Raiding the Inarticulate: Postmodernisms, Feminist Theory and Black Female Creativity

C. Margot Hennessy

University of Massachusetts Amherst

Follow this and additional works at: https://scholarworks.umass.edu/open_access_dissertations

Part of the English Language and Literature Commons

Recommended Citation
Hennessy, C. Margot, "Raiding the Inarticulate: Postmodernisms, Feminist Theory and Black Female Creativity" (2010). Open Access Dissertations. 244.
https://scholarworks.umass.edu/open_access_dissertations/244

This Open Access Dissertation is brought to you for free and open access by ScholarWorks@UMass Amherst. It has been accepted for inclusion in Open Access Dissertations by an authorized administrator of ScholarWorks@UMass Amherst. For more information, please contact scholarworks@library.umass.edu.
RAIDING THE INARTCULATE:
POSTMODERNISMS, FEMINIST THEORY AND BLACK WOMEN’S CREATIVITY

A Dissertation Presented

by

C. MARGOT HENNESSY

Submitted to the Graduate School of the University of Massachusetts in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of

DOCTOR OF PHILOSOPHY

May 2010

ENGLISH
RAIDING THE INARTICULATE:
POSTMODERISMS, FEMINIST THEORY AND BLACK WOMEN’S CREATIVITY

A Dissertation Presented
By
C. MARGOT HENNESSY

Approved as to style and content by:

_______________________________
Rajagopalan Radhakrishnan, Chair

_______________________________
Lee R. Edwards, Member

_______________________________
Margo Culley, Member

_______________________________
Vincent DiMarco, Department Head
Department of English
DEDICATION

To The Ancestor And The Child And All That Will Link Them:
   John J. Hennessy
   Colin Hennessy Elliott

...And so each venture
Is a new beginning, a raid on the inarticulate
With shabby equipment always deteriorating
In the general mess of imprecision of feeling,
Undisciplined squads of emotion. And what there is to conquer
By strength and submission, has already been discovered
Once or twice, or several times, by men[sic] whom one cannot hope
To emulate—but there is no competition—
There is only the fight to recover what has been lost
And found and lost again and again: and now, under conditions
That seem unpropitious. But perhaps neither gain nor loss.
For us, there is only the trying. The rest is not our business.
   T.S Elliot (East Cocker, The Four Quartets)
ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

This work could not have been possible without the imagination and vision of my friends and colleagues who encouraged me to follow the harder path and find connections between these seemingly diverse ways of perceiving. A special and warm thank you to R. Radhakrishnan, the chair of my committee and my friend, who had so much patience when I read only theory for what seemed like years at a time and who finally let me read a novel. I also want to thank Clark University and my colleagues there, Lois Brynes, Serena Hilsinger and Cynthia Enloe who provided insight and support for both my scholarship and my teaching for such a long time now.

I thank James P. Elliott and Sarah Marden for all the editing and proofreading in the wee hours and for picking up the baby when he cried. I want to mention my fellow students in the graduate program who asked hard questions and particularly the students in my classes in the Women’s Studies Department at UMass and at Clark University who kept the work alive always. A special acknowledgement goes to the students of my Feminist Critical Theory seminar who tested out my ideas even when they were in the embryo stages and corrected me when I needed it. Thank you to Patrick, Shanta, Donna and Joy for believing even when getting on with it got so damn hard.
ABSTRACT

RAIDING THE INARTICULATE: POSTMODERNISMS, FEMINIST THEORY AND BLACK WOMEN’S CREATIVITY

MAY 2010

B.A. CLARK UNIVERSITY

M.A. UNIVERSITY OF MASSACHUSETTS

Ph.D. UNIVERSITY OF MASSACHUSETTS

Directed by: Professor Ragopalan Radhakrishnan

This is an investigation into the ways that postmodern theories and feminist theories have both failed to learn from each other and yet also reveal the blindness’ implicit in each other. Postmodern theory has consistently failed to engage gender in any significant way and feminist theory has consisted failed to find the usefulness of the methods and questions posed by postmodern theorists. Both approaches have failed to address the very real and important perspectives of the post colonial others who have been addressing the questions of race, gender, history, and agency for hundred of years. The second half of this investigation looks specifically at the work of three African American women writers, Toni Morrison, Gloria Naylor and Gayle Jones, in their most recent work. All three novels, Beloved, Mama Day and Corregidora are historical novels concerned with the legacy of slavery, and these narratives themselves exceed all the expectation for postmodern theory and feminist theory in inviting us to understand the relationship between history, memory and the now. In effect the work of these writers succeeds in “theorizing the present” in ways that both feminism and postmodernism fail.
CONTENTS

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS ........................................................................ v

ABSTRACT ......................................................................................... vi

CHAPTER

SECTION I: GRASPING THE PRESENT

I. GRASping THE PRESENT ................................................................. 2

II. JUST THINK IT: FEMINIST ENCOUNTERS WITH POSTMODERNISM ................................................................................... 33

III. JUST DO IT: PRACTICING THEORY AND THEORIZING PRACTICE ......................................................................................... 65

A. On the outside looking in ............................................................ 72
B. On the outside looking out ......................................................... 81
C. On the inside looking out ........................................................... 98

SECTION II: DECOLONIZING THE MIN(E)DS

IV. UNLEARNING THE PRIVILEGE .................................................. 107

V. REMEMBERING HISTORY ......................................................... 126

A. Introduction: Surveying the landscape of history ....................... 127
B. Re-memberings ........................................................................ 149
C. Re-tellings ............................................................................... 160
D. Intimate Histories .................................................................... 177
E. Conclusions: remember to forget ............................................ 193

VI. CONJURE WOMEN ............................................................... 197

BIBLIOGRAPHY ............................................................................ 208
SECTION I
GRASPING THE PRESENT
CHAPTER I
GRASPING THE PRESENT

The underlying thread ... is that postmodernism must reject a description of itself as embodying a set of timeless ideals contrary to those of modernism; it must insist on being recognized as a set of viewpoints of a time, justifiable only within its own time. By doing so, of course, it opens itself up to objections by feminists and others of being potentially dangerous for our times. In short, as feminists how do we assess the political implications of postmodernism (Nicholson 11)?

Any attempt to “historicize ourselves” or indeed to “historicize the present” is replete with dangers and contradictions. However, one of the imperatives for those of us wishing to respond to “our time” is to seek to assess the conditions of that period as well as the implications of our theoretical and political responses to our present condition. And indeed our present condition has been called the “postmodern,” a term which is replete with multiple meanings and interpretations as well as a myriad of usages within discourses ranging from the “high theory” of Lyotard, Foucault and Jameson to Madison Avenue advertising lingo, to the explosion of mass culture signaled by MTV and other forms of media art. As Linda Hutcheon has pointed out, “of all the terms bandied about in both current cultural theory and contemporary writing on the arts, postmodernism must be the most over and under defined” (3). As I attempt to enter the discourse of the postmodern or postmodernism, it seems necessary that I begin with my definition of the term and my usage of it—as do Lyotard, Hutcheon, Haraway and countless others. Those who are not willing or able to say what postmodernism is, are more than willing to say what it is not or to accompany their definitions with “a grand flourish of negative rhetoric; discontinuity, disruption, dislocation, decentering, indeterminacy, anti-totalitarianism” (Hutcheon 3). Yet despite the proliferation of definitions, meanings and
non-meanings for the term and its practice, despite all the paper and ink and computer chips dedicated to this discussion, I still find myself in various professional or social situations asked to define postmodern or postmodernism, invariably in a “few words or sentences.” How indeed can I describe “in a few words or sentences” the historical moment which represents the span of my lifetime? How can I, who have been so engaged in the discussion and investigation of the postmodern that the proliferations of meanings are overwhelming, perform a well-rehearsed definition at a cocktail party or family picnic? My reluctance indicates that, despite the fact that the postmodern debate has proclaimed itself worldly and has become “an epic production almost in spite of itself” (Ross 3), it is still a debate being waged too far from the everyday politics of the ways that we live our lives. There have been some important exceptions to this, yet in the academy and in the arena we have come to call theory, postmodernism has remained relentlessly embedded in the discourse of the philosophical and thus avoided, at great cost, the political and material. My avoidance of the question may also be indicative of something else. I began to wonder if I knew what I meant by postmodern(ism). I may be able to tell my friends and colleagues what Lyotard meant, or Jameson or Jane Flax, but could I tell them what I meant when I used this hip and slippery word? A couple of years ago a colleague of mine, when referring me to the work of yet another theorist writing about the postmodern, said “she takes postmodernism seriously as you do.” In my effort to understand my own usage and interest in the discourse erupting around postmodernism, I return to this phrase: Why is it that I take postmodern and postmodernism seriously and have done so from the beginnings of my strictly textually-based investigations of its practice? Was it because I entered graduate school at a time
when this debate was raging? Was it because I was enamored, as were so many, of its proclamations to newness? Was it because I felt it offered a methodology that spoke to my way of seeing? Within this moment (the postmodern) and its nascent practice (postmodernisms) did I recognize something of myself?

