

The power Tante Lou wields over Grant is based in history. Tante Lou has experienced the dynamics of race and even gender politics in this world, and thus she aspires that Grant may achieve enough success in life so that he will never experience any such injustices. Despite his education and the tangible difference in lifestyle or aspiration it has gained for him, he finds it easier to do as he is told and not to rebel or openly express himself. Instead, he pouts and succumbs to their manipulation. Grant feels weighed down by the racism that still enslaved blacks in 1948 Louisiana, but he has no plan and little desire to effect change. He is convinced, however, that they understand the personal and social history of which he is a part much better than he does. With a commanding voice, the two elderly women overpower Grant, and he becomes defenseless.

Gaines emphatically describes the impact of these two strong-willed older women on Grant. He observes, "Both are large women," but his godmother is larger. She is of average height, five four, five five, but weighs nearly two hundred pounds: "Once she and my aunt had found their places . . . his godmother became as immobile as a great stone or as one of our oak or cypress stumps" (3). The image of the women being as immobile as oak or cypress stumps evokes the imagery in the Christian song entitled "I Cannot Be Moved," which also alludes to Gaines's story, "Just like a Tree" in Bloodline (1968). This story portrays the strong old black female character of Aunt Fe. When Gaines uses the tree analogy, he does not necessarily allude to its immovability; rather, he presents these Southern women as he knows they truly are, nurturing and caring, typical of his beloved great aunt Miss Augusteen.

It is not only the women's nurturing ability that grants them respect, but it is also their willpower. At various points throughout the narrative, Grant gives the reader the impression that the two women, Tante Lou and Miss Emma, achieve what they want through strong will, as is the case when they force him to drive them to Pichot's house. The conversation below between Tante Lou and Miss Emma explains how Tante Lou's commanding voice, when combined with Miss Emma's, enables them to achieve their objective. They command Grant to "sit down" and listen to what they have to say:

'Sit down for what?' I asked her.

'Just sit down,' she said.

I settled back on the chair, but not all the way back was ready to get up at any moment.

'He don't have to do it,' Miss Emma said, looking beyond me again.

'Do what?' I asked her.

'You don't have to do it,' she said again. It was dry, mechanical, unemotional, but I could tell by her face and by my aunt's face that they were not about to give up on what they had in mind.

'What do you want me to do?' I asked her. 'What can I do? It's only a matter of weeks about to give up on what they had in mind.

'You going with us up the quarter,' my aunt said, as though I hadn't said a word.

'You going up there with us, Grant, or you don't sleep in this house tonight.'

I stood back from the table and looked at both of them. I clamped my jaws so tight the veins in my neck felt as if they would burst. I wanted to scream at my aunt; I was screaming inside. I had told her many, many times how much I hated this place

and all I wanted to do was get away. I had told her I was no teacher, I hated teaching, and I was just running in place here. But she had not heard me before, and I knew that no matter how loud I screamed, she would not hear me now. I'm getting my coat, and I'll be ready to go,' she said. 'Emma?' (13-15)

While the narrative voice suggests the struggle for identity that Grant undergoes, the two elderly women insist that Grant is good enough to enact change by instilling integrity and honor. The two elderly women are ambassadors for justice and Wiggins is their instrument to accomplish the mission. He is, therefore, kept in line with their stern nature and devout faith, believing that he is obligated to help Jefferson. The excerpt shows the intense emotions that Wiggins feels in relationship to the older women in his life and his knowledge of their stance.

The attitude, however, is justifiable by their sense of responsibility toward their offspring and also by their constant need to protect themselves from vulnerability or from any outward expressions of love that might cause them to make wrong decisions based on emotions. The natural emotional responses provoked are so well-contained that they become superhuman in their stance – a phenomenon entitled “gender blurring” – the topic of discussion in the next chapter. These old women characters manage to wrap themselves with an aura of rigidity and callousness – superficial as it may be at times – that wards off all challenges.

The two women seem to derive their strength from religion. In their old age, they fit the pattern of generations of long-suffering historical Black women who rely on the Lord to take away their burdens. The spiritual strength they embrace comes from above. It is also to the White man's advantage that African-Americans believe in religion as their only source of power so as to enforce limitations on them while sustaining the ideology of White supremacy. From Reverend Ambrose's perspective, therefore, the agony that Miss Emma experiences concerning

Jefferson is God's way of "testing" her (123). Yet for all the novel's religious symbolism, Grant has no faith in religion. He sees the church as "playing the role of making people complacent with their lot on earth and offering them rewards in the hereafter. The ministers are seen as the major perpetrators of this belief, as well as the major beneficiaries" (Charles Hamilton 208). His cynicism and his belief that religion is a sham inform his attitude and deeply hurt his aunt and antagonize Reverend Ambrose. Yet, at the book's climax, Grant admits, "[t]hat old man [Ambrose] is much braver than I" (253), and he has his students pray in the hours before Jefferson's execution. Reverend Ambrose and Grant Wiggins work together as agents of change to determine how best to help young Jefferson.

Miss Emma, like Ondine in Morrison's Tar Baby, is the maternal type in A Lesson. In spite of her seeming grumpiness, Miss Emma provides him with the proper nourishment physically and spiritually. Trying to reconcile with Grant, Miss Emma humbly acknowledges her ignorance or lack of education when she relies on Grant to teach Jefferson. Gaines alludes to the fact that, regardless of such lack, she excels in what she does. Cooking meals is the one strength she can offer him. Thus she hopes that this one skill will indeed be pleasing to Jefferson in his current circumstance, proof of her mothering instinct and a quality of the maternal archetype.

Tante Lou and Miss Emma certainly do not allow him the space that manhood would presumably require. Furthermore, Grant even voices a serious accusation against Tante Lou. By forcing him to go alone to the jail to visit Jefferson, she becomes in league with white men who would emasculate black males; he says to Tante Lou,

Everything you sent me to school for, you're stripping me of it, I told my aunt.

. . . The humiliation I had to go through, going into that man's kitchen. The hours

I had to wait while they ate and drank and socialized before they would even see me. Now going up to that jail. To watch them put their dirty hands on that food. To search my body each time as if I'm some kind of common criminal. Maybe today they'll want to look into *my* mouth, or my nostrils, or make me strip; anything to humiliate me, all the things you wanted me to escape by going to school. Years ago, Professor Antoine told me that if I stayed here, they were going to break me down to the nigger I was born to be. But he didn't tell me that my aunt would help them do it. (79)

Perhaps this is Grant's first and only opportunity to voice his anger and his rejection to his Great-Aunt's humiliating behavior that strips him of his identity. By so doing, he plans to chastise her and make her feel guilty for mistreating him or for sending him to teach Jefferson. He wants desperately for Tante Lou and the other women to see him in a different, more manly light, one in which they have not allowed him to exist. His love affair with Vivian is a step further toward self-indulgence and an assurance of manhood.

Following Jung, I assume that Lou represents the maternal archetype that dwells in Grant's personal unconscious or is actualized in his mind. She invokes in him innate anticipations when he is in proximity to her. When they begin the journey to Pichot's house, Grant comments, "My aunt never said a thing, but I could feel her eyes on the back of my neck. I could hear them bouncing on the back seat, but they never said a word" (17). The state of being reserved or in control of oneself in conversation as identified with these older black characters is strikingly clear here. Tante Lou does not feel the need to elaborate on her motives or the decision that she has made. She appears distant and unaffectionate, yet we can measure her love for Grant through what she does for him – cooking and providing shelter, for instance.

The old woman cannot afford the luxury of pampering a child, when other critical needs are present.

The Great Aunt imposes her will on Grant and is enabled by his personality quirks and his own apathy. He is unable to stand up to her or to claim his own space to be on the plantation. He has grown comfortable in his indolence and in his ability to articulate dreams without any expectation that they will become reality. It is to Tante Lou's credit that she forces him to visit Jefferson, for that is the one experience in his life that finally moves him toward true self-realization. In this context, one of Tante Lou's comments, "You ain't going to run away from this, Grant" (123), takes on a new significance. Grant's response to her provides us with a probable reason why he tolerates his aunt's cruel behavior:

We black men have failed to protect our women since the time of slavery. We stay here in the South and are broken, or we run away and leave them alone to look after the children and themselves. So each time a male child is born, they hope he will be the one to change this vicious circle – which he never does. Because even though he wants to change it, and maybe even tries to change it, it is too heavy a burden because of all the others who have run away and left their burdens behind. (166-67)

Having the opportunity to teach Jefferson, Grant will not run away and instead stand up to the challenge on behalf of the entire black race. It will also be an opportunity that will result ultimately in saving both Jefferson and himself too. Gaines finally and effectively posits that the old black woman's intentions are essentially good and that there is no need to make alterations to the character type.

By making the old woman the centerpiece of his plot, Gaines deconstructs the negative representations of aged African-American women. He intends to make the old aunt an authoritative, yet not malicious, figure. For both literary and personal reasons, his plan to construct a tale about a young man who is inspired by his old aunt to defend the black race is well-conceived. Yet the conflict between the moral vision in the story and his personal attitude toward old age causes some creative difficulties that he cannot overcome. To begin with, being a Black man in the South maims him and drastically limits his chance of achievement. In his understanding, any encounter with White people is bound to end in an insult to his intelligence and his humanity. On the other hand, he even feels trapped by his own people – his aunt Lou and those of her generation – and by the responsibilities of having to uphold his position in a community that does not appreciate education. As Reverend Ambrose explains, he is simply trying to keep himself above the complications of hypocrisy, to avoid telling a lie that is necessary to save someone's feelings.

The archetype of ancestor given to old Black women in Morrison and Gaines can be viewed not only as an aesthetic resolution but also an effort to overcome any ambivalent or contradictory attitudes toward old age. The two authors enable the ancestor to bear witness to the history and the wisdom preserved in the folklore and oral literature of black Americans, commonly referred to as the "mother wit." Morrison and Gaines borrow from archetypal imagery as well as the mood and the mind of common folk to create innovative fiction and contemporary myths to sustain a struggling people. By so doing, they nurture a tradition that is as mythical and real as life itself. The next section discusses the crone figure to demonstrate the strength that lies in the old women's reaction to their conditions in ways that protect their clan and their families.

The Crone

A second archetype which is significant in the portrayal of elderly Blacks in Morrison and Gaines is the “crone.” Morrison’s emphasis on older women, not as victims, but as strong survivors, harkens back to the mythological image of the crone – the goddess of age, wisdom and power. The term used metaphorically here refers to older women living a life of risk-taking that only a certain type of woman seems to attempt. As I researched the new term “Crone,” I was surprised to learn of its original meaning which is so different from its current definition. The most commonly accepted current definition of a crone is the “withered old woman,” based solely on the physical attributes of the female. The fourteenth century definition of the word, on the other hand, meant “mischievous and feisty wise woman.”⁹ The shift in meaning across the centuries, which seems to have disempowered the female self, is found to be threatening and not straightforward or deceitful.

Older African-American Women have lived to be Crones. Mary Daly writes, “A woman becomes a crone as a result of surviving early stages of the Otherworld Journey and therefore having discovered depths of courage, strength and wisdom in her Self” (16). What Daly apparently argues here is that the crone is the woman who has grown old disgracefully to become a powerful, strong and wise figure. Complete in her own power, the crone stands as the model for aging women today. Internalizing the negative messages society sends may render women powerless, yet rejecting such stereotypes and old boundaries would suggest empowerment in old age. This section explores characters taking on the image, role, and standards of the crone who openly have defied societal norms and become crones. While the “ancestor” was revered as archetype, the “crone” was used to criticize old women in past centuries. Nevertheless, many women now try to turn that around and reclaim the title of crone.

Instead of allowing themselves to be "old ladies" at Cronehood, these women refuse to believe that with age only comes wisdom. They are vibrant, life-embracing women who are proud to be labeled "crones." Instead of hiding in the shadows and lamenting their destinies, they celebrate the coming of age and their survival.

Jill Fiore in her study of the crone figure contends that the crux of growing old "disgracefully" – or becoming a crone, in short – is a choice to be made about living a life of risk-taking and continual growth as opposed to "growing old gracefully," which implies that "we (women) are to be silent, invisible, compliant, and selflessly available to the needs of others" (3). The archetype is presented in three major aspects – designated Virgin, Mother, and Crone – of which the crone is most powerful. In the twentieth-century, because old age has become a cultural taboo, dreaded and undesirable, the crone has been banished from the culture as well. In some measure, they are trivialized and degraded. The experience of growing older, then, is profoundly shaped by the negative meanings that are ascribed to aging (Woodward xiii). Fiore, following Barbara Walker and others, asserts the need for women "to be awakened, and to remember what the crone used to represent before she fell prey to the forces of patriarchal prejudices" (Walker, The Crone 38). In this section, however, I pay homage to aging Black women in particular and redeem the title of "crone," revealing through a brief discussion of literary characters, from both Morrison and Gaines, the possibilities available to aging Black women through this ancient and powerful archetype.

Eva Peace, the Crone Facing the Inevitable

The crone type is signified in the character of Eva Peace in Sula. Eva is arguably the best embodiment of the crone figure with trickery as her distinguishing characteristic. She is known to be eccentric in the Bottom community. In her manifestation of love, she literally sacrifices her leg under a train in order to provide food for her children. Eva has a largely disorderly house in which she plays the matriarch to a host of tenants and family members. The controversial character reflects a West African model of a woman who is both powerful and resourceful. We can understand the distortion of the mother love with some historical background in mind of the enslaved mothers who committed infanticide rather than have their children live in slavery. While family bonds were difficult to maintain, stories of valor emerged. There is usually the mother/grandmother who sustains the family amid chaos. She portrays stability in an environment of injustice and poverty. The old Black men and women featured in this dissertation typically overcome the hardships of slavery and ultimately climb out of the marginal lifestyle to become productive members of their society.

Morrison's representation of Eva Peace in Sula renders her as neither crazy nor evil. She is the mother faced with what Joyce Elaine King and Carolyn Ann Mitchell term as "dilemmas as choice" or "caught between the rock and the hard place" (18). Thus, Eva chooses murder to confront a situation she cannot overcome otherwise. Morrison finds this to be "noble" (Moyers 272), yet when asked if she [Morrison] would have killed her two sons had she been confronted with a similar situation, she answered, "I've asked. I don't know. I really don't know" (Moyers 272). Morrison explains to Marsha Darling, "I felt the only person who could judge her would be the daughter she killed" (Darling 248). In the end, Morrison does not condemn Eva as either insane or evil.