For despite some proclamations the postmodernism is a deflection from history and politics the postmodern has come to represent a period, a time, our time. Thus my attempts to define the postmodern and elucidate a practice are commensurate with a desire to historicize the present and our most recent past. This is not to suggest that all historical activity is postmodernism or that all postmodernism partakes of historical analysis, but that the varied and multiple postmodern methodologies which have emerged in the past twenty to twenty-five years respond to changed conditions, which the post-1960’s era has ushered in. These changes are felt across disciplinary boundaries within the academy and across the boundaries modernity elucidated between race, class, gender, and sexual identity, to name but a few. The project to establish the postmodern as a moment, or a condition stimulated by a series of social, political, economic and technological upheavals, has been furthered by the work of several theorists, and indeed few would argue that postmodernism is not connected to the material conditions which shape our lives through the 80’s and 90’s. What we need to do is to engage in a process where the focus is no longer rejecting or embracing the postmodern, but instead to navigate useful and powerful political responses to its new forms of domination and its hopes for change.
Over the past twenty years we have become increasingly aware that something has moved, shifted. Foucault has called this the discovery of “certain fragility in the bedrock of existence” (1977 80). Jameson has referred to this “shift” as the emergence of a new kind of society signaled by new types of consumption, planned obsolescence; an ever more rapid rhythm of fashion and styling changes; the penetration of advertising, television and media generally to a hitherto unparalleled degree throughout society; the replacement of the old tension between city and country, center and province, by the suburb and by universal standardization; the growth of the great networks of superhighways and the arrival of the automobile culture—these are some [my emphasis] of the features which would seem to mark a radical break...(Jameson 1983 125). Lyotard, the original ‘prophet’ of the postmodern in contemporary philosophy, has marked this shift by noticing “incredulity toward metanarratives.” He has proclaimed that the narrative function “has lost its functors, its great hero, its great dangers, its great voyages, its great goal” (xxiv). For Baudrillard, “something has changed and the Faustian Promethean (perhaps Oedipal) periods of production and consumption give way to networks, to the narcissistic and protean era of connections, contact, contiguity, feedback and generalized interface that goes with the universe of communication” (Foster 127). The postmodern ‘subject’ faces the “end of interiority and intimacy, the overexposure and transparence of the world which traverses him [sic] without obstacle” (Foster 133). Even for Habermas, who is not yet ready to abandon the project of modernity, the optimism of the Enlightenment philosophers who sought to “promote not only control of the natural forces but also understanding of the world and the self, moral progress, the justice of institutions and even happiness of human beings” (9) has been shattered by the
happenings of the 20th century. Each of these theorists refers to the changes in our present condition that produce shifts in our viewpoints and our methodologies, our artworks and our political practices; changes which have resulted in a series of postmodern gazes. Donna Haraway and Andreas Huyssen, building on Frederic Jameson’s assertion that the postmodern is a “periodizing concept,” have both recognized “the “postmodern as a perspective within a historical condition” (Nicholson 12). Yet for both, as for Jameson, the wholesale embrace of the postmodern or outright rejection of it is beside the point. Jameson has argued that the ideological or moralistic judgments of the postmodern in both its political and aesthetic forms are in the long run of very little use to us. The many attempts to develop “final judgments on the phenomenon of the postmodern” (Jameson 1984,111), as witnessed in the work of Habermas and significantly some feminist theorists, leaves us unable to articulate the network of ways in which the postmodern has invaded our consciousness, our culture, perhaps our very ways of seeing or knowing. The point is that we are within the culture of postmodernism to the point where its facile repudiation is as impossible as any equal facile celebration is complacent and corrupt. Ideological judgment on postmodernism today necessarily implies, one would think, a judgment on ourselves as well as on the artifacts in question; nor can an entire historical period such as our own be grasped in any adequate way by means of global moral judgments or their somewhat degraded equivalent pop-psychological diagnosis (Jameson 1984, 111). For Jameson this historical moment is signaled by “a general modification of culture itself within the social restructuration of a late capitalist system” (111), and thus he argues for the development of a “genuinely historical and dialectical analysis of such a phenomena” (111). Many theorists, Donna
Haraway and Lyotard included, have argued that the tools for analyzing such phenomena will have to be new and thus the Marxist dialectical model, which in its synthesis still dreams of unity, are not applicable. However, Jameson’s contribution to “historicizing the postmodern” lies in his assertion that our analysis of the postmodern “is a matter of a present time and a history in which we ourselves struggle and exist” (111). To celebrate the postmodern as a liberatory and transgressive discourse ignores the practical and political dangers this condition of postmodernism and its various media present to us. On the other hand, to renounce the postmodern as reactionary, to see it as a return to status-quo conservatism, also limits our understanding of the impulses which this historical moment may represent. Jameson argues that “the only way out of this vicious circle, besides praxis itself, is a dialectical view that seeks to grasp the present as history,” and although one may reject the dialectic, the need to ‘historicize ourselves’ and our struggles is at the center of the postmodern debate.

Andreas Huyssen’s “Mapping the Postmodern” opens with his assertion that postmodernism represents more than the “latest fad, advertising pitch, and hollow spectacle,” but is instead “part of a slowly emerging cultural transformation in Western societies, a change in sensibility” (234). Huyssen is quick to point out that “the nature and depth of that transformation is debatable,” and he is not prepared to claim a “wholesale paradigm shift of the cultural and economic orders”; yet he does recognize that within an “important sector of our culture there is a noticeable shift in sensibility, practices, discourse formations, which distinguish a postmodern set of assumptions, experiences and propositions from that of a preceding period” (234).
Huyssen’s focus within the essay is both historical and aesthetic. His efforts to “map the postmodern” include a desire to elucidate the postmodern by taking into consideration “its long and complex history” (234); as well as locating the various tenets of the debate within their specific cultural and political contexts. Thus Huyssen’s desire to map indicates a desire to situate and historicize some of the postmodern practices and theories which have emerged over the past thirty years. Huyssen’s postmodern gaze falls on the question of the possibility of the postmodern to reinfuse aesthetic practice with the power of critique. Central to this effort is the process of situating the postmodern within its historical moment:

...if our postmodernity makes it exceedingly difficult to hold on to the notion of art as critique, then the task is to redefine the possibilities of critique in postmodern terms rather than relegating it to oblivion. If the postmodern is discussed as a historical condition rather than only as a style, it becomes possible and indeed important to unlock the critical moment in postmodernism itself and sharpen its cutting edge, however blunt it may seem at first sight (235).

His attempts to situate the postmodern include a recognition that the promise of modernism, which he sees as basically libratory at its inception, and the myth of modernization which characterized the early twentieth century, gave way in their institutionalization to a series of oppressions, principal among them the suppression of mass culture and the “postulation of the aesthetic as a domain of life separate from both the political and the ordinary” (Nicholson 12).

Not unlike Jameson, whose earlier work characterizes the postmodern as that which refutes the boundaries between high and low culture, Huyssen argues that this move toward a realm of the aesthetic, separate and innocent, emptied modernism of its possibilities for critique. Postmodernism, in his historical trajectory, specifically in the United States, springs from the pop avant-garde of the 1960’s, which sought to emulate the avant-garde of the 1850s and 60s by posing an artistic expression that attacks cultural
institutions and traditional modes of representation. It was indeed this move to unseat high art from its institutional pedestal which gave birth, if you will, to the postmodern debate in the realm of art and artistic expression. Huyssen looks at various rebellions, both theoretical and artistic, from the 1960’s to the present, and yet maintains that “that which most significantly defines the critical element in postmodernism is its challenge to modernism’s hostility to mass culture” (Nicholson 13). It is based upon this observation that Huyssen rejects the conflation of post-structuralism and postmodernism: supported by the privileged position that the poststructuralists give to aesthetics and “writing” and the separation of art from life, history and politics. He also points out that although the poststructuralists are essentially modernists, signaled by their ignorance of postmodernist works, “center stage in critical theory is held by classical modernists”; they are modernists who differ greatly from their predecessors, and their principal contribution is an “archeology of modernity, a theory of modernity at the stage of its exhaustion” (260).

Huyssen’s hopes for postmodernism are not without qualification. Yet he does argue that “contemporary arts...can no longer be regarded as just another phase in the sequence of modernist and avant-gardist movements” (267). Postmodernism “raises the question of cultural tradition and conservation in the most fundamental way, as an aesthetic and political issue” (267). Recalling a metaphor often found in the writing of postmodern theorists and artists, Huyssen recognizes the tensions and fissures which postmodernism lays bare:

And yet my main point about contemporary postmodernism is that it operates in a field of tension between tradition and innovation, conservation and renewal, mass culture and high art, in which the second terms are no longer automatically privileged over the first; a field of
tension which can no longer be grasped in categories such as progress vs. reaction, Left vs. Right, present vs. past, modernism vs. realism, abstraction vs. representation, avant-garde vs. Kitsch (267).

Huyssen recognizes at the close of his article “four phenomena” which he sees will “remain constitutive of postmodern culture for some time to come”: the challenge to imperialism on the micro and macro levels; the feminist movement in both the arts and criticism; the questions of ecology and the environment (270). He calls for a postmodernism of resistance, a resistance which will have to be “specific and contingent upon the cultural field in which it operates” (271). He concludes by reminding us that “no matter how troubling, the landscape of the postmodern surrounds us. It simultaneously delimits and opens horizons. It’s our problem and our hope.” (271).

Ironically, Huyssen’s argument that postmodernism has challenged modernism’s repudiation of mass culture, and that that repudiation is what has doomed modernism in the present, is completely presented within the realm of the aesthetic. He does not venture, except in the final page of his essay, to consider the implications of the re-introduction of mass culture into the discourse of art and criticism, nor does he examine the material, social and economic conditions which may affect this process, among them the advent of technology in mass proportions, the media explosion or the shifts in our economy indicated by global markets and the network of multinational corporations. He never considers postmodernism as our problem and our hopes in relation to liberation struggles against oppressive regimes in a multitude of geo-political spaces. These struggles have often dismissed postmodernism as completely relevant. Huyssen does not attempt to think through or posit the relevancy of postmodernism to the pursuit of social
justice. He argues for a postmodernism which is in many ways still imprisoned within the aesthetic. It is, arguably, a different approach to the aesthetic, but it is still dependent on a vision of art as critique of existing systems and still operating outside or separate from the mechanisms of criticism and theory. Thus, although Huyssen’s insistence on viewing the postmodern as a ‘historical condition’ is valid and useful, he does not elucidate that condition outside of the trope of the philosophical and the aesthetic. What do we gain when we look at the postmodern as a historical condition? It may indeed be this move that allows us to traverse the large and dangerous chasm between theory and practice, between the discourse of the academy and the experience of everyday lives. For indeed one of the boundaries which postmodernism has required us to challenge is the one that exists between the inner and the outer, the ivory tower and the material reality of our lives as subjects. The debates concerning the postmodern, particularly in relation to politics and political practice have caused, as Andrew Ross points out, “a full-blown discourse about the nature and future of social modernity” (Ross vii). Referring to Jonathan Arac’s proclamation that postmodern criticism has chosen to be worldly, Ross tells us that the “question of worldliness has taken on even more grandiose implications. What world? Whose world? and what possible world” (Ross vii)? What concerns Ross, not unlike Huyssen, is the promise of the postmodern. The “once pristine intellectual phenomena,” postmodernism has found its way into fashion magazines and consumer culture, and Ross, like Huyssen and Jameson, sees this not as an indication of its loss of power by means of devaluation, but as a signal of the infusion of low and high culture. It is in this that Ross sees one of postmodernism’s principal strengths: “postmodernism, after all, holds the promise of a cultural politics that would have no institutional
boundaries, high or low, that would fight over if not infiltrate every last inch of historical terrain” (4). Postmodernism is “a real medium in which we all live across the jagged spectrum of color, sex, class, region and nationality” (4); thus by claiming that the postmodern is a historical “real medium,” Ross is able to place the concerns of postmodern criticism into a larger context, which “addresses a whole range of material conditions, that are no longer consonant with the dominant rationality of modernism” (5). Among these would be the material conditions of race, class, gender, sexual identity, and a multitude of other subjectivities.

For Ross, the debate about the postmodern cannot be waged simply in the realm of the aesthetic or within the realm of political and social theory but must re-figure the boundaries between such discourses. The postmodern debate, formed principally in the work of Lyotard, Habermas, Jameson and other white male intellectuals, fashioned in the early eighties around the issues of the death of modernity, the death of the grand narrative, the failure of the Enlightenment project, the rejection of universals, has suspiciously ignored the issues of gender and race. This debate has been waged in much the same “philosophical discourse” as the tradition they seek to undermine. In an effort to wrestle the questions surrounding the postmodern from the grip of these white male middle-class intellectuals, recent feminist analysis has charted a new course in relation to the postmodern. One very valuable contribution to this new course is Donna Haraway’s “A Manifesto for Cyborgs.” In my efforts to situate the postmodern within a historical context, as a “viewpoint of our times” Haraway’s construction of the Cyborg is extremely useful, and her discussion of the world out of which the Cyborg springs is central to
understanding the changing and changed conditions of women which are indicative of the historical moment we have come to call postmodern. For Haraway the postmodern “is a period not only of changed ideals, metaphors and hopes. It is also a period of changed structures of family, work relations, and class distinctions” (Nicholson 12). Thus the postmodern not only signals our changed view of art or artistic practice, but in fact indicates the changes in social structures and how they affect our lives. Haraway argues that the postmodern moment gives birth to new systems of domination that act differently from the models of oppression and silence which modernism and early feminism sought to upset. The old domination of white capitalist patriarchy seems nostalgically innocent now: they normalized heterogeneity, e.g. into man and woman, white and black.

“Advanced capitalism” and postmodernism release heterogeneity without a norm, and we are flattened, without subjectivity, which requires depth, even unfriendly and drowning depth....Our dominations don’t work by medicalization and normalization anymore; they work by networking, communications redesign, stress management. Normalization gives way to automation, utter redundancy (194). Haraway refers to these new conditions as the “informatics of domination.” In her effort to establish a politics which responds to “rearrangements in worldwide social relations tied to science and technology” (203), she argues that “fundamental changes have occurred in the constructions of race, class and gender, brought about by a shift from industrial capitalism to “a polymorphous information system—from all work to all play, a deadly game” (203). Her recognition of this shift, signaled by changes in work and familial arrangements, “charts a transition from the comfortable old hierarchical dominations to the scary new networks.” (203). These new networks are characterized by movements away from representation toward
simulation, away from the Bourgeois novel and realism to science fiction and postmodernism, away from physiology to communications engineering, away from reproduction toward replication. Her catalogue of these changes is both comprehensive and frightening for what it indicates about the shifts in the ways in which we, as postmodern subjects, experience the world. Yet her rhetorical use of the ‘list’ (203-04) allows her to make some important observations. The old dominations of modernism which occupy the left hand margin can no longer be considered natural once one recognizes the emergence of new systems of domination which she places in the right margin. Haraway warns us against a nostalgia for the old familiar forms of domination, and suggests that we “think not in terms of essential properties, but in terms of design, boundary constraints, rates of flow, systems logics and costs of lowering constraints” (204). Thus our desire to see sexual reproduction as “natural” must be re-figured with the understanding that within this new system “sexual reproduction is one form of reproduction among many, with costs and benefits as a function of the system environment” (204). Thus our notions of sex and sex roles cannot effortlessly be seen as “organic aspects in natural objects like organisms and families.” This recognition is strikingly supported by recent court cases which seek to legislate the custody of ‘frozen embryos’ during a divorce settlement, and which question the “legal” rights of pair of genetic parents whose custody of the baby is being challenged by the surrogate mother who, after an in-vitro procedure, carried the egg fertilized by the father to term. Invariably such dilemmas will continue to emerge, requiring that we re-define the meanings and boundaries of motherhood, parenthood and sexual reproduction based on the intervention of biological and genetic technology. The efforts of such re-definitions
show the kinds of confusions which our present moment creates between legal discourses and popular discourses, the old debate between nurture and nature resurfaces with a vengeance and with new terms conditions and problems. But more importantly, the “Baby M” case indicates the complex ways that Haraway’s informatics of domination operates in relationship and conflicts between various discursive and disciplinary practices. The implications of this case are augmented by more recent cases which raise similar questions and which are almost impossible to “resolve” inside old forms of disciplining power. For example, the media explosion of the case of “Baby Jessica”, a child who has been adopted at birth but whose birth parents sued for custody when the child was 18 months old. In this situation, the media engendered a confusing conflict between legal discourses; the U.S. Supreme Court upheld the decision of a lower court to return Jessica to her biological parents, and popular discourses, as opinion polls across the nation showed strong support for the adoptive parents. Thus the desire to return to a narrative or discursive power which is the “last court of appeal” is thwarted by a public dissatisfaction with the inability of that discourse to adequately address the new terms of “reproduction” and replication which are part of the postmodern moment. Haraway also argues that the “informatics of domination” requires that we reconsider our codifications of racial identity and racial oppression with a careful eye on the translations of “colonialism and racism into languages of development and underdevelopment, rates and constraints of modernization” (204). In effect these new forms of domination, which come out of the social relations of science and technology, require that we rethink notions of identity and self in relation to the systems of domination which threaten us in different ways than we previously imagined. She argues that we need to be aware of these systems
in order to resist them, and we need to understand the language and ideology of domination in order to combat it. For example, control strategies applied to women’s capacities to give birth to new human beings will be developed in languages of population control and maximization of goal achievement for individual decision makers. Human beings like any other component or subsystem, must be localized in a system architecture whose basic modes of operation are probabilistic, statistical. No objects, spaces or bodies are sacred in themselves; any component can be interfaced with any other if the proper standard, the proper code can be constructed for processing signals (205).

The picture here is in many ways a frightening and unsettling one, and the tendency to see it as science fiction or a “Brave New World,” and thus dismiss it as unreal, indicates a nostalgia for an organic wholeness which modernism offered, a hierarchical dualism which allowed feminism, for example, to name the enemy—Men—white middle-class men. Yet the experiences of our everyday lives, not to mention the “legal” tangles suggested by the court cases alluded to above, question all the old dichotomies between “mind and body, animal and human, organism and machine, nature and culture, men and women, primitive and civilized...” (205). For Haraway the construction of a viable “political myth of identity” requires that we look at the “actual situation of women,” not aspire to a theoretical position which answers to old systems of oppression while ignoring the significant changes in the ways that we live our lives. That “actual situation” indicates a transformation of the boundaries between “home, workplace, market, public arena, the body itself” such that each of these previously stable categories
of experience begins to melt into one another in a myriad of possible combinations; combinations which have different effects and different consequences for different individuals and groups. It is these multiple manifestations and effects of the “informatics of domination,” which make the formation of any resistance very difficult. Haraway points out that this makes “oppositional international movements difficult to imagine,” yet I would add, this makes even local or institutional movements or resistance difficult to organize and maintain. For Haraway the model which offers possibility to encompass the “postmodern collective and personal self” is the Cyborg, a metaphor which opens up the field of resistance:

The Cyborg is a matter of fiction and lived experience that changes what counts as women’s experience in the late twentieth century. This is a struggle over life and death, but the boundary between science fiction and social reality is a Fiction (191).

I will return to the possibilities which the Cyborg offers in more detail later in this discussion; however, Haraway’s insistence on the need for a “new metaphor” is supported by her elucidation of the actual changes in women’s lives in the postmodern. She locates herself as someone interested in “build[ing] an ironic political myth faithful to feminism, socialism and materialism” (190), and such a focus requires a change in focus outside the boundaries of the romantic aestheticism set out by Huyssen. She argues convincingly that the “New Industrial Revolution,” characterized by the explosion of the electronics industry and global markets as well as the revolutions in science and technology which the post-1960s era brought about has and is producing a new working class, in much the same ways that it is revolutionizing the categories of race and gender. This working class is not “gender or race neutral” and thus the effects that its emergence
has on certain groups according to race and gender are different. While showing that women in third world companies are the victims of the Neo-colonialism of the multinational, she also recognizes that this new working class exists in the United States in concentrated locations like the Silicon Valley in California and the Computer belt on Rte. 128 in Massachusetts. In her analysis of the Silicon Valley, she concludes that many women’s lives have been structured around employment in electronics-dependent jobs, and their intimate realities include serial heterosexual monogamy, negotiating child care, distance from extended community, a high likelihood of loneliness and extreme economic vulnerability as they age (208). Using Richard Gordon’s construction of “the homework economy,” which speaks to the electronic industries’ use of the home terminal, but also names “a restructuring of work that broadly has the characteristics formerly ascribed to female jobs, jobs literally done only by women,” she concludes that the concept indicates an integration of factory, home and market in new and crucial ways.