In her old, experienced age, Eva becomes more image than character. Reading the novel from a humanistic approach, I opt to perceive Eva's actions as human. Her survival depends entirely on acquiring a new set of values and a new perspective on life. Morrison literally attaches these images to Eva, who is able to sever her relationship with her offspring. The character of Eva, in a fundamental sense, interplays these images. The apparent gender blurring that occurs and the reversal of roles are the indirect consequences of slavery, racism, emasculation, and the psychological and physical violence that characterize life for some Blacks in America. The consequential blurring of gender is the focus of Chapter Four. Should old women hold this power, such as is the case in Africa? Eva's power embodies African spirituality. A woman of Africa and of African origin, she dared to live in a culture whose survival threatens and obliterates African values. She embodies the essential African archetypes: she is old and is like the Earth Mother who renews, sustains and consumes herself. If there is any negativity to Eva's character, it is because she is the Mother type in a hostile land, "The Bottom." In New Dimensions of Spirituality, Demetrakopoulos argues, "The Bottom signifies America's repression and destructiveness and unworthiness. . . . It makes the survival of African women difficult and fraught with pain and sorrow" (70). Morrison's crone archetype fits the gap between Eva's maternal and survival instincts. Morrison's view of the crone as goddess is exceptional in Eva's character. It is a view that brings readers to a clear understanding of her role in the novel. She is the mother, the sole maker of life who is also credited with the power to destroy what she makes.

Morrison uses the ancestor and the crone equally in her fiction. While the first transcends time and links the present to the past and ancient tradition, the crone is the woman who has suffered so much at the hands of patriarchal mythmakers and strives to survive the

present to ensure her own safety and the well-being of her kin. “Like the female animals,” Barbara Walker argues, “the crone is genetically prepared to be responsible for lives other than her own” (177). When the crone is recognized as a valid image, the old woman is no longer seen as a useless object. She demands respect; her advice is sought and the whole community looks up to her and takes her seriously, not as much in Eva’s case as in Pilate’s in Song of Solomon. She represents precisely the kind of power women so desperately need today. Taking on the crone figure, old women become stereotyped as masculine. Perhaps our study of the ancestor and the crone archetypes helps to bring these old women out of their closets of suppression, invisibility, and deprivation. Taken together, Morrison’s novels skillfully portray the functions of both the ancestor as foundation and the effectiveness of the crone’s visibility in the community. Both find real comfort and real courage to face the inevitable and sustain the belief in life and human dignity.

Radicalized Crone-hood/Matriarchy in Gaines

In Gaines’s works, the older women often hold the family and community together and, hence, function as crones. These women provide “the steady influence that balances the restlessness, rebelliousness, or resignation of the men in his fiction, and it is they who are the catalysts for subtle but certain change” (Babb, *Ernest Gaines* 20). In their advanced years, the women are mistakenly viewed as matriarchs in control and thus push the men into subservient positions in the family. On the contrary, the men are rendered incompetent not by the women, but, in the thinking of some, by the mainstream society in which they live. Psychologists William H. Grier and Price M. Cobbs in Black Rage counter the simplistic view of the Black family as a matriarchy, an unfortunate theme repeated too often by scholars. They write, “If a man is stripped of his authority in the home by forces outside that home, the woman naturally

must assume the status of head of household. This is the safety factor inherent in a household which includes two adults and it by no means suggests that the woman prefers it that way” (61). Scholars discount the fact that Gaines’s women, regardless of their age, if given a choice, would rather not head up the households, but do so out of necessity, and they become the “Crone” or “the man of the house.” This results from Black men abandoning their families.

The old woman or crone in Gaines’s work simply ensures the survival of future generations of her race. William Burke’s “Bloodline: A Black Man’s South” offers perhaps the most scathing discussion of Gaines’s women characters as crones. Burke’s review of Bloodline is a misogynistic attack on women. He writes that Gaines’s first two stories, “A Long Day in November” and “The Sky Is Gray,” “[portray] a tough matriarchal society which all but destroys the possibility of masculinity for black males” (546). Burke launches an attack against Amy’s mother, Rachel, who acts as a crone and who blunts Eddie’s masculinity. Introducing the older character of Grandma Rachel, “A Long Day in November” illustrates well the conflict between the generations. While the action of the stories revolves around two young boys, the resolution of the conflict resides with their parents. Furthermore, when the parents themselves are troubled in their relationship, there is the grandmother, an old woman of resolve who is always able to give advice to her afflicted child. Rachel’s interference, however, seems to hinder Eddie’s understanding of his marital difficulties. While he attempts to reconcile with Amy, things get complicated by Rachel, whose old traditional values threaten to sever the marriage permanently. Rachel’s traditionalism is exemplified in the story by the coloring of her speech and logic with folk cliché. For example, her objection to Eddie as a son-in-law is based on her superstitious belief that “a yellow nigger with a gap 'tween his front teeth ain’t no good” (14). Amy’s present problem with Eddie simply confirms Rachel’s general assessment of his

character, an assessment which she delights in delivering proverbially: “Put a fool in a car and he becomes a bigger fool” (14). Her philosophy of “live and learn” (16) eventually leads her to bring up Freddie Jackson, her own choice of a husband for Amy. Rachel considers Freddie a perfect mate in a traditional sense since he is a hard worker and landowner. Because she cannot envision a change in Eddie's behavior that would cause Amy to resume a marital relationship with him, Rachael feels no remorse concerning her attitude or actions toward Eddie. She feels perfectly justified in keeping Eddie away from Amy, even at the end of a gun. In the end, Rachael is sufficiently moved by Eddie's drastic change: "I must be dreaming. He's a man after all" (57).

Gaines has been successful in creating older female narrators. His comments in interviews suggest that these are versions of the older women in his life “who were of great importance to him in his formative years” (Gaudet, Black Women 157). He virtually limits the woman’s narrational voice to the elderly. He has the utmost respect for women, whom he does not view as matriarchs. Gaines’s older female characters are based upon women in his life. Gaines has said that he obtained his values from the old women who raised him, particularly his aunt, and that his mother and his maternal grandmother were incredibly strong women: “I was raised by older women as a child. . . . I was around older women much more than I was around the men who came around the place where I lived” (Gaudet and Wooton 39). He says that Octavia’s character takes her strength from Gaines’s mother: “I think the person I had in mind as my mother was in “The Sky Is Gray.” [Octavia] was somewhat like her . . . an incredibly strong person. Both she and my maternal grandmother were extremely strong people” (Porch Talk 65). In his interview with Tom Carter for *Essence* magazine, Gaines also speaks of his Great Aunt, Miss Augusteen Jefferson:

She had great moral strength. I know the kind of burden she carried trying to raise us and I feel any character I wrote about has to have a burden. The main character has to have a heavy burden, one that can knock the average person down; sometimes it does but he has to get up. This is the philosophy I have, if I have any at all, because of the struggle of my aunt, the struggle of my race, the struggle of people in general. Any person who's worth a goddamn must really struggle. (82)

In the case of women narrators, Gaines hears the voice clearly only with older women. Thus they are the only women he allows to take over and narrate his fiction. Gaudet hypothesizes that “[P]erhaps the elderly women’s roles as conservators of culture and facilitators of community distinguish them in Gaines’s fiction as particularly appropriate female voices through which to present and interpret African-American life” (Black Women 157).

To sum up, in Gaines’s fiction, Older Black women gain strength and wisdom from life experiences. They become crones – strong physically, emotionally, and spiritually – whose survival into old age leads to a secure position of prominence in the African-American community as is the case with Miss Jane Pittman. Their belief in God helps them remain hopeful that He will deliver a brighter day if they only hold on and continue to have faith.

The Shaman

An old person’s power and usefulness are often pondered through the archetypal implications of the shaman, another essential later-life function.¹⁰ Less familiar to some readers, the Shaman among certain tribal peoples is a person who acts as intermediary between the natural and supernatural worlds, using magic to cure illness, foretell the future, and control spiritual forces and so on. “Shaman,” a word from the language of the Tungus people of Siberia,

has been adopted widely by anthropologists to refer to persons in a great variety of non-western cultures who were previously known by such terms as “witch,” “witch-doctor,” “medicine man,” “sorcerer,” “wizard,” “magic man,” “magician,” and “seer” (Harner and Harner 8). As Mircea Eliade observes, the shaman is distinguished from other kinds of magicians and medicine men by his or her use of a state of consciousness which Eliade calls “ecstasy,” following Western mystical tradition (86). In his trance, the shaman commonly works to heal a patient by restoring beneficial or vital power or by extracting harmful power. On the value of Shamanism, Phil Hine writes,

In trying to regain the spirit of our collective past, we can regain a sense of community with our ancestors, using techniques which carry us back to forebears on the Savannah plains of Africa. This can endow us with a sense of community that surpasses all cultural differences. In learning to see the world as Shamans, we reconnect with ourselves, and can adapt much easier to the world around us. (8)

Toni Morrison gives her older female characters shaman-like roles and functions, which defy or deconstruct the negative value judgments and transcend cultural stereotypes and perceptions of older Black women. Shamans, because of their function and power, stand out as the most prominent members of the African American community. According to the shamanistic tradition, dead ancestors are considered to be very much alive by the members of the community. The shamans have power to preserve the culture and heritage of the community through their ability to communicate with dead tribal ancestors as a way of healing and passing on past culture by relating the ancestor’s wisdom and heritage to younger generations. This guarantees the perpetuation of the culture through the generations. As community leaders, these

shamans are exclusively eligible to speak about the society's past and present identity and to offer means of healing, both literally and metaphorically, in times of adversity and sickness. In African-American novels, the shaman signals the character's importance. He or she is often a spiritual symbol in the novel and thus becomes a distinct figure. Shamans are awe-inspiring and endowed with qualities that add to their mysterious being. The healer or the so-called shaman brings together Christian and African spirituality to elderly blacks and shares with them their spiritual needs and life. Mircea Eliade tells us that the shaman "can be healer and guide as well as mystic and visionary" (qtd. in Spivey xiii).

In Morrison's works, the shaman appears frequently. In The Bluest Eye, M'Dear is a quiet, elderly woman who serves as a doctor in the community where Cholly Breedlove grows up. Tall and impressive, she carries a hickory stick not for support but for communication. When Old Aunt Jimmy "felt poorly," M'Dear is brought in. A quiet woman who lives in a shack near the woods, she is known for her "infallibility" and venerated as "a competent midwife and decisive diagnostician" (136). In any illness that cannot be handled by ordinary means – known cures, intuition, or endurance – the word is always, "Fetch M'Dear." When she arrives, M'Dear quickly sets about deducing a medical history of her patient by making full use of all available clues. Most telling of the nature of her diagnosis is her prescription: to Aunt Jimmy, for instance, she says, "You done caught cold in your womb; Drink pot liquor and nothing else" (137). In a note on folk medicine in The Bluest Eye, James Wren suggests that the importance of M'Dear's diagnosis lies in her approach to illness which represents a "radical departure from traditional attitudes" (173).

Besides M'Dear, there is also Soaphead Church in The Bluest Eye. He is central to the novel's plot, a West Indian elderly male, whom Morrison introduces to provide Pecola her

revelation. Though appearing only briefly in the novel, Church provides a remedy for the troubled young protagonist. Exemplifying all the aforementioned shamanic characteristics, he practices conjure as his only source of power where voodooos still command great respect within their communities. Morrison first introduces him as “an old man” who thinks of his behavior as generous and his intentions as noble. A misanthrope, his disdain for people leads him into sorcery, which he thinks brings him freedom and satisfaction since it is the kind of work that is dependent solely on his ability to win the trust of others and one in which the most intimate relationships are necessary. He thus becomes a

Reader, Adviser, and Interpreter of Dreams. His clientele was already persuaded and therefore manageable, and he had numerous opportunities to witness human stupidity without sharing it or being compromised by it. . . . He had no taste for luxury – his experience in the monastery had solidified his natural asceticism while it developed his preference for solitude. Celibacy was a haven, silence a shield. (165)

Since his early childhood education, Soaphead learned the fine art of self-deception:

He chose to remember Hamlet’s abuse of Ophelia, but not Christ’s love of Mary Magdalene; Hamlet’s frivolous politics, but not Christ’s serious anarchy. He noticed Gibbon’s acidity, but not his tolerance, Othello’s love for the fair Desdemona, but not Iago’s perverted love of Othello. The works he admired more were Dante’s; those he despised most were Dostoyevsky’s. (169)

Soaphead's perverted nature sets him apart from the more normal men and women in the novel. With all the education he received, he has a hatred of any hint of disorder or decay. A self-proclaimed psychic healer, Soaphead believes that the world is base and evil, and he concludes that evil exists because God created it. Morrison produces a character with a very neat personality, except for one flaw: "rare but keen sexual cravings" (166). His intentions, however, settle on those humans whose bodies are least offensive (that is, clean) – children, girls, in particular: "He was what one might call a very clean old man" (167). He fetishizes young girls because they are innocent and clean.

Pregnant by her father and shunned by the Black community, twelve-year-old Pecola Breedlove is easily deluded and believes Soaphead has the power to give her blue eyes. With an ugly little girl, asking for beauty, he feels sympathy toward the girl and quickly becomes angry because he is powerless to help her. For the first time he honestly wishes he could work miracles. With the trembling hand of an old shaman he makes a sign of the cross over her. His flesh crawls trying to hang on to the feeling of power he pretends to possess. He genuinely sympathizes with the girl because he knows she is in search of the thing that all of the people he meets desire – to be loved.

Soaphead is successful and able to grant requests without passing judgment on his clients. Acts of mercy such as this are morally ambiguous at best; at worst, they perpetuate deceit and are motivated not by mercy or love, but by the desire to preserve oneself by ensuring his clients' well-being. Soaphead perceives his deception of Pecola not as cruel but as redemptive as he honors her desires with another reward, too: instead of molesting her as he would most other young girls who cross his path, he lets her be. He seems satisfied when he acts

righteously toward her, both by not molesting her and by convincing her that her eyes have turned blue.

But Soaphead is a religious hypocrite who ministers to the people through false promises. He is an illustration of the perversions of a distorted, sinful world. In a letter to God he explains that he has taken over where God has failed. He chastises God for not granting Pecola the one thing she desires. In the meantime, he takes pride in his own ability to bestow upon the little girl and others like her the love they want. He thinks Pecola's request for blue eyes is a reasonable one because "God had done a poor job. . . . It was in fact a pity that the Maker had not sought [Church's] counsel" (170). Morrison suggests eccentricity in the character of Soaphead. Yet, in his old age, he is far beyond the desire to assimilate the values of the white middle class; rather, he acknowledges his black racial identity.