These economic changes also have important effects upon the family structure. Referring to the narrative framework of the three major stages of capitalism worked out by Jameson—realism, modernism, and postmodernism—Haraway schematizes the postmodern family as the “family of the homework economy with its oxymoronic structure of women-headed households and its explosions of feminisms and the paradoxical intensification and erosion of gender itself” (209). As she places “women in the integrated circuit,” Haraway paints a picture, a “holographic photograph,” of women’s experiences in the postmodern world “seen primarily from the point of view of advanced capitalist societies” (212). In that photo, ‘Home’ equals women-headed
households, which are characterized by domestic work, paid home work, home-based business, electronic cottage industries, simulated nuclear family and intense domestic violence (212-13). In a similar vein, she views the significant changes in the Market, the Paid Work Place, the State, School, the Clinic hospital, and the Church. She concludes that “[t]he only way to characterize the informatics of domination is as a massive intensification of insecurity and cultural impoverishment, with common failure of subsistence networks for the most vulnerable” (214). This conclusion leads her to call with urgency for a “socialist-feminist politics addressed to science and technology” (214). Despite the bleakness of the postmodern condition for women and others, Haraway is quick to point out that the nostalgia for modernism or previous forms of domination reflects an inability to see that what has been lost in these changes is often, specifically for women and people on the margin, “virulent forms of oppression,” and that we must resist the desire to “nostalgically naturalize those forms in the face of current violation” (215). There is potential within our recognition of the changes in our lives brought about by the informatics of domination—the postmodern. Passing moralistic judgment on it or wistfully trying to return to a condition of organic wholeness, the dream of a common language will not empower us now. Haraway makes some invaluable contributions to the establishment of the postmodern as a historical condition and various postmodernisms as a response to that condition. Unlike Huyssen, who sees the signatory as indicative of a shift in sensibility reflected principally in the arenas of art, the aesthetic, criticism, and the academy, she establishes the postmodern as an ongoing shift in the cultural, social and economic orders, which affects all the ways we experience our lives. Unlike Jameson, she questions the viability of the dialectical
analysis to answer to the polymorphous tensions and contradictions which the informatics of domination set up. For Haraway these changes can be traced to a series of “developments” within the social relations of science and technology. As a feminist, Haraway sees the need for a move toward a feminist science, a socialist-feminist methodology which responds to the present conditions of women, denying the dream of commonality, but instead forging a myth of political identity which is born of the dismantling of boundaries between old dichotomies: the Cyborg. The viability of the Cyborg metaphor needs to be tested further by analysis, with regard to categories of experience, culture, history and identity. Is the metaphor limited by its emergence in relation principally to women from advanced capitalist societies, and does it travel across the constructs of race, class and sexuality as easily as Haraway claims? A Cyborg is a cybernetic organism, a hybrid of machine and organism, a creature of social reality as well as fiction. (191)

Haraway attempts to form a myth of political identity which will respond to the very complex networks of power and domination that characterize the postmodern moment. In her efforts to engage with a metaphor which will both characterize and challenge the postmodern, Haraway constructs the Cyborg, which is “outside salvation history?” and “which does not mark time in an Oedipal calendar, attempting to heal the terrible cleavages of gender in oral symbiotic utopia or Post-oedipal apocalypse.” (192) Thus, she rejects the working of Marxist master narratives or psychoanalytic micro-narratives; instead she seeks to construct a myth which engages what she perceives to be the very real conditions of “social reality” in the late twentieth-century and the possibilities for
agency within those conditions. For these reasons Haraway’s contribution to the
discourse of the postmodern cannot be overemphasized. However, Haraway’s
construction of the Cyborg as a myth of political identity also invites the same kind of
vigorous critique which she herself performs. Recent postmodern feminist discourse has
often referred to the “Manifesto for Cyborgs” as an article which charts new ground, and
which thus is vital to our efforts towards productions of engagement between postmodern
theory, feminist theory and socialist theory. However, few have looked closely at the
viability of the Cyborg within communities outside the rubric of academic discourse. Yet
the construction itself still stands, seven years after the original publication of the essay
as one of the few attempts to create such a myth that has political implications and
perhaps political power.

For Haraway the Cyborg represents the reconstruction of the function of subjectivity
within the postmodern world. It rejects wholes on every plain—pre-oedipal symbiosis,
unalienated labor, origin stories in the Western sense—and is instead committed to
“partiality, irony, intimacy and perversity.”(192). This means that in the Cyborg world,
“[n]ature and culture are reworked; the one can no longer be the resource for the
appropriation or incorporation by the other.”(192) Thus, all dreams, aspirations and
pretensions to organic wholes either in the guise of a Marxist macro political historicism
or a psychoanalytic interiorization, are not only rejected but unrecognizable to the
Cyborg, as are religious origin stories or other forms of “holism.” Haraway sees the
Cyborg born out of a series of historical and material conditions endemic to the late
twentieth century, including the breakdown of the separation between human and animal
signaled by the feminist alliance with animal rights and the reconfiguration of the
evolutionary debate into an “ideological struggle or professional dispute between life and social sciences.” Thus, the Cyborg appears in myth precisely where the boundary between human and animal is transgressed:” Far from signaling a walling off of people from other living things, cyborgs signal disturbingly and pleasurably tight couplings” (193). The Cyborg also transgresses the boundaries between animal-living organisms and machines. Late Twentieth Century machines have made thoroughly ambiguous the difference between natural and artificial, mind and body, self-developing and externally designed, and many other distinctions that used to apply to organisms and machines (194). Certainly this is supported by “developments” in medical and biotechnological fields over the past dozen years or so, including baboon hearts implanted in people, accomplished by the advent of the artificial heart and countless other medical procedures which combine the machine with the human to “repair” the organism. And although these material examples foreground this fusion, she also argues that the “textualization of everything” in postmodernist and poststructuralist theory, which has been so badly bemoaned by Marxists and socialist feminists for its “utopian disregard for lived relations of domination,” represents another important aspect of the creation of the Cyborg. The shift and break that so many postmodern theorists have announced is certainly not a challenge that can any longer be ignored, and thus

...certainly what counts as nature—a source of insight and a promise of innocence—is undermined, probably fatally. The transcendent authorization of interpretation is lost and with it the ontology grounding Western epistemology. But the alternative is not cynicism and faithlessness, that is, some version of abstract existence, like accounts of technological determinism destroying “man” by the “machine” or “meaningful political action by ‘text.’” Who cyborg will be is a radical question: the answers are a matter of survival. Both chimpanzees and artifacts have politics, so why shouldn’t we? (194-95)
Haraway’s call to politics prefigures more recent feminist theorizing by Wendy Brown and Nancy Love as well as the attempts by Nicholson and Fraser to articulate a postmodern feminist practice. However, she is alone in her attempt to create a workable “myth of political identity” which addresses the conditions of postmodernism materially, economically and textually. Interestingly enough, the Haraway model invokes the work both theoretical and fictional of women of color in order to theorize about the possibilities for the cyborg myth. Contesting the fact that most socialist and feminist theorists see “deepened dualisms of mind and body, animal and machine, idealism and materialism in social practices, symbolic formulations and physical artifacts associated with high technology and scientific culture” (196), Haraway argues that radical cries for an “imagined organic body to integrate our resistance” are at best romantic failures and at worst dangerous illusions. Arguing that the Cyborg has a potential to become a myth that emphasizes new and more powerful forms of domination and control, she also suggests that “a cyborg world might be about lived social and bodily realities in which people are not afraid of their joint kinship with animals and machines, not afraid of permanently partial identities and contradictory standpoints” (196).

Haraway’s invocation of Chela Sandoval’s elucidation of an “oppositional consciousness” which is based on the experience and historical construction of a new “political voice called women of color” (197) is revealing. Searching for a model that is ostensibly outside the Western epistemology that has so plagued white women’s feminisms, both psychoanalytic and Marxist, she appropriates the term “women of
"Women of color," a name contested at its origins by those women it would incorporate, as well as a historical consciousness marking a systematic breakdown of all signs of Man in Western traditions, constructs a kind of postmodern identity out of otherness, difference and specificity. This postmodern identity is fully political...oppositional consciousness is about contradictory locations and heterochronic calendars, not about relativisms and pluralisms (197). Arguing that the construction of such an identity or category that “cannot affirm the capacity to act on the basis of natural identifications, but only on the basis of conscious coalition, of affinity of political kinship” (198), Haraway endorses Sandoval’s claim that this type of construction reveals the uniquely powerful possibilities of oppositional consciousness.

Haraway’s turn toward women of color is indicative of a particular trend in both postmodern and feminist theory in the late 80’s and the 90’s. The romance with the other and with difference, which so characterizes the textual investigations of poststructuralists and the theoretical elucidations of postmodernists, are extended here from the abstract into the political and social. Women of color become both a basis upon which to form a ‘myth of political identity’ and a space to enact desires to form “political unity to confront effectively the dominations of race, gender, sexuality and class”. (199) Yet there are several problems with this move. A kind of romanticizing of the border here allows for an escape from any consideration of the politics of our (white women’s) own location.

For despite the fact that Haraway cites Sandoval in noting the “lack of any essential criterion for identifying who is a woman of color” (197) -- essential or partial and
contiguous—such a criterion does exist. I could not at any point, despite the “possibilities for affinity and political kinship,” claim a place inside such a construction. To do so would be both politically and theoretically unsound, but also possibly ethically dangerous. Thus Haraway’s attempts to critique identity politics by constructing the Cyborg and invoking “women of color” are problematic, for although there is a need for the interrogation and perhaps even destruction of such essential categories upon which identity politics depend, it would seem that ignoring the location of subject/speaker conditions of differences between speakers is not the place to begin. Clearly Haraway is utilizing Sandoval’s “oppositional consciousness” and the category of “women of color” as a possible model or example of the ways that the “fraying of identities” could be productive, not apocalyptic; and she asserts that the mistakes which Euro American feminists have made in their innocent belief in the category of “woman” have been divisive at best, yet the move to co-opt instantly the processes of an identity she calls “women of color” seems suspiciously to indicate a new problem as Euro American women struggle with difference. Easily appropriating such identities for “our” use indicates a will to power that needs to be investigated. Haraway’s desire to “end salvation history” and critique the notions of origins may be at odds with recent desires within specifically African American women’s fiction to investigate self-consciously and complexly the process of colonization through history. Does a end to “salvation history” signal an end to important histories of domination and subjugation which “women of color” are trying to rescue from erasure? Haraway’s very salient critique of Marxist/socialist feminisms and radical feminisms leads her immediately to two places in her desire to postulate the Cyborg—women of color and “monstrous selves in feminist
science fiction” (216). Leaving aside momentarily my unease with such a coupling, I want to focus on Haraway’s argument that the works of women of color may help in the “construction of a potentially helpful cyborg myth” (216). She suggests that “women of color” might be understood as a cyborg identity, a potent subjectivity synthesized from fusions of outsider identities and in the complex political historical layering of Audre Lorde’s “biomythography’ Zami.” (216) Appropriating Lorde’s construction of self as a Sister Outsider, Haraway contends that this construction “is a potential amid the races and ethnic identities of women manipulated division, competition and exploitation in the same industries,” (216) yet never does she consider the very real and necessary interaction between women who cannot and would not claim identities as Sister Outsiders and those who can; never does she consider the implications for the appropriation of such a “identity myth” for the Sister Insider, who is inscribed in the postmodern world in radically different ways than these fictional and “real” women of color to whom she turns her gaze.

Looking at the propensity in the writings of women of color to use writing and inscription as a form of resistance, Haraway argues that “releasing the play of writing is deadly serious” and that the emergence of works by women of color which foreground the importance of writing indicate that “writing is access to power to signify, but this time that power must be neither phallic nor innocent.” (216) Such an insight demands a historical vision which circumscribes the history of women of color as voices and writers previous to the onset of the postmodern moment. It contains these voices in a historical gaze that supercedes the tradition of resistance and revolution that women such as Audre
Lorde claim as a source of strength and identity. It suggests that they did not exist until we recognized that they were there. Bereft of our own traditions, possibilities, Haraway turns to these voices, lumps them together without considering the specificities of culture, history and experience and then suggests that these voices are contained within a postmodern moment which is specifically Euro American and technological in its elucidation.

The assumption that identities such as “women of color” that indicate a rejection of the western epistemological turn toward certainty, salvation and “wholeness” ignores the fact that these constructions of identity may have preceded not only our postmodern moment but Western epistemology itself. In fact, in her attempt to contain the works of radical feminist thinkers like Adrienne Rich and Audre Lorde within the “cyborg world,” Haraway maintains that despite the fact that they themselves may still adhere to a world view that opposes the organic to the technological, they are defined inside the postmodern by the very reaction to it. Indeed if one recognizes, as I have argued, that the postmodern is a condition and historical moment, not a set of practices or methodologies to be eschewed or endorsed, the emergence of any reactions within this moment can be contained within the postmodern or Cyborg world, yet Haraway’s neat rhetorical move leaves out a great deal. Her sweeping fiction or myth enacts a process which has become characteristic of many white Euro American engagements with the work of women of color, or specifically African American women’s work. Unshaken really by the challenges their work presents to our position as the colonizers, we consistently look for strategies to contain their works within our systems of thought or strategies for change.
This leads to a new kind of exoticism, perhaps not the abstract “other” so familiar in a poststructuralist discourse, but now a real “other” which will provide us with lessons for “fictionalizing” our own myths of political identity. We have in effect not moved from the center, but just redefined the boundaries around ourselves and co-opted the discourse of the “margin” in order to do so. Two things emerge from Haraway’s construction of this identity myth that are most useful—the writings of women of color are relentlessly political and the stories they tell challenge, “reverse and displace the hierarchical dualisms of naturalized identities.” However, the ways, strategies, necessities and specificities of those challenges are ignored here. For despite the rejection in much of the writings of women of color of the story of origin—or the possibility of tracing or knowing the origins—that rejection is not based in most cases upon an exhaustion with the process of “salvation history” but upon a very real history of erasure which makes such knowledge in terms of textual evidence impossible. Thus their motivations for rejecting such “fictions” are never one and the same as the Euro American theorist looking for new ways to theorize self.

Haraway’s “coupling” of “women of color” with her myth of political identity—the Cyborg—still insists upon the power of Euro American white women to name the motivations, interests and experience of “other” women. Would Toni Morrison in her construction of the “ancestor figure” Beloved agree that “writing is preeminently the technology of Cyborgs, etched surfaces of the late twentieth century?” (218). For, although Beloved in its investigation of multiple voicing and versions of history and its insistence on the power of language, might indeed “struggle for language and against the
perfect communication, against one code that translates one meaning perfectly, the central dogma of phallogocentrism.” (218) Sethe’s horrification of the conflation of her and her children with animals as expressed in Schoolteacher’s codifications does not indicate a “politics that insist[s] on noise and advocates pollution, rejoicing in the illegitimate fusions of animal and machine” (218). Illustrating the very real violence of the history of colonization in Western consciousness through the association of all others with animals and bestiality, and the significance of the inscription of that association in writing and scientific discourse—“I made the ink”—Sethe’s horror cannot be reduced to a kind of easy rejection of such categories inscribed in a postmodern moment.

Haraway’s desire to create a return to scientific discourse and create a dialogue between feminism and science is compelling. Yet her use of women of color to facilitate such a move is problematic. At no place in the article does she discuss the very real and different relationships that women of color discursively have to technology. She does recognize that the “informatics of domination” affect “offshore” women—Korean women and other women in the worldwide sexual market, labor market, and reproductive market—differently.

But she does not look closely at the configurations of capitalist, colonizing technology which are evident in the writings of African American women, for example even in the absence of direct reference to them. Toni Cade Bambara’s critique of western technological medical practices in *The Salteaters*, for example, or Gloria Naylor’s very blatant rejection of modern technology and her illustration of its relationship to strategies of colonization in the first section of *Mama Day*, both seem to indicate a commentary on
the effects, possibilities and strategies of technology and specifically high technology
which is radically different from Haraway’s. Significantly the efficacy of Haraway’s
construction of the Cyborg is limited to those who, contained within the center, are
looking outside of it for solutions and in so doing enact a process of containment that re-
capitulates power to the center. Her marriage of “women of color” and the Cyborg
indicates a desire to “control” the discourses and strategies of “others”—not, in effect, to
learn from them.

There is a myth system waiting to become a political language to ground one way of
looking at science and technology and challenging the informatics of
domination(223). Haraway’s attempts to intimate the possibilities for such a “myth
system” are important, yet her article, written in 1985, signals a powerful trend in the
attempt of white women feminists and socialists to mine the work of women of color by
appropriating it outside of the contexts that women of color themselves have insisted
upon. It also fails to engage the problems and inconsistencies that the identity “women of
color” has evoked in the history of struggle over the past several years. However, what is
most striking in its absence from Haraway’s “myth system” is a discussion of the
importance of the politics of location (spatial relationships) and history (temporal
relationships) in any attempt to form “affinities, coalitions and a “powerful heteroglossia”
between and among very different kinds of women (and men) For although she
recognizes the importance of regarding the postmodern as a moment in time with specific
historical conditions of domination, she does not engage the ways that those dominations
are unequal and consistent with the history of colonization, nor does she look at the ways
that women of color are actively engaging those conditions in a multiplicity of ways which may challenge our notions of technology not by demonizing it but by insisting we look at the history of its effects on those we have colonized. Haraway’s powerful call for a “mythology” of political identity rightly turns our gaze to the “political,” not the transcendent or philosophical, and it rightly insists upon new forms of “resistance” etched in our process of “reconstructing the boundaries of daily life” (223). Yet her myth and its dependence on the works of “women of color,” as well as her inability to engage the politics of her own location as a white academic feminist socialist come dangerously close to enacting one of the new strategies of domination which she seeks to disrupt; in effect she subsumes the concerns of race, class and sexuality under the rubric of the construction of a scientifically-based feminism: We require regeneration, not rebirth, and the possibilities for our reconstruction include the utopian dream of the hope for a monstrous world without gender (223).

Haraway’s process, and indeed the process of much postmodern theory, hails the desire to engage multiplicity and heterogeneity, yet often does so at the expense of “others.” The establishment of a language or discourse to speak to our (whose?) ‘present condition’ is a necessary if impossible “dream,” yet consistently the embedded ness of our discourse is displayed in the working out of our “myths” and models of the postmodern or of postmodern strategies. Giving over to abstractions of “race” and “class” and “gender” or enacting an exoticization of the “other” without really consulting those “others” leaves us in a space of repetition—we are still talking to and about ourselves even as we invoke ‘difference’. The desire to shift the focus from the philosophical or epistemological to
the political characterizes much of the important work being done under the guise of postmodern feminism, and my next chapter will look closely at the possibilities and problems implicit in such a shift. What does this shift create in terms of dialogues between women of color and white women, for example, or how does it continue to codify race/class/gender in ways that ignore the politics of location and history? How do the methods by which we (white western academic feminist postmodernists) choose to grasp the present, reveal our own implication in the informatics of domination or the continuing process of colonization?
CHAPTER II
JUST THINK IT: FEMINIST ENCOUNTERS WITH POSTMODERNISM

It has become difficult to name one’s feminism by a single adjective—or even to insist in every circumstance upon the noun. Consciousness of exclusion through naming is acute. Identities seem contradictory, partial and strategic. With the hard-won recognition of their social and historical constitution, gender, race and class cannot provide the basis for belief in “essential” unity. Who counts as ‘us’ in my own rhetoric? Which identities are available to ground such a potent political myth called “us” and what could motivate enlistment in this collectivity? (Haraway 197)

If it is true, as I have tried to establish in Chapter I, that the postmodern is not the exclusive ‘property’ of the white middle class male philosophers who have named it, but instead signals the site of some important and complex changes in the “material conditions of our lives,” then principal among those changes is the challenge to categories of unity which some postmodern theories have articulated and postmodern conditions, economic, social and political, have necessitated. Haraway refers to this as a “crisis in political identity,” and attempts to form a “myth” of political identity which will respond to these changes. That attempt, although commendable, falls into the traps of “othering” which characterize much of the more recent engagements between postmodernism and feminism. However, it becomes necessary to set the stage for this process by looking at several of the theorists who have actively addressed the postmodern/feminism debate in recent years. Certainly feminism and feminist theory specifically has fallen prey in many instances to the “dream of a common language”—the notion that our identification with each other as “women” transcends all other categories of difference. Recently the charge that a theory or methodology is “essentialist” is heard
consistently at conferences and in classrooms as well as in the growing body of published material which critiques the phenomena of “white women’s studies” and the various forms of feminist discourse which cannot account for the differences which are entangled with gender, specifically those of race, class, sexual orientation, culture and history. Early efforts in feminist practice to “liberate” or unite women in the revolt against patriarchy often depended upon the politics of identification which led consistently to the construction of a “we” or us which looked not surprisingly homogenous. As Elizabeth Spellman has pointed out, “It is not news that dominant Western feminist thought has taken the experiences of white middle class women to be representative of, indeed normative for, the experiences of all women” (ix). Within the discourse of feminist thought many have reproduced a notion of “identity” and “unity” which echoes many modern Enlightenment narratives of social and political revolution. This would seem to suggest that postmodernism’s challenge to the unity of the subject and grand narratives of any sort is in direct contrast to much of feminist theory. However, neither postmodern theory nor feminist theory can be reduced to such easy “tropes,” nor can we suggest that within the varied and fractured discourses of postmodernism and feminism there exists a “unity” of perspective, aim and methodology. There are indeed many feminisms and many postmodernisms, and even any rhetorical attempt to totalize the trends within either discourse becomes suspect. Therefore, as it is necessary to look carefully at the ways that postmodernism and feminism relate to each other, it is also important to pay heed to the differences within each of these seemingly homogenous theoretical approaches.