Soaphead's eccentricity gets taken to task in the criticism of the novel. Roberta Rubinstein, in her discussion of The Bluest Eye, identifies Soaphead as fraudulent: "He violates Pecola's spiritual innocence as surely as her father abuses her physical innocence" (142). Jan Furman describes the character as an "itinerant spiritualist and flawed human being, pedophile and con man, carrying his blackness as a burden to be borne with self-righteous indignation" (22). Yet despite all the criticism, Soaphead has significance in the narrative. John Duvall points out that Soaphead functions "as a significant early figure in Morrison's attempt to fashion a usable radicalized authorial identity" (28). Such a character, others note, lacks the ability of self-definition. Barbara Christian comments: "Elihu [Soaphead] is the tragic mulatto¹¹ who is both bred to, yet aware of, the waste in the urge to actualize" (Black Women Novelists 149). Morrison herself suggests this when she points out that Soaphead "would be wholly convinced that if Black people were more like White people they would be better off" (qtd. in Duvall 30).

Soaphead Church never achieves any sort of self-definition. Cheryl A. Wall argues: “The tragedy for these mulattoes is the impossibility of self definition. . . . Protagonists assume false identities that ensure social survival but result in psychological suicide” (89).

There is also an implicitly forgiving attitude in Morrison toward Soaphead Church. Morrison’s construction of Soaphead uses the “tragic mulatto” because his character flaws seem to be the result of miscegenation, and his actions seem inevitable. He is a flawed human being, a pedophile and a con man who has not transcended life’s humiliations and is deeply scarred. As both a shaman and a social pariah, Soaphead has been accepted by, but never assimilated into, the black community. His shamanism represents his direct confrontation with the oppressive social forces inherent in white domination and is portrayed in Morrison’s novel as liberational. His mixed blood gives him a false sense of superiority, which he maintains with delusions of greatness.

Unlike Soaphead Church, Baby Suggs of *Beloved* exemplifies well the positive aspects of aging in Morrison’s fiction. As the elder figure in this text and the matriarch of her family, Baby Suggs often reflects a wisdom and grace that not only sustains but also transcends her family. She serves as the Griot, the seer/shaman, and the historical witness to African tribal history and the life of the enslaved. In her position, she feels responsibility toward the whole Black community. A formerly enslaved Southern black woman, she speaks to the spiritual and psychological needs of the majority of the enslaved Black population.

As an elder, Baby Suggs provides wisdom and guidance for the present. “Like other preachers, [Baby Suggs] gave the slave community a context in which it could place itself and in which it could [find] refuge and a source of strength” (Peach 113-14). More important, however, is the person of Baby Suggs, whom the text suggests to be Christ-like. There is in fact

an allusion to Christ, the rock, in the description of Baby Suggs: “situating herself on a huge Hat-sided rock” (103). Her Christ-like message, “Let the children come,” (103) emulates Mark 10:14, “Suffer little children to come unto me, and forbid them not.” Like Jesus, she takes her message to “her own” – the Black people dispersed in the land. As she preaches to the multitudes, she bids the children to laugh, the men to dance, and the women to weep. In a symphony of laughter, dance and weeping, the crowds respond to Baby Suggs’s “great big old heart” (89). The message restores their sense of self-worth by urging them to love their physical bodies which have been so degraded by slavery.

Baby Suggs thus plays a distinct role as a preacher in the Clearing – a wide-open place cut deep in the woods nobody knows (Beloved 102). She demonstrates her capacity for creative and righteous acts that promote healing and assist with spiritual growth. Her sermon reveals how oppression and injustice generate self-hatred and social as well as spiritual death. In assisting her people to love and connect the dismembered and unremembered parts of themselves, Baby Suggs brings to their remembrance the mutilated African body. After a long time of preaching to the people, “Baby Suggs, holy, believed she had lied. There was no grace – imaginary or real – and no sunlit dance in a Clearing could change that. Her faith, her love, her imagination and her great big heart began to collapse. . . . The White folks had tired her out at last” (207).

Old Baby Suggs is central in the lives of black people in the novel and to the plot development as a whole. Even after her death, Sethe and Denver believe that she was able to effect change despite her physical absence from among them. For example, when the baby ghost fails to appear, Denver concludes that “Grandma Baby must be stopping it” (10). As a

shaman Baby Suggs is able to confront evil, reach out to the poor and provide the needs of her own Black folks.

Similar to the character of Baby Suggs in Beloved is old Consolata (aka, Connie) in Paradise. A centuries-old Native American prophecy speaks of “the circle of grandmothers” coming together during these chaotic times, encouraging humanity to turn to these sages for guidance and the action needed to assure humanity’s place on earth. Connie’s ideas are traditional and revolutionary at the same time. With her newly acquired shamanic power, the aging Connie now transforms and takes charge of the women at the convent. She marshals them into a new sense of purpose and life. Connie instructs them to paint images of themselves, their pasts, and their fears on the basement floor and walls and begins to lead them in sessions of “loud dreaming” that allow them to purge their souls by telling their stories to each other. From their position on the floor, the women begin to tell their stories, which merge into one dream-like monologue. They help each other piece together the details of their individual stories toward a coherent narrative. Consolata thus insists on the union of the two parts into which woman has been divided in Western culture: the sinning flesh and the perfect soul. Now the women actively take control of their stories, and “unlike some people in Ruby, the convent women were no longer haunted” (266). Connie’s union of the physical and spiritual worlds may be seen as counteractive to Ruby’s emphasis on spiritual goals and its denigration of the physical.

Shaman characteristics are also evident in the character of Lone DuPres in Paradise. Lone serves as Ruby, Oklahoma’s only midwife until the hospital in Demby, the nearest town, ninety miles away, begins to admit blacks. Lone, a Christian who also “practices,” befriends Consolata Sosa and teaches her the power of engaging people and saving them. Lone visits

Connie and talks about magic, but Connie rejects Lone's suggestions because of her faith. When Soane's drunk fifteen-year-old son Scout crashes the truck he is driving, Connie is willing to try Lone's practice. Following Lone's directions, Connie enters the dead boy's body and leads him back to life. Connie is horrified by what she has done because she believes her actions are non-catholic and thus sinful; Lone nevertheless insists that the shaman power is a gift from God. Connie believes that the power is evil despite Lone's insistence that "God don't make mistakes" (246). After she resurrects Scout, who has died in a car accident, she is ecstatic until she begins to consider the theological implication of her act: "The exhilaration was gone now, and the thing seemed nasty to her. Like devilment. Like evil craft. Something it would mortify her to tell Mary Magna, Jesus or the Virgin. She hadn't known what she was doing; she was under a spell. Lone's spell. And told her so" (246).

Lone DuPre, on the other hand, has the gift of knowing people's thoughts in addition to her ability to midwife and heal. She functions as a healer in the novel by tending to pregnant women, their babies and sick people. She contributes to the overall well-being of the town, assisting countless women in the community of Ruby through pregnancy and childbirth (271). Though not a doctor, Lone has knowledge of natural and spiritual remedies of healing. When Connie experiences the first signs of menopause, the old midwife Lone administers herbal tea. More than these everyday remedies, she also possesses a special power - the power to raise the dead. This shaman character uses her healing power for the good of everyone in her community for more than eight decades and passes her craft to others.

The shaman is certainly used to re-establish contact with the forgotten past history. Lone links the narrative with the African-American tradition and draws Connie back toward her own roots in Afro-Brazilian culture. Lone knows what neither memory nor history can say or record:

“the trick of life and its reason” (272). While Connie realizes her limited powers and frets about making non-catholic moves for helping people, Lone has no trouble using what she considers to be God’s gift. Both can hear the unspoken and interpret what is said as well as what remains unstated. In addition, Connie appears to Soane as a ghost – a sign of Morrison’s adaptation of the African belief system and an indication of the role of the shaman as protector and guardian. Lone’s and Connie’s gift connects them to Pilate of Song of Solomon and Marie-Therese of Tar Baby, also guardians of the African-American legacy.

In Song of Solomon, Morrison uses Pilate to draw attention to the possibilities of non-western spirituality. She is eccentric and, though part of her community, she is also apart from it. While respected and sometimes feared, Pilate is not beloved by the community. John Duvall comments, “If people turn to Pilate, it is because she has a conjure power and potions; she can defeat apparently physically stronger men, and can also make fools of the police” (93). Pilate even claims that there is a ghost who comes to visit her at her wine house – a surer sign of Pilate’s unnaturalness than that stigmatized by the missing navel. Pilate further speaks to her dead father Jake/Macon, who comes to her wearing “a white shirt, a blue collar, and a brown peaked cap” (150). Because she is spiritually directed, Milkman becomes her spiritual heir. At the end of his journey, Milkman has a renewed respect for his aunt Pilate and a new belief in the spirit world, both of which suggest the possibility that African-American men may re-conceive their masculinity in a non-patriarchal fashion, that is, in a way that does not reduce African-American women to objects of possession. Aside from her strengths, critics emphasize Pilate’s flawed character, being rootless and searching for a place of belonging. Davis writes that Pilate “originates nothing,” lacks “conscious knowledge,” and acts with “an oddly garbled sense of mission” (“Self” 339); Bakerman describes her as a “failure” (“Failures of love” 556); Scruggs

finds her pathetic and alienated (“Nature of Desire” 320-22). Morrison's own commentary on Pilate is much ambiguous: "I was just interested in finally placing black women center stage in the text, and not as the all-knowing, infallible black matriarch but as flawed here, triumphant there, mean, nice, complicated woman" (Taylor-Guthrie 231). However, it would be unjust to see Pilate as a totally negative character lest we should ignore the way women are often seen as guardians of worthwhile knowledge which men need to acquire. Song of Solomon, in short, casts women in a better light than men.

With such an array of old characters, Morrison is able to charge them with many responsibilities: the ancestor to pass on wisdom, the Crone to defend her kinship, and the shaman to direct communal good will. No longer are we able to claim ignorance of elderly blacks and the fact that they are integral to the health and well-being of American society. Thus, in her works, older women – be they mammies or matriarchs, Croness, ancestors or Shamans – are as imperfect as the world in which they live.

Gaines and Morrison adopt an affirming attitude toward southern traditional culture as clearly demonstrated in the lives of these elderly types. The two authors find in African American culture a useful and enduring tradition which includes respect for elders, whose participation would restore order to a fragmented culture. The archetypes presented in this chapter represent the broad repression of African Americans and their refusal of the victimized status long assigned to them in the mainstream society, hence underscoring the positive resources of the traditional black community. By embracing their new roles within their community, they enact the changing attitudes toward the traditional Afro-American culture and become teachers in the fullest sense, seeking “to relieve pain, to relieve hurt,” as Reverend Ambrose in A Lesson before Dying puts it (218).

Notes on Chapter Three

1. An archetype is the original; the stereotype is a repeated copy of the archetype with modifications. See Catherine J. Starke, Black Portraiture in American Fiction. Stock Characters, Archetypes and Individuals. For discussions on the archetypal figures in women's fiction, see Annis Pratt, Archetypal Patterns in Women's Fiction; Carol Pearson and Katherine Pope, The Female Hero in American and British Literature; also Joseph T. Skerrett, Jr. "Recitation to the Griot: Storytelling and Learning in Morrison's Song of Solomon," in Conjuring: Black Women, Fiction, and Literary Tradition, ed. Marjorie Pryse and Hortense J. Spillers; and Jacqueline de Weever, "Toni Morrison's Use of Fairy Tale, Folk Tale, and Myth in Song of Solomon." All these images acknowledge the positive cultural functions older Black women serve in their community in contradiction to the negative images associated with them, especially in literature written by men.
2. For the true mammy of the plantation tradition, Harris provides a literary analysis of Charles Chesnutt's The Marrow of Tradition (1901), Toni Morrison's The Bluest Eye (1970), and Kristin Hunter's God Bless the Child (1987). Harris's research highlights the legacy of African-Americans who consistently sought to declare the self and claim subjectivity.
3. Campbell uses myths as guidelines to connect people with their inner consciousness. A thorough treatment of Campbell's wisdom is found in his book, The Power of Myths, an edited transcript of the PBS interviews with Bill Moyers, and sums up Campbell's lifelong views on mythology and our ties to the past.
4. Stenudd's article "Psychoanalysis of Myth" was originally written in 2006 for a seminar at the Department of History of Ideas, Lund University.

5. Probably the feminine present participle of *medein*, "to protect or rule over" (American Heritage Dictionary). In the 20th century, feminists reassessed Medusa's appearances in literature and in modern culture. The name "Medusa" itself is often used in ways not directly connected to the mythological figure but to connote malevolence; despite her origins as a beauty, the name in common usage came to mean monster. When considered in archetypal structures, Medusa is the paragon of all women whom every man simultaneously fears and seeks. Female Rage: Unlocking Its Secrets, Claiming Its Power by Mary Valentis and Anne Devane, notes that "[w]hen we asked women what female rage looks like to them, it was always Medusa, the snaky-haired monster of myth, who came to mind In one Interview after another we were told that Medusa is 'the most horrific woman in the world.' . . . [However], none of the women we interviewed could remember the details of the myth" (Wilk 217-18). The essay "Medusa's Head" (1922) by Sigmund Freud contributed to a body of criticism surrounding the Medusa Myth. Also, the reader may also learn elements of the myth and its symbolism @ http://www.english.illinois.edu/maps/poets/a_f/bogan/medusamyth.htm
- The petrifying image of Medusa makes an instantly recognizable feature in popular culture. Medusa is featured in the 1981 film "Clash of the Titans" as well as its 2010 remake.
6. Morrison strongly emphasizes the ancestor as the foundation, as a life-giving source or force who guides those in need of direction or guidance (back to and into the ancestral world). This theme is given full attention in her articles "Rootedness: The Ancestor as a Foundation," and "City Limits, Village Values." In both articles, Morrison emphasizes the values of community and ancestral continuity. She does not, however, propose a total rejection of the real world. Instead, she suggests possible integration of the two worlds.

7. Although Paul D is not an elderly character in the novel, critics such as Elizabeth Ann Beaulieu argue that Paul D represents the ancestor in the novel because he is the only source of comfort and protection to Sethe and her household (76).
8. Circe is a mythological figure, a beguiling and bewitching woman of evil power, not typical of Circe in Song of Solomon, where she is depicted as being helpful and supportive to the Dead family. Morrison does not bring out the underlying significance of the ancient mythological symbols.
9. The Oxford English Dictionary suggests that crone is probably from *carogne*, meaning “a cantankerous or mischievous woman.” This meaning seems somewhat appropriate. It is noteworthy that Merriam-Webster gives as the etymology of *crone* the Greek *chronios*, meaning long-lasting, which in turn is from *chromos*, meaning time. It would seem eminently logical to think that *crone* is rooted in the word for “long-lasting,” for this is what crones are.
10. The word “Shaman” usually refers to a male practitioner whereas the word “Shamaka” refers to a female. In many societies, for economic and social reasons that have little connection with the practice of shamanism itself, most of the shamans are men. In medieval and Renaissance Europe, widows and elderly women similarly often became healing shamans, partly to support themselves. The Inquisition termed them “witches,” as Christian missionaries commonly still call shamans in non-Western societies. See Harner and Harner.
11. The tragic mulatto appears in slave narratives. Critics such as Barbara Christian, Hazel Carby, and Hortense Spillers have analyzed the ways in which the mulatto represents a taboo, an allegory for the racially divided society. See Elizabeth Abel’s Female Subjects in Black and White: Race, Psychoanalysis, Feminism. Also, Barbara Christian. Black Women Novelists: the Development of a Tradition, 1892-1976.