There have been several salient discussions of feminism and postmodernism over the past few years, signaled by the publication of Feminism/Postmodernism, edited by
Linda Nicholson (1989). The first of these discussions is Nicholson and Fraser’s “Social Criticism without Philosophy” (1988). Commenting on the lack of significant debate concerning postmodern theory and feminist theory, Nicholson and Fraser analyze the relationship between these two modes of interpretation, by looking at the spaces where they can speak to each other. ...there are good reasons for exploring the relations between feminism and postmodernism. Both have offered deep and far reaching criticisms of the institution of philosophy. Both have elaborated critical perspectives on the relation of philosophy to the larger culture. And most central...both have sought to develop new paradigms of social criticism that do not rely on traditional philosophical underpinnings (83). Despite the fact that feminism and postmodernism “have worked independently on a common nexus of problems” (83), there remain a number of difficulties and differences between the two theoretical models. For Nicholson and Fraser one of the central differences lies in their approach. Postmodernists have focused “primarily on the philosophy side of the problem,” and for feminists “the question of philosophy has always been subordinate to an interest in social criticism” (83). This difference results in “some complementary strengths and weaknesses.” (83). Postmodern theory has performed some valuable and important critiques of foundationalism and essentialism but has been unable to forge these critiques into a viable practice of social criticism, let alone action: feminist theory has been able, based upon gender as a viable and organizing principle of experience, to perform some “robust conceptions of social criticism,” but its reliance on essential categories of “women” or even “gender” has led dangerously toward essentialism and exclusion. For Nicholson and Fraser the trick lies in looking at these two approaches in relation and getting beyond a mutual critique in order to
construct a social criticism which retains its power, while not falling into foundationalist and essential categories. They suggest the possibility lies in the “prospect of a postmodern feminism” (84). I have tried to establish the postmodern as not only a methodology, but as a Historical moment which has created the need for various new methodologies. Although I would be unable to establish the exact parameters of that moment, i.e., dates when modernism fell into the post phase—and although I may argue that these changes have different signs and affect within a myriad of realms aesthetic, social, political and cultural, my argument proceeds from the recognition that the material conditions of our lives accompanied by the intellectual challenges to the systems which we previously used to “order” or “explain” those conditions indicate a “shift” which we cannot choose to ignore. For Nicholson and Fraser, as well as many others, one of the signs of this “shift” is the rejection of the “traditional philosophical underpinnings” which characterized the ‘modern’. Philosophy with a capital ‘P’ is no longer seen as a viable and founding critical enterprise—it is no longer necessary or even true that the grand narrative of legitimation which has characterized the critical enterprise of philosophy in the modern effectively grounds politics and social criticism. The “modern” conception must give way to a new “postmodern” one in which criticism floats free of any ‘Universalist’ theoretical ground. No longer anchored philosophically, the very shape or character of social criticism changes; it becomes more pragmatic, ad hoc, contextual and local. And with this change comes corresponding changes in the social role and political function of intellectuals (85). As Jane Flax has pointed out, “Western Intellectuals cannot be immune from the profound shifts now taking place in contemporary social life” (6). It is in fact these changes in our social reality which have indicated a need for new
methodologies, yet within the failure of foundationalism posed by the Enlightenment, the thinker/writer is left with an “uncomfortable form of intellectual vertigo” (6). The illusion of “safe ground” now gone, how do we get used to feeling dizzy?

Why indeed are we dizzy at all? While postmodern perspectives may display some sites of common ground, the debate about that which characterizes the postmodern will undoubtedly continue. However, within the realm of Philosophy, it is possible to sort out some parameters. Most postmodernists agree, beginning perhaps with Lyotard who coins the phrase in reference to philosophy, that the meta-narrative of the Enlightenment has broken down, forcing philosophers (and others) to question the validity of our notions of “voice, terrain, purposes and meaning” (7). The grand ideas that structured legitimated and lent coherence to so much of Western Science, philosophy, economics and politics since the eighteenth century no longer appear compelling or even plausible. The Enlightenment now seems more like an inherited set of beliefs, rent by all too self-evident contradictions. The political and philosophical aspirations and claims typical of Enlightenment thinking appear to have been falsified by that which is supposed to predict but which cannot account for: the subsequent course of Western History (Flax 7). Central to All Enlightenment beliefs is the a priori existence of a stable identity or “self”—“a stable, reliable, interrogative entity that has access to our inner states and outer reality” (8). This meta-narrative also provides a privileged space for science and philosophy—for the triumph of Reason. As we challenge the ability of the Enlightenment narrative of reason, progress, knowledge and ethical action, as we begin to question the existence of that stable category called self, we must unseat the underpinnings of not only
philosophy but of any theory of knowledge (epistemology) which lays claim to
universals. The inadequacy of the meta-narrative of the western Enlightenment has been
revealed by historical events: How do we explain Hiroshima, Auschwitz, or nuclear
holocaust and environmental disaster within the rubric of Reason. We do not even have
language for such “events.” One need only read the story of the development of nuclear
bombs at Los Alamos to begin to question the limits of reason and science when we
ourselves become enslaved by the products of that knowledge. Our romance with Science
has cost us dearly, that no one can deny. Yet the tendency within postmodernism to reject
the Enlightenment narratives has led quickly to the rejection of all large scale
narratives—the vision that social critiques must forswear the tools of large historical
narratives and replace them with theories which are “ad hoc, contextual and local.”
There emerges a certain arrogance of the western intellectual within this process—if my
system is faulty, then the very notion of system itself is flawed. Nicholson and Fraser
have recognized this as one of the principle weaknesses in postmodern theory, evident
in the theory of Lyotard. Within the predominate feminist critiques or engagements with
postmodern theory, as well as the interrogation of the modern which postmodern theory
itself performs, the nature and terms of the conversation are consistent—the debate or
critique is enacted within the structures of the Western Enlightenment narrative—the
Western concept of Philosophy—the hegemonic discourse of Reason. Postmodernism
is described or defined as that which rejects or interrogates the modern, which is in itself
a particularly specific construct dependent upon dominant notions of self, history, science
and reason. What happens when we widen the definition of the postmodern, when we
make attempts to incorporate the narratives of the subaltern, the marginalized—that
which falls outside the dominant western enlightenment narrative by its very definition? Does that mean that such narratives, interpretations, cosmologies are pre-modern? Or does that mean that they fall outside the debate of modern/postmodern completely? Can the tools of analysis which Nicholson and Fraser recognize as important aspects of postmodern theory—the anti-foundationalist perspective—be used when looking at the narrative of African American experience, for example? Jameson, among others, has recognized that that which characterizes the postmodern moment is not only a rejection of the Modern on the philosophical level, but that that rejection was anticipated by the failure of the enlightenment narrative to speak to the condition of the Subaltern—the post-colonial subject, the African American, the female. ¹ If in fact those challenges to the meta-narrative of enlightenment were precipitated by the recognition of the failure of meta-narrative to account for the experience of the other, then what happens when we switch the terms to a postmodern narrative which is ad hoc, contextual and local? Do we in fact perform a new injustice by articulating Toni Morrison as a postmodern writer, suggesting that her work is still contained within the centrality of the rejection of something we (dominant Western discourse) have called Modern? Is this also true when talking about the experience of ‘women’ of various subjectivities—many kinds of ‘others?’ Is postmodern theory, at least as it has emerged in the realm of philosophy and theory, hopelessly entangled with the oppressive Enlightenment narrative it seeks to unseat? If we answer this question with a quick “yes” then will postmodern theory continue to speak only to the condition of the dominant; will it continue to speak only to those who recognize self within the trope of Enlightenment and then anti-Enlightenment

¹There is much debate about the ability of western discourse to speak to the conditions of the colonized “other”. Please see Franz Fanon, Edward Said, Gayatri Spivak and Homi Bhaba as well as many others exploring the importance of the “post-colonial”. I will return to their critiques later in this work.
stances? The terms and the fields of postmodern inquiry will not change. However, if we postulate that this question is far more complex then a quick “yes’ will allow, then perhaps we can challenge the hold which “philosophy’ and Western Philosophy in particular has on us. We need to concretely break the hold which philosophy has had on this discourse of the postmodern—not by simply unseating the Philosopher within the discourse of philosophy (Lyotard), but by challenging the very definition of philosophy and theory within which we operate. That includes a rejection of the privileged discourse of ‘theory’ upon which most postmodern inquiries depend. Nicholson and Fraser are in search of a “social criticism without philosophy,” and part of the articulation of that search necessitates a shift in approach and perspective. Rejecting Lyotard’s starting point—the condition of philosophy—they propose another starting point: Suppose one began, not with the condition of philosophy, but with the nature of the social object one wished to criticize. Suppose one defined that object as the subordination of women by men. Then, it would be apparent that many of the genres rejected by postmodernists are necessary tools for social criticism. For a phenomena as pervasive and multifaceted as male dominance simply cannot be adequately grasped with the meager critical resources to which they would limit us (Nicholson and Fraser 91). These “meager critical resources”—the ad hoc, contextual, and local--forswear “large narratives about changes in social organization and ideology, empirical and social theoretical analysis of macro-structures and institutions (Haraway’s “informatics of domination” for example), interactionist analysis of the micro politics of everyday life (Fraser’s work on the welfare state) critical- hermeneutical and institutional analysis of cultural production, and historically and culturally specific sociologies of gender…” (91) The postmodern
rejection of an oppressive foundationalism is imperative for any analysis of gender, race and class in our historical moment (the dizzy technological space of the postmodern); however, that need not lead us toward a not so easy relativism, a web of critiques confined to the miniature. As Nicholson and Fraser have pointed out, even Lyotard himself, “despite his strictures against large totalizing stories...narrates a fairy tale about a large scale social trend” (90)--the postmodern condition. It is possible and necessary to conceive of the tools of social criticism—including large narratives about changes in social organizations—without returning endlessly to an oppressive foundationalism—a universal story.

The paths toward a new way of conceiving of social criticism without “Philosophy” need a great deal more exploration, and as Nicholson and Fraser attempt the outline for such a social criticism, they are well aware of the sketchy quality of their effort. Their proposal depends upon the intersection of tenets of feminist analysis with the anti-foundational approach of postmodern theory. Feminist theory has avoided many of the mistakes of postmodern theory by being aware of “the demands of political practice” (91). Feminists have “sought to develop new paradigms of social criticism” that do not rely on “traditional philosophical underpinnings... criticiz[ing] modern foundationalist epistemologies and moral and political theories, exposing the contingent, partial and historically situated character of what has passed in the mainstream for necessary, universal and a historical truths” (91). Feminist theory has also challenged the “dominant philosophical project of seeking objectivity in the guise of a ‘God’s eye view ‘which transcends any situation or perspective” (91). The need to conceive of social
criticism within the powerful arena of political practice insured that feminist theory
would not be as susceptible to the “abandonment of powerful political tools merely as a
result of intramural debates in professional philosophy” (92). In effect what feminist
type allowed/needed was a consideration and conscious recognition of the way that
type affected and worked in the world. This led, as Nicholson and Fraser have so aptly
demonstrated, to another set of problems. Political need and practical imperative have
led some feminist theorists, particularly in the early stages of feminism, to construct large
methods of theorizing and analysis which upon closer examination begin to look
suspiciously like, in structure and application, the met-narratives postmodern theory
critiques. To be sure the feminist theories we have in mind here are not “pure” meta-
narratives; they are not a historical normative theories about the transcultural nature of
rationality or justice. Rather they are very large social theories, theories of history,
society, cultures and psychology, that claim, for example, to identify causes and/or
constitutive features of sexism that operate cross-culturally, Thus, these theories purport
to be empirical rather than philosophical. But...they are actually ‘quasi metanarratives.’
They tacitly presuppose some commonly held but unwarranted and essentialist
assumptions about the nature of human beings and the conditions for social life (92).
Nicholson and Fraser cite many examples here, including the early radical feminist
Shulameth Firestone and the feminist anthropological views expressed in the very
influential text Women, Culture and Society (1974), which saw the separation between a
‘domestic’ sphere and a ‘public’ sphere—the former being a female space, the later a
male space—as the organizing principle of its analysis. Although this got us away from
the rampant biologism which characterized Firestone, it also posed that these two spheres
existed in ALL societies and cultural arrangements and thus as a methodology of social criticism could be transcultural. In effect the theory falsely generalized to all societies a historically specific conjunction of properties: women’s responsibility for early childrearing, women’s tendency to spend more time in the geographical space of the home, women’s lesser participation in the affairs of the community, a cultural ascription of triviality to domestic work and a cultural ascription of inferiority to women (94).

Many of these early feminist social theories were dependent upon a view of theory entangled with the Enlightenment methodology of constructing one theory which would account for the experiences of all women. This desire led to multiple theories in various fields which tried to “explain sexism cross-culturally and illuminate all of social life” (95). Thus the act of theorizing itself came to be synonymous with the production of a “quasi meta-narrative”—a paradigm which would illuminate the causes and results of sexism in every culture and every moment in history. Fraser and Nicholson note that the tendency to speak of “biological determinants or a cross-cultural domestic/public separation” has fallen off since the late 1970s; however, they also note a trend in feminist theory in the 1980s which “continu[es] implicitly to suppose a quasi-meta-narrative conception of theory” (95). They have continued to theorize in terms of a putatively unitary, primary, culturally universal type of activity associated with women, generally an activity conceived as ‘domestic’ and located in the ‘family’ (95). One of the most influential theories which Nicholson and Fraser examine within this context is the work of Nancy Chodorow on “mothering”.

43
Chodorow’s conclusion that “female mothering produces women whose deep sense of self is relational and men whose deep sense of self is not” (95), although compelling in its seeming ability to account for the “pervasiveness of sexism” and “it[s] ‘legitimat [ion] of the claims that the ties that bind women are deep and Nicholson and Fraser expose the problems with Chodorow in detail substantively based,” is constructed on a quasi-meta-narrative. It posits the existence of a single activity, “mothering,” which while differing in specifics in different societies nevertheless constitutes enough of a natural kind to warrant one label. It stipulates that this basic unitary activity gives rise to two distinct sorts of deep selves; one relatively common across cultures to women, the other relatively common across cultures to men. And it claims that the difference thus generated between feminine and masculine gender identity causes a variety of supposedly cross cultural social phenomena including the continuation of female mothering, male contempt for women and problems in heterosexual relationships (95-6). because the tendency exhibited in her theory to essentialize the idea of ‘gender identity’ in terms of a single activity and revealing a basic “deep sense of self” which exhibits itself “across cultures and within cultures across lines of class, race and ethnicity” (96), is not limited to the theories of Chodorow but is the cornerstone of many influential feminist theories which base their analysis on ‘reproduction’ as the “sign of difference” between men and women or other female associated activities: sex affected production and “sexuality” to name a few. Each of these “categories ...group together phenomena that are not necessarily conjoined in all societies, while separating from one another phenomena that are not necessarily separated. Upon closer examination it becomes doubtful whether such categories have any “determinant cross cultural content”;
indeed, it is doubtful that any categories can adequately serve as the basis for the construction of a grand social theory of sexism which cuts across race, class, ethnicity, culture and history.

This is dramatically enacted in the work of African American women writers such as Morrison, Naylor and Jones (to mention only a few) as the construction of mothering is examined through the lens of slavery and colonization and the ways that those oppressive institutions rendered the activity of mothering radically different from anything that Chodorow’s theory could accommodate. Sethe’s choice for “safety with a handsaw” or Ursa’s Gran, Great Gran insistence upon “making generations” in order to keep alive the memory of slavery and prostitution to which they were subjected cannot be explained within a transhistorical and transcultural accounting of the “relational” experiences of men and women to their mothers. The need for each of the main characters in *Beloved*, *Corregidora* and *Mama Day* to account for and re-member the matrilineal line by placing the self into that history does not evoke a kind of easy celebration of “motherhood” and its essential function of the construction of a gendered self, but instead forces us to consider the specificity of the conditions which created “mothering” within the context of colonization and slavery at various moments in African American women’s history. Thus attempts by Chodorow and others to create a quasi-meta-narrative which explains sexism or gender relations across culture and history erases, once again, the experience of these women, and participates in the splitting off of gender from race, class and other forms of power relationships. Feminist theory in the 1980s has moved away from the tendency displayed in Chodorow and Mackinnon and others to construct a
“grand social theory.” However, even within the more local and focused work of theorists such as Carol Gilligan, in her project to dispute Kolberg’s theory of moral development on the basis that it posited the same model of morality for both genders, ends up posing a model of female moral development which does not take account of differences among women pertaining to class, race and historical circumstances. So far I have only referred specifically to the theoretical work of a few feminist thinkers, in fact the same theorists whom Nicholson and Fraser mention. But this tendency within feminist theory to either unconsciously or uncritically conduct analyses which fail to account for difference among women and which presuppose a category of ‘women’ which evokes the experience of only white middle class women is widespread. The subterranean influence of “mainstream models of thought” in feminist theory continues in women’s studies departments and classrooms as well as in the works which flood the publishing market. Any challenge to this tendency must take account of the “implicit reference to white Anglo women in many classic feminist texts” and continue to expose the heterosexist bias of much mainstream feminist theory” (99).

This brings us to one of the (if not the) most critical conflicts/issues for feminist theorists in the 1990’s. The overwhelming and understandable desire in feminist scholarship and theory since the early 1970s to construct theories and analysis which spoke to our experience of sexism across differences; a desire to construct a commonality, has revealed itself to reproduce the same kind of oppressive paradigms which we exposed within the patriarchal model of societies. This is not by now news to feminist theorists who are conscious of their own exclusion from “mainstream feminist thought.” And it
has become necessary for white middle class feminists working specifically within the institutional boundaries of the academy to address these issues. Far too often the form of this address is simplistic and dismissive. It is not enough to relegate the oversights of our work to a footnote or a passing reference to differences of class, race, sexual orientation and cultural identity. The gesture of inclusion which characterizes much of the work and commentary on “difference” such as the inclusion of black women writers into syllabi or the inclusion of an article on “race” in an anthology, only reproduces the model of center and margin which devalues the concerns of those women not like us (for any number of reasons) and presupposes that the category “white middle class woman” actually means something that in itself does not need to be unpacked. The fear, guilt and relative vertigo which the challenge to our models causes is similar to the “intellectual vertigo” which Jane Flax says characterizes the philosopher who has deconstructed and then rejected the enlightenment narrative, yet it is also more violent a challenge because it requires that we learn simultaneously how to consider our location and learn to listen to those speaking from other places. If we are to seriously take into account differences, we cannot do so within the models which feminist scholarship and inquiry have proffered so far. In effect we must not simply address or include ideas or notions of difference, but instead must recognize the challenge that various categories of difference present to the very ways that we “do theory,” teach courses and validate experience. Rejecting the romantic “dream of a common language” brings with it a whole new set of problems and in effect leaves us dizzy in ways that mirror our reactions to the postmodern world—dealing with difference” in a multitude of ways is the necessity of the postmodern condition. Elizabeth Spellman has defined this issue as the “paradox at the heart of Feminism”:
Any attempt to talk about all women in terms of something we have in common undermines attempts to talk about differences among us, and vice versa. Is it possible to give the things women have in common their full significance without thereby implying that the differences among us are less important? How can we describe those things that differentiate women without eclipsing what we share in common? (3)

The attempts so far to address and deal with this paradox have often fallen under the rubric of postmodern/feminism or feminist postmodern critiques, and I would argue that although many of these attempts are flawed they do represent some of the most important efforts which specifically white women, who represent the “mainstream” in feminist thought, have made to account for their own privilege and blindness. This kind of effort is clear in the work of Jane Flax, Donna Haraway and Nicholson and Fraser to name but a few.