CHAPTER FOUR

ESSENTIALIZING THE EX-CENTRIC:
GENDER REPRESENTATIONS IN MORRISON AND GAINES

The construction of gender is both the product and process of its representation.

–Teresa de Laureates –

When a woman chooses myth as her subject, she is faced with material that is indifferent or, more often, actively hostile to historical considerations of gender, claiming as it does universal, humanistic, natural, or even archetypal status. To face myth as a woman writer is putting things as their most extreme, to stand at the impact point of a strong system of interpretation masked as representation, and to rehearse one's own colonization or "iconization" through the materials one's culture considers powerful and primary.

Rachel DuPlessis

The black culture has its unique features. Present realities of race and gender inequality have shaped the lives of African-American men and women. Morrison and Gaines create characters who cannot be convincingly categorized as exclusively male or female. With a strong feeling of autonomy and independence, their characters – mainly female and elderly – claim to destroy the male/female binary in their struggle for freedom and their quest for new identities. These elderly females are the tar women who are created with the sole purpose to disrupt the

hegemonic (Eurocentric) gender discourse.¹ They are *bi*-gendered as they defy the normative classification.

To better understand the concept of gender within the African-American context, we need to look briefly at some theorists' and critics' views on this matter. Judith Butler in Gender Trouble argues that the development of the self must be accomplished within the dominant social order. Freud believes in the power of the subconscious. Lacan contends that concepts such as "masculinity" and "femininity" are social constructs. Lacan notes, as did Freud, that sexual identity is fluid; it can be "disrupted" by the unconscious. French critic Michele Foucault contends that power also has a role in gender relations and that deviations from the normative roles threaten the status quo. Gender identification as "disruption" – as is the case in the African-American context – does not coincide with the hegemonic definitions of "appropriate." Gender is not biological, according to Chodorow, and "gender differences and the experience of difference . . . are socially and psychologically created and situated" (4).²

Moreover, as feminists have noted, gender difference is equated with inferiority. This notion is especially important to African-Americans where the women can be said to be doubly *othered* by virtue of being both Black and female. The development of their identity is thus threatened and impeded. Also relevant here is Descartes' theory of the "*cogito*," which argues that "the self is created and maintained by thought" (27), a notion that I find particularly relevant for our discussion of strong Black women (i.e., the tar women) in Morrison's and Gaines's fiction whose behavior is taken as constitutive not of human nature but of their experience as a whole.

The Ageism which old women experience and the inferior status they hold in society are firmly embedded in sexism as claimed by Fiore (12). This also emphasizes what feminist

Barbara MacDonald says concerning older women as “twice unseen – unseen because they are old, unseen because they are women.” The latter also points out that older Black women are “thrice unseen” (84). Hortense J. Spillers, in her study of psychoanalysis, race and Black feminism, applies race to fiction studies in gender relations. In her “Mama’s Baby, Papa’s Maybe,” a powerfully memorable critique of the Moynihan Report, Spillers suggests, “This problematizing of gender places her out of the traditional symbolics of female gender, and it is our task to make a place for this different social subject” (404). That social subject is the African-American woman, the mother, the daughter who becomes historically and culturally empowered under slavery. Spillers further explains that this subject was “ungendered” insofar as the slave’s body was understood not as human, but rather as a commodity within which gender did not exist. The term gender-neutral thus “identify the quality of enslaved existence in the post-slavery era when identity, self-definition, and traditional gender definitions are blurred or slightly fading” (60). “Claiming the monstrosity, which her culture imposes in blindness, “Sapphire” might rewrite after all a radically different text for a female empowerment” (Spillers 404). In the Sapphire prototype, the characters share traits of both genders and the conventional gender definitions are blurred but the effect of such blurring is unclear.

Patriarchal structures and stereotyped notions of gender, however, hide the past disempowerment of many African-Americans to the extent that, albeit critical, may appear subliminal. Unemployment or low incomes thwart men’s ability to fulfill their roles as heads of households and breadwinners, which disrupts men’s social value, identity and self-esteem. On the other hand, women’s roles and responsibilities increase. Morrison and Gaines deal with this phenomenon of role reversal or, for a better term, “gender blurring” to show how the change in traditional gender roles brings condemnation upon the Black race. I borrow the term “Tar

Women” from Morrison's novel Tar Baby where Morrison speaks of Jadine as having lost the tar quality or “the ability to hold something together that otherwise would fall apart.” In Jazz, Morrison presents a triad of lost characters – a male and two females. With the male in between, Morrison avoids what Linda Hutcheon calls “essentializing the female,” that is, positing the female as “essence” (68). For her political agenda, Morrison portrays Joe Trace, a violent Black male with a wild irrational power, in a more or less sympathetic light, similar to her portrayal of Son in Tar Baby.³ By so doing, the author follows the postmodern strategy of “[u]ndermining the concept of a static identity” (Maxwell 217).

With collapsing traditional structures, the emergence of new social roles, norms and values affects male and female gender identity. In Morrison's Beloved, she calls attention to the way she genders her characters in order to augment what she perceives as the legacy of slavery. Elizabeth Ann Beaulieu, in Black Women Writers and the American Neo-Slave Narrative, uses “gender-blurring” to describe the brutal experience of the characters in Beloved. Spillers refers to the characters of Sethe and Paul D: the latter is endowed with characteristics that are typical of women, and Sethe, on the other hand, assumes a number of masculine qualities. While Sethe and Paul D. are not considered elderly, their example draws attention to and emphasizes Beaulieu’s viewpoint. In a display of courage and physical power, Sethe manages to escape Sweet Home and lead an independent life. Denver, Sethe’s daughter, later reflects on her mother’s strong characteristics:

The one who never looked away, who when a man got stomped to death by a mare right in front of Sawyer’s restaurant did not look away; and when a sow began eating her own litter did not look away then either. And when the baby’s spirit picked up her Boy and slammed him into the wall hard enough to break

two of his legs and dislocate his eye, so hard he went into convulsions and chewed up his tongue, still her mother had not looked away. She had taken a hammer, knocked the dog unconscious, wiped away the blood and saliva, pushed his eye back in his head and set his leg bones. (12)

In this passage, Sethe's unique behavior and fearlessness, more typical of men, proves her gender-blurred identity. Morrison even flashes back to Sethe's mother to demonstrate the irrelevance of gender in slavery. Sethe's mother shows her daughter a circle and a cross burnt in the skin on her rib as a mark. She explains that, if something happens to her, Sethe can only identify her by the mark and not by her face. Katrin Rindchen argues that Sethe kills her own daughter as a result of herself being deprived of a mother. And according to Aoi Mori, "Sethe's lack of communication with her own mother drives her into an extremely protective and, at the same time, deranged motherhood" (107). Whatever the reason or the motive, the infanticide testifies to her power of self-determination as to how to react to danger and fulfill her role as a mother regardless of her unacknowledged femininity.

Arguments might also be made for Morrison's gender-blurring in depicting the elderly character of Baby Suggs, whose great leadership skills are cleverly portrayed. The example emphasizes Morrison's intent to dramatize the characters' "individuation" and to support our understanding of her own perspective on slavery and identity issues. Beaulieu's new term manifests itself well in Morrison's novels, as well as in Gaines's, when her female characters are bound together, determined to live and survive with dignity under any odd or extraordinary circumstances regardless of their gender. These are the "tar women" who arouse awe because they are powerful in ways that women are not traditionally supposed to be.

These tar women are descendants of the African ancestors to whom tradition looms largest. Ancestral descent or lineage, however, does not define the quality of the descendant. By viewing the older black women in this light—having the tar quality—Morrison and Gaines create an aesthetic with an objective understating of racial individuality. Questions of gender and identity surface through the authors' dramatization of the tar women's unrelenting struggle for racial equality in a dominant culture. Morrison explains in her interview with Judith Wilson. "If the race is to survive, it has to take care of its own – That's not an agency's job" (131). She thus emphasizes the importance of nurturing the race from within and the need for more role models to counteract the negative images that often bombard the Black community.

For her vision of strong and proud women, Morrison uses the womanist perspective.⁴ The term "womanist" is, by definition, a person who is committed to the survival and wholeness of her entire people, male and female (Alice Walker xi). According to Walker, the term is:

[u]sually referring to outrageous, audacious, courageous or willful behavior.

Committed to survival and wholeness of entire people, male and female. Not a separatist, except periodically, for health. Traditionally universalist. . . .

Traditionally capable. . . . Loves struggle. Loves the folk. Loves herself.

Regardless. (xi-xii)

These traits often define Morrison's mature and older women characters. After long weary years of oppression and subservience, they have realized their inner strength and resolved to run the race with contentment and self-sufficiency.

Older women have their roles, power, and subjective choices in society as they participate in preserving the community's values and traditions. Their value, however, is determined by what they can perform of community and societal roles traditionally expected of

them. They have often performed the domestic work of making life comfortable for others, and as a result, they have failed to achieve their own self-fulfillment. Younger generations in Sula and Tar Baby resent the older black women's acceptance of their role for themselves; their rejection leads them to distance themselves and seek to assert a sense of self denied outside of the parameters set for women by the society at large. On her deathbed, Sula tells Nel, "I know what every black woman in this country is doing; dying just like me" (143). Jadine in Tar Baby also admits to her aunt, "Your way is one. . . . But it's not my way; I don't want to be like you. . . . I don't want to be that kind of woman" (282). Like Sula, Jadine rebels against the ways of her aunt and the black women of her past. She sees these women as backward.

In her essay, "Convergence of Femininity and Ethnicity in the Fiction of Toni Morrison," Carolyn Denard argues that while Morrison allows older Black women full opportunity to voice their objections to what they view as limited, she does not condone their existentialist position: "In fact, rather than diminish the worth of the domestic roles that black women have served, Morrison accentuates the value and the inner strength required to perform them" (174). These older women are the tar women whom Morrison approves for their inner strength and whose value and self-worth, she believes must not be minimized or defined by others. Instead, they should be celebrated while they hold proudly and steadfastly to the values of black womanhood in a way that is historically and culturally resolute.

The Myth of the Tar Woman Explained

Morrison sees great value in the employment of traditional African myths. These, however, prove to be problematic due to their phallogentric nature. The female is inferior and occupies a non-heroic status. While Morrison expresses her advocacy of Afro centric myths, she also attempts a disruption to their phallogentric ideology and condemns the myths' general

failure to uphold the female as active participant in the story of Black survival – their self-actualization and cultural preservation. Michael Awkward in “Unruly and Let Loose” argues, “[t]he question of gender-specific) exclusion is profoundly important to Morrison’s formulations. . . . Clearly, for Morrison Black female psychic health cannot be achieved without the cooperative participation of both females and males in its creation and nurturance” (77). Morrison thus critiques the phallogentric nature of traditional myths and creates female-centered narratives with women as heroes and subjects. The tar lady in African mythology is one example. In her conversation with Thomas Le Clair, Morrison explains, “At one time, a tar pit was a holy place, at least an important place, because tar was used to build. . . . For me the tar baby came to mean the Black woman who can hold things together” (Le Clair 27). The tar women could likewise “hold together the stones of pyramids and the rushes of Moses’s crib” (Tar Baby 183).

Tar seems to be of sacred quality in this interpretation. For Morrison it is sacred because it has played a role in building up and preserving structures that are sacred. Tar in the Moses story is significant because Moses became the prophetic leader of an exodus from slavery. In the African-American spiritual “Go Down, Moses,” the Moses myth reveals the sacredness of socio-political freedom and justice in history. In her novel Moses, Man of the Mountain, Zora Neale Hurston reconstructs the myth of Moses from the African-American perspective. Likewise, Morrison suggests that the tar used to preserve Moses’s life has Afro-centric, sacred meaning. The myth thus reveals Black women’s spiritual power and moral wisdom to “hold things” together. For Morrison, “the tar baby came to mean the Black woman who can hold things together. The story was a point of departure to history and prophecy. That’s what I mean by dusting off the myth, looking closely at it to see what it might conceal (Le Clair 126).

In this sense, the tar baby myth functions as a metaphor for Black womanhood. The tar's power to hold together and to preserve that which is sacred – life, family, and community – is embodied in older Black women in Morrison's fiction. In Tar Baby, Ondine challenges Jadine to remember her "ancient properties." As Jadine falls into the tar pit and clings to a tree to pull herself out, the "swamp women" in the trees above her – mythological ancestors – realize that she resists "their sacred properties," as discussed earlier in Chapter Three. In deconstructing the myth, Morrison reveals the moral wisdom and power of the ancestors. The powers to nurture and hold things together are sacred properties of older Black women, not just the biological mothers. The night women appear to Jadine and "bare their breasts as symbols of the ancient properties to nurture and bare culture" (Tar Baby 258-59).

Tar, which has been used by Euro-Americans to denigrate Black women, is positively revised by Morrison. Although the meaning has been distorted by white culture, it can be redefined by Black women. In Morrison's view, Black women who neglect any thought or remembrance of the ancient properties of Black womanhood have already lost the tar quality and are incapable of holding together that which otherwise would fall apart. Susan Willis laments that Morrison's women lose their origin and simplicity. Willis writes, "[T]hey learn how to behave. The careful development of thrift, patience, high morals, and good manners. In short, how to get rid of the funkiness. The dreadful funkiness of passion, the funkiness of nature, the funkiness of the wide range of human emotions" (265-66). For Morrison, examining the tar baby myth unfolds the mystery of history for her readers, helps reveal Black women's power to preserve Black life and culture, and prophesies the significance of understanding the uniqueness of the Black community.

The Making of the Tar Women in Toni Morrison

Morrison contends that the old notions, myths and stereotypes must be done away with systematically. We can see this clearly in her older characters who are strong and indestructible, as Mari Evans so eloquently puts it in her poem “I am a Black Woman”:

. . . I
 am a black woman
 tall as a cypress
 strong
 beyond all definition still
 defying place
 and time
 and circumstance
 assailed
 impervious
 indestructible
 look
 on me and be
 renewed. (12)

Evans’s pronouncement calls Black Americans to reconstruct their destinies by the light of black vision. Morrison’s older women are there to act as models and images for their kin to seek their renewal and put to rest the past beliefs of their acquiescence and intellectual servitude. Through these old figures, Morrison actively brings the rich resources of the folk heritage to the scene. Her older tar women are gender-neutral, a tradition in Morrison's fiction

where older characters not only transcend societal limits but also share traits of both genders. Gender blurring as evidenced in her work is a fundamental and crucial characteristic of these tar women.

In her examination of Morrison's characters, Trotter-White writes, "The characters in Morrison's novels are affected by their status as 'Other' in white society and the ways in which that status hinders the development of a whole and balanced self" (20). I can use White's example of "othering" as an illustration of Morrison's argument about the necessity of survival in a hostile environment that drives individuals to do two things: first, to build a strong character under pressure – that is, according to Jane Bakerman, to "remain whole" (60) – and, second, to relate to oneself and others in order to diminish the consequences of these adverse conditions. In other words, Morrison's characters, regardless of their gender, manage to survive with dignity and become socially articulate. In her first novels, older women appear as convincingly triumphant. Wendy Harding and Jacky Martin note, "Black women are represented in Morrison's work as a kind of touchstone – a pattern for existence – survivors of the socio-psychic fragmentation to which black Americans are subjected" (62). In her response to the imposed limits of her society, an elderly African-American woman defines her originality. In her essay "What the Black Woman thinks about Women's Libs?" Morrison explains that "[t]he black woman had nothing to fall back upon: not maleness, not whiteness, not ladyhood, not anything. And out of the profound desolation of her reality she may very well have invented herself" (63). The various oppressions - including gender, race, and class - push elderly black women to invent or imagine a new order; these are women who have grown old, strong, and whole in their struggle for existence.

Drawing on the African myth of the “tar lady,” discussed above, Morrison’s older characters in The Bluest Eye provide a powerful example of what Morrison considers the “tar quality” of older Black women. She writes that they,

came edging into life from the back door. . . . They ran the houses of white people, and they knew it. When the white men beat their men, they cleaned up the blood and went home to receive abuse from the victim. They beat their children with one hand and stole for them with the other. The hands that felled trees also cut umbilical cords; the hands that wrung the necks of chickens and butchered hogs also nudged African violets into bloom; the arms that loaded sheaves, bales and sacks rocked babies into sleep. They patted biscuits into flaky ovals of innocence – and shrouded the dead. They plowed all day and came home to nestle like plums under the limbs of their men. The legs that straddled a mule’s back were the same ones that straddled their men’s hips. And the difference was all the difference there was. (110)

The women in the passage resolve within themselves the gender divide, yet despite the bleak picture set before them, they do not resent the roles they serve but instead create their own positive images. Morrison’s older women are capable of making differences contrary to the stereotypical views of them. Powerful as they are, these exemplary women do not offer a solution to the apparent division between the sexes, for in the end they survive without men and gather in each other’s company. A strong woman like Pilate in Song of Solomon is shown as inferior to men, yet independent. The incredibly old woman Circe has willfully outlasted the Whites so as to destroy everything they found precious. Aunt Jimmy’s network of women is describes as truly free, and they transform their indignities into something usable. Aunt Jimmy

counters the muting of the young voices in the community that “[b]lended into a threnody of nostalgia about pain” (109). Yet since Morrison is deeply concerned with the problems besetting the black community as a whole, these proven survivors generally remain at the periphery of her novels; nevertheless, they exhibit traditional values of black womanhood. And it is in the development of these tar women that Morrison engages in the kind of ethnic cultural feminism that she advocates.

According to Carolyn Denard, ethnic cultural feminism is “concerned more with the particular female cultural values of their ethnic group rather than with those of women in general” (171). Drawing on the novels of Toni Morrison to illustrate this approach, Denard explains that ethnic cultural feminism acknowledges the damaging effects of sexism on women of color, both inside and outside their ethnic community, but it “does not advocate as a solution to their oppression [a] . . . political feminism that alienates black women from their ethnic group” (172). Furthermore, ethnic cultural feminism “celebrates the unique feminine cultural values that Black women have developed in spite of and often because of their oppression” (172).

Morrison’s elderly characters in The Bluest Eye, however atypical, are convincingly gender neutral as well; not only are they true to their roles, but also assertive and aggressive. We are introduced to Cholly’s Great Aunt Jimmy, who rescued him from his mother who had placed him on a junk heap by the railroad. Aunt Jimmy beats her niece, Cholly’s mother, with a razor strap and will not let her near the baby after that. Aunt Jimmy raises Cholly herself but takes delight sometimes in telling him of how she had saved his life. The story of Aunt Jimmy demonstrates Morrison’s ability to move seamlessly between strong, individual characters and a broader picture of black life. Aunt Jimmy is an individual but is also a representative of elderly

black women. She has suffered violence and committed violence. Now that she is old, she is at last free—free to feel what she feels and go where she wants to go without fear.

Morrison further details some physical characteristics of elderly Blacks as represented in Aunt Jimmy about which Cholly does not feel comfortable or grateful when he watches her “eating collards with her fingers, sucking her four gold teeth, or smelled her when she wore the asafetida bag around her neck, or when she made him sleep with her for warmth in winter and he could see her old, wrinkled breasts sagging in her nightgown – then he wondered whether it would have been just as well to have died there” (132-33). The resentment that Cholly articulates regarding his aunt’s aging physical signs reflects on the generational conflict that often grieves American society in general, though this is a secondary concern to our discussion here.

Morrison’s unusual approach to gendering becomes even more evident in the old female character Pilate in Song of Solomon. Pilate is the dominant female figure in the novel. The conventional feminine qualities she bears are obvious: she is a mother and a grandmother, a nurturer, a conjurer, a practitioner of folk ways, and a storyteller. However, she bears a man’s name and dresses in men’s clothing. She is clearly the head of the household in all respects. Joseph T. Skerrett, Jr. in “Recitations to the Griot,” asserts that “Pilate’s personal power goes beyond the conventions of her gender” (198). Despite her physical idiosyncrasies, her values are like those of all tar women: a caring concern for her home, family and community. Although she represents love in the novel, Pilate is the community’s pariah, disliked due to her lack of a navel, which also suggests her out-of-the-ordinary human nature.

The gender-specific question here raises doubts of a potential threat of a narrowly-focused Black feminist criticism. Morrison rejects the feminist idea of an exclusively female

community as the best means for the Black female's well-being: "That is the disability," she writes, "we must be on guard against for the future – the female who reproduces the female who reproduces the female" ("Rootedness" 344). She is in favor of male participation to help provide the new Black woman with a sense of "balance" between "the best of that which is female and the best of that which is male," without which sound gender and ethnic relations are unlikely (Awkward, "Unruly" 489).

Conjuring is another source of empowerment to Pilate in Song of Solomon. "Subjugated to exploitative conditions through the sorcery of white America," Houston Baker explains, "[Pilate's] escape is only through the wisdom of words" (95). As a conjure woman, she uses voodoo – her cultural heritage escape is only through the – with which she manages to defy all forces of an oppressive culture. Pilate thus plays an important protective and emancipatory role in the novel. She is believed to have supernatural powers and abilities that supersede human norms. She is "believed to have the power to step out of her skin, set a bush afire from fifty yards, and turn a man into a ripe rutabaga" (Song of Solomon 94). This woman is highly esteemed for her ability to transcend boundaries and even perform miracles of healing as she practices conjuring. Pilate's magic involves playing to white assumptions of the inferiority of African-Americans. She plays the Aunt Jemima/Mammy role to release Milkman and Guitar from their predicament. With the power of healing and preserving the past, a conjure woman is able to stand in opposition to all evil and expose communal guilt toward her, the old Black female who is ostracized for her lack of a navel. Pilate at last is able to transcend the boundaries that most human beings cannot. She seems to possess the tar quality that characterizes Morrison's female characters.

In Morrison's Sula, however, the author gives a bold, shocking, ethical portrait of the tar women, the old and the young women assuming the traditionally male roles in a battle for independence. Sula tells her grandmother, straight-out, to shut up. When Eva sputters that no one talks to her that way, " Don't nobody . . . ", Sula explodes,

This body does. Just 'cause you was bad enough to cut off your own leg you think you got a right to kick everybody with the stump."

"Who said I cut off my leg?"

"Well, you stuck it under a train to collect insurance,"

"Hold on, you lyin' heifer!"

"I aim to."

"Bible say honor thy father and thy mother that thy days may be long upon the land thy God giveth thee."

"Mamma must have skipped that part. Her days wasn't too long:'

"Pus mouth! God's going to strike you!"

"Which God? The one watched you burn Plum?"

"Don't talk to me about no burning. You watched your own mamma. You crazy roach! You the one should have been burnt!"

"Hellfire don't need lighting and it's already burning in you,

"Whatever's burning in me is mine!"

But I ain't. Got that? I ain't. Any more fires in this house, I'm lighting them!"

(92-93)

The encounter between Eva and Sula is antagonistic, since Eva insinuates that Sula was a bad daughter and even attempts to define Sula as the source of all chaos. On the other hand,

Eva's harsh experiences did not allow her to express her love in affectionate ways, but she provided what was necessary for their survival. Having the tar quality, Eva is not preoccupied with self-worth, but takes care of her children and the homeless. She reportedly had her leg run over by a train in order to collect the insurance payments to care for her family. For Sula to simply condemn Eva's actions is insignificant compared to the gravity of Eva's dilemma.

Aunt Jimmy, Pilate and Eva are clear examples of Morrison's tar women. So is Ondine from Tar Baby. From the above discussion of Ondine, we discover her steadfast belief in a commitment to family and tradition as the measurement of self-worth for a Black woman of any age. She even guides Jadine through the responsibilities of a good daughter; she says to her, "if she never learns how to be a daughter, she can't never learn how to be a woman. . . . A real woman – good enough for a child, good enough for a man, good enough even for the respect of other women" (281). Ondine, Aunt Jimmy, and Pilate hold proudly and steadfastly to the values of black womanhood. They are the "tar women" of whom Morrison approves and whose value, she believes, should not be curtailed by attention to the wrong value system or by existential yearnings and separate self-definitions. They provide the consistency that holds their families and communities together. Even without any endorsement from society, they keep their vision and their energies focused on what is worthwhile and sustaining. Morrison's emphasis on their selflessness and their strength is not to romanticize their limited opportunity for adventure or fulfillment outside the boundaries of their own communities. Instead, it is to show the value and the difficulty of the role that they serve. Thus, her role as an ethnic feminist is to deconstruct these misconceptions and to seek ways to reinforce the notion that racism, sexism and ageism are social ills that obliterate the real value of elderly black women.

Gender blurring is mainly a by-product of slavery, yet it cannot be found among slaves themselves who are considered genderless. This is made clear in Beloved. Because women are “required by the master’s demands to be as masculine in the performance of their work as their men” has consciously caused gender blurring (11), a concept Morrison works consciously to evoke in her novel. Morrison’s statement that “definitions belong to the definer, not the defined” (Beloved 190), suggests that control is demonstrated not only through the physical and economic means, but also through representation. Morrison exposes what women face as victims of debilitating racism as analogous to what they face as victims of patriarchal control. While Morrison’s claims are compelling, her women, the elderly in particular, do not participate in but resist such control. Because she invests her elderly black women with power and self-determination, they may even use violence as their survival tactic. Though women are often victims rather than perpetrators of violence, they learn not to be “defenseless ducks. . . . All over the country, Black women were armed. . . . Didn’t everything on God’s earth have or acquire defense? Speed, some poison in the leaf, the tongue, the tail? A mask, flight, numbers in the millions producing numbers in the millions? A thorn here, a spike there” (Jazz 72). The narrator of Jazz concedes that the past – “an abused record with no choice but to repeat itself” – contrasts with the portrayal of the characters being “original, complicated, changeable” (220). True Belle, Violet’s grandmother and a heroic figure in the novel, leaves her mistress in Baltimore and comes to the rescue of Violet’s family in Virginia. She raises her grandchildren, and her love heals their home. The narrator observes the potential for individual recovery through the older characters and marvels at the role an older character like True Belle can play to transform or reinvent the world and to promote hope for all peoples. By re-envisioning the Black history, the reader experiences the trauma of those

elderly Blacks. Morrison thus brings into consciousness what has been repressed both in literary representation and in historical narrative.

Morrison's tar women are models for resistance. By using the concept of the tar women, Morrison repositions America's history to ensure proper recognition of the older Black women who contribute significantly to the Black community. Her primary impetus is also to challenge negative stereotypes of black elderly women. Morrison's work provides alternatives to these negative images of black women presented to the American society and perpetuated by stereotypes. These black women, however, look to the past as a source of pride, and are able to recover a sense of wholeness both in themselves and in their history. With their tar quality, they shape America's future just as their maternal ancestors shaped America's past.

The Making of the Tar Women in Ernest Gaines

Not only do Morrison's texts confirm the value of elderly Black women's experiences, but in Gaines's texts women also stand as representatives of their race: born of ages of oppression, submission and ignorance. He is able to transform them into agents of success, self-determination and heroism. While literary representations of older Blacks remain problematic in mainstream culture, Gaines's older female characters create and maintain new identities against an immoral and dominant social order. Gaines's older women are self-empowered and fully convey portraits of subject-hood and life-sustaining values.

Gaines's art is understood in the context of a long literary tradition of strong female characters who function as guides or role models to others within the texts and potentially to readers. A female prototype for these characters is the fictional "Aunt" figure. Gaines has complex affinities with this subversive tradition of female heroism and Black feminism. While many of the black women in the literary texts resonate with images of the mammy, matriarch,

and hot momma, in Gaines's work they are also fully humanized with distinct characteristics that speak to their ideals. Also noticeable with these women is their utter rejection of public positions of power in relation to their men and the larger non-black world. Conducting a gender analysis of heroic male and female behavior reveals the quality of those people in the African-American context. The continuing tradition of strong Black/tar women is explored below in Gaines's The Autobiography of Miss Jane Pittman.

Gaines portrays his older black characters as far more complicated than the average Louisiana women, who often feel too inferior to have a positive impact on their community. The older characters of Miss Jane Pittman and the many elderly conjure women in his other books are counter-examples to the Western figures. These older characters are capable of challenging any race or gender ideologies that will continue to enforce their inferior status. I will approach these texts with less concern for their aesthetics and more attention to the message they convey regarding the heroism of black men versus the less clearly defined, albeit heroic, behavior of Black females. I would argue that part of the dilemma lies in its redefinition of gender roles. This gender-specific aspect of African-Americans' suffering highlights the struggles that have included black women as active participants and their insistence on being seen and heard.

Gaines's texts engage contemporary race and gender issues in order to explain racial and social inequality in the plantation quarters. He represents black women as they apparently suffer the fate of "double invisibility" in a male-dominated society, the fact which amounts to their misrepresentation. Not only are they misrepresented, but they are also denied their full potentialities. Harry R. Phillips argues that "by introducing conservative female subjects suffering from race and gender, the author [Gaines] mystifies Southern Black women's active

participation in public struggle” (27). A feminist reading of Gaines’s text would emphasize Phillips’s view of female misrepresentation and also reinforces male dominance. Catherine Belsey suggests the re-visioning of or deconstructing the literary text as a necessary corrective to demeaning stereotypes. Belsey notes,

The text implicitly criticizes its own ideology; it contains within itself the critique of its own values, in the sense that it is available for a new process of production of meaning by the reader, and in the process of production it can provide knowledge of the limits of ideological representation. (604)

Belsey carries along the primary concern of feminism – eliminating the subjugation of women. She establishes definitions for crucial terms as subject, identity, and ideology that seem to cross many boundaries. She thus finds deconstruction of the text a means to challenge the subject ideology, and produce multiplicity and diversity of possible meanings. The narrative gaps, according to Belsey, inform our analysis of the texts pertaining to Black female subjectivity – that is, gender inequality – and the reading of the submerged Black female.

Certainly the most popular and pervasive women in Gaines's fiction are the Aunt figures. Stowe’s “Aunt” figure has led to America’s most famous Mammy, Scarlett’s tyrant nurse in Gone with the Wind. Hattie McDaniel’s film portrayal of Margaret Mitchell’s creation has been recast for generations since that time on pancake boxes in the picture of “Aunt Jemima.” Writing of this reincarnation, James Baldwin in Notes of a Native Son (1955) observes, “There was no one more forbearing than Aunt Jemima, no one stronger, more loyal, or more wise; there was, at the same time, no one weaker or more faithless or more vicious and certainly no one more immoral” (28). Whatever the word “mammy” means in America, she is not a safe image

to consider. Her motherliness can only be troubling in a society that often forced her to abandon her own children or to bear children by her master who became slaves themselves. African-American writers give us an African-American matriarch counter-image to apply as a clearer, more honest figure of survival and determination. This very different Mama figure comes to us as early as the narrative of the slave mother Harriet Jacobs, writing of her grandmother in Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl in 1861. Aunt Martha is the embodiment of courageous and respectable motherhood. Her healing presence gives Linda Brent the courage to defy Dr. Flint's attempts to rape her and she is able to survive.

Very similar to the matriarch in Gaines's fiction as well as to the concept of tar ladies in Morrison, there is the Aunt figures who often hold positions of power and respect within the community. These older female figures seem to combine strength, humanity, and wisdom in life. The "aunt" who raises her great nieces and great nephews, is a common figure in black fiction and in black culture; Gaines himself was reared by a great aunt. The title "aunt" is usually used for an older woman even by those who are not really related to her, especially if they have known her all their lives. Though generally identifying themselves in terms of relationships to men, these women in Gaines's works are not passive servants but are influential in the development of these men. The aunt figures are often sources of strength and wisdom, but they can also be troubling, especially when trying to protect the boys or men from danger, real or nonexistent. The older women generally seem to have a confidence and sense of place that the men lack within their community. They create a sense of continuity and cohesiveness among their people. Nevertheless, there are important limitations, in Gaines's view, in what they can offer.

The Aunt type appears as a significant character in almost all of Gaines's fiction. There are Aunt Charlotte in Catherine Carmier; Aunt Amalia (Malia) in "Bloodline;" Aunt Angelina Bowie in In My Father's House; Aunt Caroline and Aunt Margaret in Of Love and Dust; Aunt Fe, Aunt Lou, and Aunt Cloe in "Just Like a Tree;" Tante Lou and Miss Emma in A Lesson before Dying, and Miss Jane in The Autobiography of Miss Jane Pittman. Given the importance of the exemplary role played by Miss Jane, she will be the focus of discussion in the next section. The significance of historical vision for Gaines is clearly articulated in the novel. Gaines does justice to the rich cultural repositories of lives such as Jane's, and the fictional Miss Jane becomes a representative of elderly Black women in the American history: "This is not only Miss Jane's autobiography, it is theirs as well. . . . Miss Jane's story is all of their stories, and their stories are Miss Jane's" (x). Spanning a long time period in history, Miss Jane's story includes elements neglected, excluded or misrepresented.

Miss Jane Pittman: An Ordinary Person Doing Extraordinary Things

The continuity of the Black struggle for freedom is beautifully written in Gaines's The Autobiography of Miss Jane Pittman, a book that marks a significant departure from the modern neo-slave narrative paradigm set by Morrison. The continued struggle in Gaines's fiction concerns issues of racial tensions and complex characterizations. This, however, makes Gaines's The Autobiography of Miss Jane Pittman a realistic account without returning to the bleak picture depicted by Morrison.

Gaines's emphasis on resistance and heroism in the example of Miss Jane Pittman as a figure capable of moving with power and authority is notable. Miss Jane, a true example of the tar woman, is the superhero who arouses awe because she is powerful in ways that traditional women are not. Jane is one-hundred-and-ten years old and is a former slave who has lived to see

the civil rights era. From the beginning, she is well aware of herself and the need to speak up and act how she needs to, regardless of the consequences. Although she is never called “aunt,” she is certainly Gaines's most famous aunt figure in his art. She shares many of the characteristics of the aunt figure. Keith E. Byerman describes her as "perhaps the ultimate 'aunt' figure in Gaines's fiction," noting that she is "old and respected" and has "undergone a full range of experiences in the world of the folk" (Fingering 87).

Pursuing a long-standing interest in his Southern culture has led Gaines to write The Autobiography of Miss Jane Pittman. While all autobiographical fiction is fraught with possibilities, Miss Jane Pittman does provide the reader with a fictional recasting of the Southern history in the United States. Her experience is that of the body of African-Americans who lived in the Deep South from the Civil War on. Her life spans slavery, Reconstruction, two World Wars, and the mid-twentieth-century Civil Rights movement. There are great stories of achievements, courage and determination that contrast in many regards the persistent negative images of Black people represented in Southern literature and history.

At the opening of the novel, Mary Hodges, Miss Jane's caretaker, refers the history teacher back to history books, as the latter insists on having the interview with Miss Jane: “What's wrong with them books you already got?” Mary asks (vi). In reply, the teacher suggests something that I consider is the key phrase to this chapter: “Miss Jane is not in them,” he says (v; emphasis added). The conversation suggests clearly that there are other representations of the American and the Afro-American past that exist outside the text. But W. Lawrence Hogue argues, “Miss Jane's discursive formation is attempting to present these other representations as exclusions” (67). Gaines's subtle rebuke of White politics is evident in featuring the 110-year-old Miss Jane Pittman and placing her in the historical context of the

1950s and the 1960s. Gaines's narrative presents events chronologically from the Civil War to the African-Americans' struggle for self-determination in the 1960s. The historical moments that the novel emphasizes are all abrupt or transitional moments in the lives of individuals who were forced to make immediate decisions about their lives. Miss Jane Pittman is influenced by these people who become motivated and unafraid to face the unknown and in the process discover their strengths and capabilities.

By involving Miss Jane, Gaines acknowledges the contribution of women in the Civil Rights movements. He makes sure that it is not overlooked or unnoticed. Valerie Babb argues that Gaines "weaves the various outlooks discovered in his research on history into a narrative that interprets history from a larger overlooked viewpoint, that of a Black female" (77). Despite her old age, Miss Jane's actions and heroism inspire hope and continuity in the souls of young Black people. In her militant spirit, she further represents the rise of cultural and political consciousness during the Civil Rights movements. In an article entitled "Idea and Form in Literature," Georg Lukacs argues that the truth of the driving forces of social development must be given in the form of action, that this truth of social development can be measured by the destinies of the individual:

The world of people, their subjective sensations and thoughts show their truthfulness or falsity, their sincerity or mendacity, their greatness or narrowness of mind. . . . Only through deeds people become interesting to one another. Only through deeds do people become worthy of poetic portrayal. The basic feature of the human character can be revealed only through deeds and actions in human practice. (qtd. in Hogue 67)

When Miss Jane decides to act, her deeds and actions truly prove that she has a rebellious spirit. We learn that as a child, forced to early maturity, Jane feared nothing and no one. Her self-determination was shown when she keeps her new name, given her by a Union soldier, and refuses to answer to her old name, Ticey; she announces to her mistress: “My name ain’t no Ticey no more, it’s Miss Jane Brown” (9). By demanding to be called not only by a new name but also by the title “Miss,” Jane demands respect and recognition and according to Byerman, she thereby becomes “an icon of freedom, symbolic of the ways in which an identity can emerge out of resistance” (Fingering 82).

This incident and her wild odyssey to Ohio are recognized by the now-old Miss Jane for what they are. An individual with wit, courage and determination, Jane refuses to listen or to accept the White woman’s invitation to stay in their plantation. The white woman pleads, “child, child, there ain’t no Ohio. . . . Y’all come back with me. . . . I’ll treat you right” (30). Jane views this plantation owner’s tears with skepticism of a survivor and an ex-slave: “I didn’t cry, I couldn’t cry. I had seen so much beating and suffering; I had heard about so much cruelty in those ‘leven or twelve years of my life I hardly knowed how to cry” (24). Miss Jane is fully aware how White planters take measures to make sure that African-Americans remained in positions of servitude and dependence.

One sure mark of heroism in Jane’s character is her refusal to "go back" either willingly or by force. All of the admirable characters in the novel subscribe to Jane's spirited movement: “I knowed I had to keep going,” she says as a child. With much confidence and some common sense, which are among her most extraordinary traits, Jane resolves on a new course in life. "I would stay right here and do what I could for me and Ned" (70). She will move again only for a better chance for herself and Ned. Just like a tree, she will not be moved by vain ideals of

Northern freedom or by disappointment at Southern change. The idea of "going back" seems to her a throw-back to a past she does not approve of.

Miss Jane's heroism follows her enslavement. Jane had been a slave in this country, so her story is simply the story of African- Americans, multi-faceted and diversified. Jane tells Joe, her husband, "Ain't we all been hurt by slavery?" (77). She attempts to convince him that healing from the scars of slavery can only take place in a caring and loving community that acknowledges their humanity. Her journey toward freedom ironically starts after emancipation and span her entire life. She, like other Black Americans, had to suffer racial inequality and injustice until after Colonel Dye restores the pre-Reconstruction conditions on the plantation. Miss Jane remembers, "It was slavery again" (70). Life has not changed much after emancipation. Blacks are employed in agriculture or domestic service. Whites have lost neither their economic power nor their monopoly of Blacks. Thirty years later, when the Civil Rights movement draws more Blacks into the struggle for social change, Robert Samson insists that "there ain't go'n be no demonstrating on my place. Anybody 'round here think he needs more freedom than he already got is free to pack up and leave now" (220).

Miss Jane, in her wisdom, follows the example of one of the elders in her life: Big Laura. Big Laura is one of many physically and emotionally strong black women who dominate the novel and is known for her strong leadership: "She was big just like her name say, and she was tough as any man I ever seen. She could plow, chop wood, cut and load much cane as any man on the place" (16). Newly freed, Jane finds in Big Laura a great leader—the Moses-like figure in the novel—and acknowledges the role she played in leading the flock to the Promised Land, Ohio. Miss Jane says, "Big Laura never stopped. . . . She moved through them trees like she knowed exactly where she was going and wasn't go'n let nothing in the world get in her

way” (19-20). Albert Wertheim argues, “For the freed slaves freedom, the Promised Land, is not the state of Ohio but a state of mind” (222). Indeed, Miss Jane never leaving Louisiana emphasizes Wertheim’s viewpoint that freedom is a state of mind. Big Laura dies with a free mind and leaves behind a legacy of courage and determination. As a heroic and courageous figure from the past, she is murdered because she does not accept the ruling hegemonic social order and becomes a discursive fact that forms within the novel. Most important, though, is that Big Laura becomes to her son, Ned, the ancestor in whose footsteps he will continue the struggle for freedom. Ned becomes the Christ-like figure and continues the tradition of struggle and advocates civil rights until he is murdered. It is Ned and Jimmy, Jane’s adopted sons, who break with the hegemony of the dominant society in an attempt to restructure and revolutionize the conditions of Blacks, which also made possible the mass defiance of the 1960s.

Jane holds a position of respect and prestige as she continues to be a source of guidance to these individuals in the community whose brave actions emerge from the values she inspires. The portrayal of Miss Jane as nurturer, caretaker and nevertheless heroic woman addresses the issue of representation of Black women in American literature, particularly in African-American literature. The positive depiction of Miss Jane and other Black women in the novel, however, has received much attention from literary critics who commend the novel for countering the image of “mammy” that contemptuously characterize Black women in Southern Literature. Using Feminist Age Theory, I argue that Miss Jane Pittman is an unambiguous challenge to the old Southern stereotypes about Black women, let alone old women. This may also explain how gender representation in the novel ties into the origin of the main protagonist – an African – with Africa being the motherland of all African-American history where Miss Jane derives her nurturing characteristic.

Miss Jane's place in the community as an older woman and aunt figure is enhanced by such qualities as intelligence and independence. Telling her story gives her a voice and becomes a source of empowerment. Barry Beckham commends Jane's verbal wit and her readiness to do verbal battle: "[T]he only way the black Southerner can assert her womanhood short of rebellion may be through the *word*. And often this practice of signifying or verbally abusing another is also necessary to preserve one's humanity against the hostility of other blacks" (106). Mary, Jane's caretaker, signifies to the interviewer, "You don't have to say a thing" (v), and "I can always borrow Etienne's shotgun" (vi). The Black woman's threat highlights the "armed resistance" that protects her voice against coercion. Like other aunt figures in Gaines's fiction, Miss Jane has gained strength and wisdom from life experiences that have earned her awe and respect in the Black community.

In his revisiting history, Gaines is prompted by the horrifying conditions of Blacks in the South to reconstruct the "War Years" of American history from a woman's perspective in the novel. In "Miss Jane and I," Gaines states that most of the work he read was untrue and unreal to his own experience and thus did not care for the way Black characters were drawn. He says, "Whenever a Black person was mentioned in these novels, either she was a mammy, or he was a Tom; and if he was young, he was a potential Tom, a good nigger; or he was not a potential Tom, a bad nigger. When a Black woman character was young, she was either a potential mammy or a nigger wench" (26). With old Miss Jane as the lead protagonist, the text is not only an articulation of the Black Nationalist Discourse but also of its definition of femininity. The tales Gaines recounts of Miss Jane are proofs of her tar quality and superhuman strength, and they also gain her prominence and power. Her action symbolizes the need for the whole society to establish its collective identity.

The novel is an interplay between history and fiction and brings to the fore a deep picture of African-American heroism. Gaines confidently brings to light the untold stories of unacknowledged people like Miss Jane that underscore much of the African-American experience. By viewing history and fiction, Gaines both revitalizes African-American history and empowers African-Americans in the cause of liberation. In the book, issues of misrepresentation of African-Americans and of the elderly in particular are questioned. To start with, older Black women in Gaines's fiction become active participants, the recognition of whose role in the black struggle for liberation is of great importance. His novel thus subverts the predominantly male-centered vision of heroism. In the end, Gaines emphasizes the tenacity of old Miss Jane as she walks painstakingly the distance to the segregated water fountain and drinks out of the "White Only" faucet – an example of courage and determination. She takes as her responsibility the achievement of Gaines's vision of freedom for Black people in America. The true liberating force for her comes from the determination – as symbolized by the long and strenuous march to the fountain – to face courageously the challenge of the dominant ideology without losing her identity. Miss Jane Pittman becomes the embodiment of Rosa Parks – "a symbol of freedom and equality" (Harrington 29). Sociologist Aldon Morris, author of Origins of the Civil Rights Movement, suggests that "[t]he real story of Montgomery is that real people with frailties made change. That's what the magic is" (Harrington 14). Like Rosa Parks, Miss Jane is heroic yet ordinary. As an activist and leader, Miss Jane witnesses not just her history, but the history of a people. Critics like Jerry Bryant identify as one of Gaines's great strengths the ability to create a "character who . . . embodies a wide range of complex historical meaning" (851). For Gaines history is character and the most important aspects of the past can be fully conveyed only through characters.

By introducing the character of old Miss Jane, Gaines reveals the dynamics of reconstruction of the Black self. “The Quarters” section of the narrative embodies Jane’s theology of liberation. In that section, we learn of everything she has known about leadership and deliverance for her community. According to John Callahan, “[S]he summons biblical folk tones and rhythms of prophecy, and transforms her testament from the ‘old’ law record of the past to a ‘new’ grace vision for the future” (205). Miss Jane plays the role of a mediator and moves comfortably between the old and the new, the past and the future, the Black and White worlds. She comes to represent the complex attitude toward Black culture and provide possibilities for resistance to the injustice. Byerman argues that the successful characters are those who “accommodate themselves to the existing system without sacrificing their dignity and living on the psychological edge of the folk community, near enough to absorb the genuine wisdom of that experience but not so close as to fear change and resistance” (67). In Byerman’s estimation, Miss Jane is a great success. Equipped with qualities of daring, courage, and dignity, she makes a difference by confronting the whole world by simply telling stories of a people whose voices were mutilated by those whom Jane dares to call “the poor White trash” (21)⁶. She thus calls for militant/non-violent resistance since she believes that revolution occurs from within and must be carefully administered.

Miss Jane does not contend with her role as ancestor, for to her preserving the past is not sufficient for liberation. She comments: “We couldn’t let what happened yesterday stop us today” (24). Gaines invites anyone concerned with social justice to follow her example and write their own narrative of liberation. Jane also adopts the maternal archetype in the community throughout her long years. Unable to bear her own children because of the beatings

she endured as a slave, she takes up with the widowed Joe Pittman and helps to raise his daughters as she has raised Ned.

In her old age, Jane “embodies the history of those who had no one to record their stories” (Byerman, “Slow to Anger” 94). She has not only lived a long life, but she also is recognized by her own people as someone capable of narrating her own life in an intimate basis with the reader. In his article “Image Making,” Callahan writes, “She's mastered the representative anecdote, and in her eloquence persuades us that what she leaves out is really there in her imagination”(203). In her narrative, most important is that Jane herself shows respect to the elderly and their nobility. She speaks of the old people, the Indians, who used to worship the rivers that they respected the rivers and found strength in them:

There's an old oak tree up the quarters where Aunt Lou Bolin and them used to stay. That tree has been here, I'm sure, since this place been here, and it has seen much much, and it knows much much. And I'm not ashamed to say I have talked to it, and I'm not crazy either. It's not necessary craziness when you talk to trees and rivers. But a different thing when you talk to ditches and bayous. A ditch ain't nothing and a bayou ain't too much either. But rivers and trees – less, of course, it's a chinaball tree. Anybody caught talking to a chinaball tree or a thorn tree got to be crazy. But when you talk to an oak tree that's been here all these years, and knows more than you'll ever know, it's not craziness; it's just the nobility you respect. (147-48)

Gaines uses the oak tree analogy again to show how the love of the old and the tradition is deeply rooted in his heart. Not only is Miss Jane’s love for the old traditions evident, but it is

also Gaines's love for the elderly that becomes apparent when he firmly de-emphasizes the role of author and editor in order to uphold Miss Jane and make her appear real and more authentic. By choosing Jane, Gaines conveys to the reader his own feeling about older people being reliable and trustworthy sources of information. In "Miss Jane and I," Gaines states that "[T]ruth to Miss Jane is what she remembers. Truth to me is what people like Miss Jane remember" (37).

In "This Louisiana Thing" Charles Rowell asks about the importance of Love in Miss Jane Pittman. Gaines replies,

Anyone who had lived 110 years in a country like this, under the conditions she lived . . . was worth writing about. . . . If she could come out as a whole human being after living 110 years with the kind of life she had to live, she is worth writing about. Survival with sanity and love and a sense of responsibility, and getting up and trying all over again not only for one's self but for mankind – those achievements I find worth writing about. Miss Jane, not generals who had killed thousands of people Miss Jane, who loved humankind so much she did not have to kill one person to continue life. . . . So when I mentioned the love in Miss Jane Pittman, this is the kind of thing I quite possibly could have been talking about. (97)

W. Lawrence Hogue contends that Miss Jane's character counters the literary stereotyping of older Black characters in the works of established American writers such as Twain (Roxy in Pudd'n head Wilson), Gertrude Stein (Rose in Melanctha), Faulkner (Dilsey in The Sound and the Fury), and others (80). He believes that the text fairly upholds the heroic worth of African-American historical figures. Jane's relation to heroic behavior reveals the system that speaks to simple strategies of survival. While she is victimized by a Black man and

a White woman due to ideologies beyond her control, she offers a model of resisting Black female subject, who is also aged. Her moral and life-sustaining values become clear. She clearly moves beyond stereotypes associated with marginalized status as an aged Black female in the culture. We acknowledge what Gaines suggests here – a wider treatment of subjectivity by his depiction of this 110-year-old Black woman’s ability to challenge ideologies of Black womanhood and the stigma of ageism. The text speaks to a larger notion of liberation with its representation of courageous, prideful, and heroic archetypes who give their lives for the goal of freedom. In terms of gender analysis, the text attends to deep female empowerment. We begin to appreciate Jane’s role in the Black culture as much more than secondary or marginal in the reconstruction of the Black race. In terms of age, her firm hold and accessibility to historic truths work best for the progression of the narrative. Not only is her life a long one, but also the community feels that it is worthy of being recorded. Gaines allows her voice to recall and interpret cultural history and thus enables communal survival.

To conclude, The Autobiography of Miss Pittman reenacts historic crimes of the White man. Gaines approaches the very essence of the Black experience, and his work brings to the surface what otherwise might lie buried in the American subconscious. No one, I imagine, would seriously suggest that this one-hundred-and-ten-year history is fully comprehended by sociological, political and economic accounts, indispensable as many of these are to an understanding of what our national sin⁷ is. Gaines believes that the literary imagination can expose moral and psychological complexities in such a way that discourages any attempts toward reducing the human experience to manageable simplicities, for the study of aging in American literature seems to indicate that the aged Blacks have been depicted more as a stereotype than an archetype of courage and self-determination, the very opposite of what Miss

Jane Pittman is really all about. It is clear that Miss Jane, despite being black, female, and poor, gains strength and wisdom from her life experiences. Also, her survival with dignity leads in old age to a secure position of prominence within the community.

Miss Jane Pittman's narrative is uplifting since it reflects the history of a people. She has the tar quality and is able to hold her people together. With all challenges set before her in the quarters, and regardless of her old age, she is still able to support, teach, and maintain the structure of her family and of the community at large. Miss Jane leads the men in the community toward subject-hood and convincingly shatters the nineteenth-and-twentieth-century stereotypes of Mammy and Matriarch for a fully humanized characterization. With fierce devotion, self-determination, dignity, and commitment to a cause, Miss Jane transcends all ideologies of age, gender and race that have had their stronghold in the lives of African-American people. Her narrative is not simply a novel or a dead end. It is symptomatic of willpower and strong determination in Gaines's life and art. The author's popular acclaim, his role as a writer, and even the cinematic production of his works, has tended to make clear the state of affairs in some parts of America. Humanism is Gaines's attitude toward a social order in a racist environment which he allows to materialize in his art.

Gaines's work shares with Morrison's a concern for the representation of elderly Black people, primarily women, and their important roles in educating younger generations on the history of the ongoing adversity and struggle of Black Americans since 1865. Though many would consider much of Morrison's and Gaines's work "essentialist," I think it is important to note that the two authors precede many theorists in linking the feminine with power and resistance – a means of confronting the legacy of slavery and re-imagining a different future for

their older characters as well. Their elderly characters cause rebellion in the hearts of Southerners and instigate in them the desire for renewed life.

Notes on Chapter Four

1. These images differ from what Jungian analyst Clarissa Pinkola Estes has termed the “Wild Woman archetype,” with its original sense which means “to live a natural life, one in which the *criatura*, creature, has innate integrity and healthy boundaries” (8). Morrison does not usually subscribe to such archetypes, since her female characters are mostly “Wild,” but in the modern pejorative sense of the word – out of control.
2. For a detailed discussion of all theories and concepts mentioned see Estes’ Women Who Run with the Wolves; Linda Huchon’s A Poetics of Postmodernism; Judith Butler’s Gender Trouble; Nancy Chodorow’s Gender, Relation, and Difference in Psychoanalytic Perspective; and Marilyn Maxwell’s Male Rage, Female Fury.
3. Morrison’s depiction of wild and powerful black males serves two purposes: to avoid succumbing to female centrism and also to undermine the concept of static identity. The latter, however, serves the purpose of our discussion of the tar women. By no means, however, does Morrison subscribe to Wright’s protest narrative genre. Her stylistic and thematic concerns differ widely from Wright’s early protest literature. See David H. Richter’s Narrative/Theory (1996).
4. The term “womanist” is credited to Alice Walker and introduced in In Search of Our Mothers’ Gardens. It resonates with meaning for much of the work being written by African-American women in the late twentieth century. Walker calls herself a womanist because she works for the survival and wholeness of her people, men and women both. For a more complete definition of the term, see Alice Walker’s In Search of Our Mothers’ Gardens (1983).

5. Gaines's novel was always acknowledged by the author as fiction (Conner 113). There is always an important distinction between an autobiography and a novel. The former attempts to furnish the reader with a remembered account of past experiences, while the latter is more simply trying to tell a story – one fettered only by the limitations of his or her own imagination. David McCooey, in his book, Artful Histories, writes, "Fiction cannot be verified; autobiography, however, is an inherently discursive act of writing. Like other forms of history, it is a form of testimony, and as such it is not autonomous in the way fiction or poetry are. It is a social form of writing (and thus a moral one) and open to all the checks and limitations of testimony. Autobiography is a public act" (164). Kimberly Rae Connor calls Gaines's book "Autobiographized fiction" since the novel cast in autobiographical form, she argues, makes a logical connection between the novels that treat slavery and the original autobiographies that engendered the slave narrative tradition (13). Mary Ellen Doyle calls it a "fictional autobiography" with one problematic difference from "real" autobiography: the use of an editor – "a distinct character with a created history, personality, and motivation" ("The Autobiography" 90-91). The author's view then is revealed through both the protagonist and the editor. It has been called "fiction masquerading as autobiography" (Hicks 16).

6. Miss Jane uses the phrase "poor white trash" in reference to patrollers. On the march to freedom, Miss Jane, Big Laura and the other wandering ex-slaves are massacred by the Confederate patrollers. These are lower class whites who did not own land or slaves, but who used to work capturing slaves and bringing them back. Since patrollers are lower class whites, they will have to compete with free blacks and become especially involved in acts of violence against blacks, such as the Ku Klux Klan (Wertheim 223). Gaines

challenges White supremacy and attempts to treat whiteness not as privilege but rather an extremely problematic condition. In Playing in the Dark: Whiteness and Literary Imagination, Morrison describes her project as “an effort to avert the critical gaze from the racial object to the racial subject, from the described and imagined to the describers and imaginers” (90), and to “examine the impact of notions of racial hierarchy, racial exclusion, and racial vulnerability on non-Blacks who held, resisted, explored or altered those notions” (11).

7. The phrase *national sin* was first used by Sidney Kaplan in his essay, “Herman Melville and the American National Sin: The Meaning of Benito Cereno” (1956).

CHAPTER FIVE

CONCLUSION

The work of Morrison and Gaines can be seen as a precursor of recent literary explorations where there is a rethinking of the status of elderly people in relation to culture, history and society. In this context, this project on a larger scale can be aligned with categorizing of peoples and geographies in colonial discourse. This dissertation, posing some key questions pertaining to the topic of aging in contemporary African-American fiction, explores various theoretical and critical views. Works by Toni Morrison and Ernest J. Gaines were the primary focus of this project. The two authors deconstruct the long established age stereotypes against older blacks by drawing them as dedicated, courageous men and women who are able to maintain their integrity, attain power, and ultimately become integral parts of their communities. This dissertation thus introduces the various archetypes and power symbols that elderly blacks employ in their redefinition of the black self. Be it the ancestor, the crone or the shaman, these all are positive alternatives to the old mammies, matriarchs and Uncle Toms. The new alternatives are paragons of courage and determination who are able to stand firm and defy the disruptions and misnamings and, above all, claim their subjectivity. As a consequence of the extreme conditions of the aged Blacks in America, gender blurring has also been emphasized as fundamental or essential for subjectivity. Keith Byerman writes that “[t]he refusal-as-affirmation that is the Black experience in America is the content of contemporary black literature” (276). With this truth in mind, both Morrison and Gaines give good witness to the personal empowerment of elderly blacks in America as represented in their characterization of the elderly.

A variety of texts have been explored in this dissertation. While the novels of Morrison and Gaines may contain grotesque representations of older Black women, I was more interested in exploring the cultural constructs of these elderly (*the Mammy, the Matriarch, and Uncle Tom*) and their effects on the Black community. In deconstructing these stereotypes, this study proceeds in two directions: either against normative constructions produced by hegemonic discourses and social practices, or toward new modes of representation that disrupt those normative constructions (11). Both writers thus moved in both directions and further they provided the elderly with a voice to challenge those who insist decline and marginalization are all there is to “aged black woman.” The dissertation thus examines the politics of representations of the current status of elderly Blacks in America and shows how African-American writers, Morrison and Gaines, endeavor to deconstruct old age ideologies.

The work started with establishing the fact that a true understanding of African-American identity, whether self-imposed or socially constructed, requires us to pay greater attention to the so-called *Vollendungsroman* because it provides us with more than empty words about older people. The genre reveals the most complicated emotions related to America’s past and the ways that people’s consciousness has been influenced by false representations of the elderly. The works of Morrison and Gaines truly challenge us to reconsider what we believe we know well and to look with renewed interest and enthusiasm for what we have been missing. Morrison and Gaines tend to the need to re-historicize African-Americans’ realities during the past several hundred years. While female representations often remain incomplete, Gaines’s novels are ripe with these revisionist histories and their detailing of folk life and the important male liberation discourses which they contain. In Morrison’s, however, older female figures are

dominant, fighting to alter their society's expectations of their age and gender. Their own gender inversion or blurring suggests possibilities for change.

Morrison and Gaines are confirmed myth-busters in a country where mainstream writers have been on occasion acclaimed and even canonized for creating and perpetuating the myths against elderly Blacks, which have altered people's views of them. In the thinking of some, the mainstream society has manipulated images of African-Americans including the elderly in order to maintain its power structure. Morrison and Gaines refuse to be intrigued by stereotypes but rather attempt to depict their well determined older characters as subjects who, albeit oppressed, steadfastly seek survival.

When I reflect on the reason(s) why I have chosen the elderly as a subject matter, I begin to realize (but not clearly comprehend) the impact of the elderly of the Greater Indiana community in Pennsylvania where I have resided for eight long years, let alone the nostalgic feelings I hold for my beloved aging parents in Egypt. I have spent the last several years, off and on, trying to grapple with the topic of aging. While work was in progress and as I researched the topic of aging among African American people, I became increasingly aware of the influence of those elderly on my life and on this study. My academic training has been meant to teach me paradigms for and theories about African American people and historical development and to teach me to use them as the basis of my textual analysis. As I questioned the applicability of my experience to African-American history, I looked for authors who are themselves noted African-American writers whose personal experiences, I believe, inform their writing.

Reflecting on this project, I find that the narrative of aging is indeed one of healing and satisfaction. Toni Morrison has the same opinion and asserts that black people need the novel

“in a way that it was not needed before.” In its function as a healing art form, the Black American novel carries a very special “sermon” in that it fulfills the critical role of preserving cultural identity:

We don't live in places where we can hear those stories anymore;
 Parents don't sit around and tell their children those classical,
 mythological archetypal stories that we heard years ago. But new
 information has got to get out, and there are several ways to do it.
 One is the novel. (“Rootedness” 340)

Morrison's and Gaines's fiction truly performs this important healing function of “bearing witness.” Archetypal images of the ancestor, the matriarch, the crone or the shaman as discussed in Chapter Three are versions of the same African archetypes; they are products of myth-making and reflect African Americans' need for heroes who embody cultural values necessary to the survival of the race. Both the ancestor and the shaman even transcend the generations to become timeless people who are able to guide new generations and to bear witness to the crimes of the past. Pilate in Song of Solomon is a clear example whose generosity and protectiveness to her children know no boundaries.

In the chapters, I have analyzed texts that feature a variety of older protagonists and fictional worlds: from Morrison's traumatic vision of an elderly character abandoned to her destructive fate in Song of Solomon, through the tragedy of Eva Peace in Sula, to the works of Gaines with his passionate depiction of the elderly and his attachment to them based on his early passion toward his own old Aunt Augusteen. While those novels express different hopes and anxieties about aging, a number of thematic connections and obsessions have emerged. The most obvious link between the works of both authors is the situating of the older black

protagonist at the heart of the narrative. The authors attempt to break the silence, in both society and literature, which surrounds certain aspects of older people's lives. They give them voice to challenge the dominant age ideologies of decline and marginalization.

Older characters belong to a past that is historic and mythic. They dominate the actions of almost all the characters in the novels, especially the young ones who seek an understanding of the importance of the past and its significance in their lives. For example, it is Pilate who brings Milkman to knowledge and enlightenment; she teaches him how to fly – that is, to survive despite life's mishaps – and to acknowledge that flight is metaphorically the choice of women. Macon Dead, Milkman's father, testifies to Pilate's role as an ancestor. He says, "If you ever have a doubt we from Africa, look at Pilate" (54). Son, in Tar Baby, is as lost and confused in his modern world as Milkman is in his. And, like Milkman, Son requires a guide into the realm of myth; it is Gideon who tells Son the legend, and it is Marie Therese, the ancient conjure woman, who sends him, finally, to his spiritual kinsmen. Therese is like Pilate and the ageless Circe in Song of Solomon, like Eva Peace and Ajax's mother in Sula, like the healer M'Dear who presides over birth and death in The Bluest Eye, and likewise Baby Suggs in Beloved. They are all ancestor figures who, with their wisdom and magic powers, guide the young through a history that is real. In their wild zone they are not themselves actors in history, but necessary mediators and conservators of myth. The African American writer, Joanne Braxton, speaks of Pilate and argues that she "fulfills a dual role: artistic and spiritual. She both creates art and connects the ancestors with the living by distilling the oral wisdom, values, and unwritten history of those who have gone before into a written language to be preserved for future generations, and by making myths and images upon which the living may model their lives" (314). Morrison and Gaines call on the ancestors from whom they derive strength, and

they perform in the holy presence of the ancestor. As often as not, especially in the case of Morrison and Gaines, the ancestor figure is an outraged mother who embodies the values of sacrifice, nurturance, and personal courage – values necessary for such an endangered minority group as the African-Americans.

In writing this dissertation, and due to the nature of this topic, I used the humanistic mode of criticism to state values and concepts that may well define aging in black America. Talking about literature is one of the best ways in the world to begin to think and feel deeply. A close attention to text and adherence to the cultural realities that have framed my individual scholarly and literary status assert that the primary value of text is its reaching these symbolic realities. Of course, art has little or no significance unless it is related to life and the struggle of people. In a crucial sense, Gaines's narrative is profoundly personal. His creative expressions and language present more than political tracts. They offer him a way to deal with both the painful and the sweet memories he has experienced in his past and could not forget. Thus his life and talent grade into each other in his fiction, thereby serving a need Gaines deeply feels. In his imagination, he is able to act out his rage against the injustices he has experienced and to recall the old good days of his elderly Aunt Augusteen.

Morrison draws upon a tradition in which survival strategies tend to vary according to gender between unruly men and strong, courageous women. Morrison has depicted for us some unforgettable characters. Old as they may be and overwhelmingly women, they are engaged in the struggle for survival, coping with injuries that are literally unspeakable and quite possibly un-survivable, taken by a belief system that defies reason and gives them the tar quality they are due. Morrison uses gender blurring as her most poignant technique to demonstrate the legacy of inhumanity of African American history. She dramatizes the irrelevancy of gender by blurring

the gender characteristics of her characters that may define them. In her scheme of things, a person cannot be fully human if either gender is denied.

Morrison and Gaines are able to overcome the limitations of essentialism by considering age an integral part of their own or their characters' identities. Their texts deal with age much less obviously. They indeed hardly thematize it at all, but they nevertheless advance our understanding of what age is in the African American culture. While she isolates age as a prominent concern, Morrison incorporates age into her extensive political agenda, connecting it, for instance, to her interest in the interrelation between generations made clear in the characters of Pilate and her nephew Milkman; Eva and her granddaughter Sula; Ondine and her niece Jade; Consolata Sosa and the convent women; Baby Suggs and Denver.

As he delves into the complexities of age, Gaines's relentlessness is nothing short of spectacular. His many novels and his collection of short stories turn to the issue of aging again and again. He is thus able to deconstruct the alleged association of old age with decline or despair. As we read Gaines, we are not apprehensive about the future. The totality of his literary efforts amounts to a message that has the potential to transform myths about old age as vague as they are harmful.

Gaines is personal in his writings and seems intent on keeping the political influence at a remove whereas Morrison, far more political even on the surface, is a strong advocate of the feminist aphorism that the personal is political. Gaines radically dismantles stereotypical portrayals of older blacks as victims. He represents them as active agents capable of effecting change in the mainstream society. If aging is the first thing we associate with the writing of Gaines, it is quite possibly the last thing that strikes us when we read Morrison's work. Yet, it is precisely her developed interest in the mythical world and her fascination with the ancestors that

connect her to the trope of aging and the new genre of *Vollendungsroman* that is more significant.

One of the many approaches both authors take in responding to the continuing pressures of life in the African-American context is their concern for future generations and their legacy. Such an approach stands out as a way of indicating new directions in which age studies might go. The writers create connections between the past and the present. In what may be seen as a comprehensive generational reach, the two authors move backward and forward in time and space, still engaged with figures from the past (i.e. the ancestor) whom they admire but also paying considerable attention to the younger generations. Clearly, Gaines concurs with Margaret Gullette's resistance to an "age fragmentation that jams us onto tiny separate terrains constructed by a dominant culture, thus precluding intergenerational solidarity" (192-93).

Throughout this study I have attempted to analyze the strengths and dangers of the two authors' gender representations. Morrison and Gaines have helped us to see what literature can offer, and we thus have our work cut out for us if we are to reach a more thorough understanding of the new genre of *Vollendungsroman*. The two authors have shown us in both subtle and obvious ways what happens to the black identity when it becomes old and what it means to be marginalized by both race and age.

What conclusions ought to be drawn from the texts I have analyzed? A few conclusions do emerge:

Contemporary African-American fiction of Morrison and Gaines has established a shifting of attitudes in the viewing of elderly Black people. Persistent images that were illustrated by societal portrayals of Uncle Tom, Mammy, Aunt Jemima, the Matriarch, and others seemed to be changing due to Equal Rights legislation and the enforcement of anti-racial

discrimination. Scholars, however, vary in their determinations of the degree of a shift in society's view of the elderly Black population from applause to scorn, from appreciation to depreciation, from nominal to excessive. Gender and race continue to be major factors in disrupting the unity within humanity. The degree of disruption can vary from place to place, from neighborhood to neighborhood, from industry to industry, from institution to institution, and from person to person. Thus, I find it difficult to generalize about attitudes toward aging today, and I suspect sorting out what our historical attitudinal roots are will require additional digging in more texts as interesting and as diverse as this beginning search in the contemporary African-American fiction of Morrison and Gaines.

Discovering a collapse of images of older men and women over sixty-five, who have been role models in the communities, I realized old age has been negatively stereotyped and there was a need to challenge the culturally-inscribed notions of what it meant to be old in the African-American context. This negativity, once challenged, can become an existential ground for growth and solidarity within the community.

Unlike Morrison, Gaines's images of older Blacks are non-archetypal or mythical. Archetypes of the Jungian theory are of much less value to Gaines when he creates his elderly characters. It follows that Gaines does not include the standard archetypal theory because most of its elements are useless for the analysis of his elderly characters who seem to be more conservative and socially adept. There are, however, elements of intellectual and spiritual rebellion in his depiction of elderly women as we have seen in the characters of Miss Jane Pittman, Miss Emma, and Tante Lou. Morrison, on the other hand, depicts her elderly characters as archetypal. She believes that a mature personality must transcend gender. Archetypes, suggesting feminine power, are mostly found in ancient and non-Western cultures

who, according to Campbell, “were more appreciative of women and goddesses, revering them for their association with seasons, fertility, and phases of the moon” (qtd. in Pratt 8).

Besides the deconstruction of dominant discourses pertaining to old age in mainstream society, Morrison’s narrative is directed more against the representation of gender as ideological construction. She, therefore, depicts her elderly characters as genderless and as a means to maintain their autonomy. Eva in Sula, for example, is the matriarch, and she exhibits some surprisingly sane insights that defy male domination.

Gaines’s images of older Blacks, albeit non-archetypal, contrast sharply with the widely accepted view of them as tommers and mummies. In A Lesson before Dying, the two seventy-year-old-women, Emma and Aunt Lou, take on the characteristics of tar matrons to shape and influence young Grant to teach Jefferson a lesson in dignity in which they both believe. Through their seemingly nagging behavior, they continue to demand that Grant teach Jefferson what the former finds impossible to do. In the end, Emma and Aunt Lou serve as catalysts for both Grant and Jefferson’s rebirth. The author continues his lesson in the survival of the elderly in A Gathering of Old Men. Gaines stresses the capacity of the aged for transformation. Instead of accepting their long-established passivity as the basis for their survival, the old men reject their old attitude and demand that they should be treated with respect. With steadfast, courageous rebellion, they refute the old stereotype of Stowe’s Uncle Tom. The Autobiography of Miss Jane Pittman, perhaps more than the two other examples, is most noteworthy for depicting the elderly as main characters. Gaines presents the elderly through the reflective point of view of a centenarian, Miss Jane, who is able to adjust and survive with dignity. The novel closes with the one-hundred-year old Miss Jane leading the residents of the Quarters into town,

initiating the change of Afro-Americans from stereotypes to archetypes and from saints to militants.

By drawing a distinction between Morrison and Gaines with regards to their treatment of old age and the elderly, I have discovered that Morrison is a traditionalist who argues for age-appropriate roles guided by cultural traditions. Gaines, on the other hand, is a modernist in the sense that he views later life as unwritten history that is yet to be and limited only by personal imagination and the pressures of society. Following the authors' perspectives, however, a meaningful understanding will be possible of the strengths and advantages of old age in contrast to the taken-for-granted assumption of the vulnerability of old age and its negative social connotations.

Elderly blacks are portrayed as asexual. The two writers speak of the elderly in complete disregard for their sexuality, yet with a high praise for their wisdom and strength. They are asexual and non-productive. This is made clear in Morrison's depiction of elderly characters such as Pilate. Her lack of a navel somehow diminishes her desire for sex. Not only does she reject any male advances, but also protects the helpless Hagar against Milkman's silly attempt to use her. The absence of a navel may thus imply that women in their fifties are elderly and that these women are less concerned about their attractiveness or sexuality than with their strength and determination in life. This said, the assumption thus defies the stereotype of Jezebel attributed to many Black women.

Stereotypes remain to some extent, but the influence of literary works is so strong that aged characters maintain a special status for writers. The most striking older figures speak to us all with insistence on being understood. The findings of this dissertation demonstrate the huge contribution of Morrison and Gaines to the narrative of aging, which stresses the need

for more scholarship to accommodate and closely examine the variety of topics and themes discussed in their work. With an ongoing increase of the elderly population there needs to be more and more literary treatment of the roles they can play in forming wholesome and ideal communities. Adequate theory and scholarly analyses have provoked a starting point on which other scholarship can build.

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