Much of the rejection of postmodern thought by women of color or others “on the margin,” has addressed the inability of postmodern theory, which is too heavily grounded in the Western philosophic tradition, to account for their experience. Many have criticized the language and focus of postmodern theory, which is often cumbersome and technical, replete with jargon and obscure terminology—a language which Barbara Christian, writing in her powerful critique of theoretical hegemony “The Race for Theory,” finds appalling for its “sheer ugliness...its lack of clarity, its unnecessarily complicated sentence constructions, its lack of pleasurability, its alienating quality” (339). This is not a characteristic of postmodern criticism which is limited to men or white middle class men, but a characteristic of the very ways in which we do theory in
the academy today. Even those theories which in their combination of feminism and postmodernism have tried to unsettle the model of Western philosophical tradition, as well as revealing the ways in which feminist thought has reiterated much of that additional bias, have often fallen into the same linguistic pattern of the works which they seek to critique. Thus the potential which these theories represent is often undermined by the authors’ participation in an elite game of preaching to those privileged by race, class and professional status.

Nicholson and Fraser’s call for a social criticism which banishes Philosophy, reconfigures the emphasis from the philosophical so predominant in white male western theories of the postmodern to the political. This shift is echoed in the work of other feminist theorists picking up the task of elucidating a workable theory which incorporates the challenges of the postmodern and the emphasis on social criticism so important to white feminist theory and practice. Wendy Brown, in her important and challenging piece “Feminist Hesitations, Postmodern Exposures,” engages in some detail the characteristic rejection of postmodern theory by so many western feminists who see the anti-foundational stance of postmodernism to be dangerous and recuperative. Brown, like Nicholson and Fraser, is not prepared to abandon “a global view” and is afraid that such an abandonment “leaves us rudderless in post modernity rather than appropriating and navigating for radical political projects its peculiar (dis)organization of social, political and economic life” (63). Arguing that the need for theory itself to engage with the peculiarities of this moment is striking, Brown points out that the forswearance of a
large glance entirely could not only leave us rudderless but can empty theorizing of any of its power:

Confounded as well by the decertification of God, science, philosophy, and intuition as epistemological and normative authorities, theory’s promise of vision, especially of developing a post foundational angle of (in)sight, also carries unparalleled political importance in our time (64).

Brown’s concern in this article is what she sees as the insistence on the part of much contemporary feminist theory to ignore the changed conditions of the historical moment in which we live: the kind of conditions which Haraway elucidates so extensively and which call for us to develop new strategies of radical politics, which address the new forms of oppression and domination that characterize our “age.” Brown casts “postmodernity as a time, circumstance and configuration rather than an intellectual tendency of political position” and thus is able to identify the “enemy” as the ‘material’ features of our age: the expanding hegemony of technical reason, cultural and spatial disorientation and a political tendency produced by this disorientation—‘reactionary foundationalism’” (65).

In this move, following Haraway she is able to see that much of the reaction against postmodernism by contemporary feminists results from a “conflation” of postmodern conditions and postmodern theory. Such a conflation allows feminist theory to continue to ignore the very real conditions of postmodernity and become mired in a theoretical exchange which limits completely the possibilities for a relationship between theory and practice or agency. In effect by rejecting the definition of the postmodern as a historical moment and reacting against the philosophical anti-foundationalism which postmodern theory has insisted upon, feminist theorists are not only divorcing their own theory from its practical basis in social theory and criticism, but also allowing the “masters” to
determine the terms of the debate. Brown’s article begins its investigation with this question:

In other words the desire to blur or collapse these critical distinctions (between conditions and theory) speaks of a desire to kill the messenger, and what I want to explore in this essay is the nature of that desire. If the “postmodern turn in political/feminist theory is, at its best, an attempt to articulate and engage the characteristic powers of our age, what frightens feminism about this age and about developing a politics appropriate to it? (65)

Claiming that the most important aspects of the postmodern condition are indicated by an increase in technical reason, the “fragmentations of political and social power” and the dangers which such a diffusion and decentering of power have on our desire to critically articulate the systems of domination endemic to this postmodern condition, Brown argues that identity politics and “reactionary foundationalism are not a response to the postmodern but a result of it. Afraid consistently of “getting lost” and unable to create a discourse which speaks to the ways that “post modernity deceters, diffuses and splays power and politics,” we look for comfort in “fierce assertions of ‘identities’ is order to know/invent who, where and what [we] are” (67). In a salient critique of identity politics and its failures, Brown shows us how the turn toward the assertion of an identity based upon racial or ethnic or gender filiations becomes a condition of the postmodern, not a radical response to it:

Drawing upon the historically eclipsed meaning of disrupted and fragmented narratives of ethnicity, race, gender, sexuality, region, continent, or nation, identity politics permits a sense of situation—and often a sense of filiation or community—without requiring profound comprehension of the world in which one is situated. Identity politics permits positioning without mapping, a feature which sharply distinguishes it from (Marxian) class analysis and reveals its proximity to (liberal) interest group politics....Identity politics emerges as a reaction, in other words, to an ensemble of distinctly postmodern assaults upon the integrity of communities producing identity (67).
Viewed this way, the rejection of postmodern theory’s anti-foundational stance and its distrust of the unified subject by theorists and thinkers who identify around the rubrics of simply race or gender becomes a symptom of the postmodern in its revelation of nostalgia for a modern discursive practice which would not be complicated by postmodern configurations of power. In her characterization of another strategy “for coping with our lost condition of postmodernity,” Brown cites what she calls the process of reactionary foundationalism—“What constitutes this strategy as reactionary rather than merely conservative is its truncated, instrumental link to a foundational narrative—the American flag, the great books, the traditional family” (68). In a presidential election year where the calls for “family values” and “character issues” abound, this process becomes extraordinarily evident. Unable to claim the foundational narrative of the modern past simply because to do so would eradicate completely the material conditions of most people’s lives—i.e., most people do not live in traditional nuclear families—reactionary foundationalism rarely and barely postulates as Truth. More often it presents and legitimates itself as the indispensable threads preserving some indisputable good, e.g., Western civilization, the American way of life, feminism or “Left politics” (68). Significantly this tendency is not limited to the Right, but exhibits itself across the “political spectrum from those hostile to what they take to be postmodern political decay and intellectual disarray” (68). Thus, for Brown both identity politics and reactionary foundationalism are “a symptom of and an act of resistance against the epistemological, political and social terrain post modernity forces us to inhabit” (68). In her recognition that such strategies are not limited to the Right, but emerge within the discourse of “feminists or others on the ‘Left,’” Brown enables a critique and investigation of the
peculiar battle between feminism and postmodernism which foregrounds feminist theory’s consistent call for a political discourse while all the time being unable to instruct such a discourse that engages with the conditions of our age. Feminist theorists who reject postmodern critiques on the basis that they pull us away from “caring about political things, caring about ‘actual women’ or about women’s actual condition in the world” reveal not only a reaction against post modernity, but a reaction against any desire to develop a political discourse and agency that may answer to those conditions. Thus, contrary to its insistence that it speaks in the name of the political, much feminist anti-postmodernism betrays a preference for extra-political terms and practices: for truth unchanging, uncontestable) over politics (flux, contest, instability); for certainty and security (safety, immutability, privacy) over freedom (vulnerability, publicity); for discoveries (science) over decisions (judgments); for separate subjects armed with established rights and identities over unwieldy and shifting pluralities adjudicating for themselves their future on the basis of nothing more than their own habits and arguments (69). Thus consistently we insist upon the “moral” correctness of the pro-choice movement, using foundational arguments about a woman’s control over her own body and invoking constitutional authority to support those arguments, in effect countering the reactionary foundationalism of organizations such as Operation Rescue with strategies that mirror theirs and eventually reducing the struggle to an impasse of relativism. Brown’s insistence that feminism’s reaction to post modernity indicates a kind of reactionary foundationalism, and her subsequent elucidation of that by looking closely at the work of Nancy Harstock, Sandra Harding and Donna Haraway leads her to
contemplate a feminist strategy which would shift away from such claims to truth and moral authority and instead try to forge a discourse and a politics: “Our question is whether feminist politics can prosper without a moral apparatus, whether feminist theorists and activists will give up substituting Truth and morality for politics (78).

For Brown the answer to this question lies in our ability to forego much of the strategies and claims upon which feminist theory has depended, and to engage in “overt struggle for position” not through the process of “resentment” which she borrows for Nietzsche, but instead in terms that “develop our faculties rather than avenge our weaknesses with moral and epistemological gestures to fight for a world rather than conduct process on the existing one...[which] requires the deliberate development of post-moral and anti-relativist political spaces, practices of deliberation and modes of adjudication” (78).

Interestingly Brown also rejects the practice most often associated with postmodern politics—resistance. She is aware that resistance as a model is a result of the postmodern problem with claiming authority; “our heightened consciousness of the will to power in all political positions and our wariness about totalizing analyses and visions” (79). Yet in our distrust in the authority of, as Nicholson and Fraser have said, “large scale theoretical narratives” and our insistence on the ad hoc contextual and local condition of our practices, a development of a resistance politics or even a politics of resistance becomes “a product of and reaction to power, not an arrogation of it” (79). Thus the contemporary urge to resistance is “more a symptom of post modernity crisis of political space than a coherent response to it” (79). Wendy Brown’s investigation of the reasons for feminist
resistance to postmodern theory is instructive. Her recognition that our refusal to recognize post modernity as a historical moment which fosters particular forms of power and domination results in a series of reactions to those conditions which are dangerous at worst and ineffective at best. Thus, we fall prey to an identity politics to usurp the dream of a common language, which is factitious and surface, or we respond to postmodernism’s anti-foundationalism in ways reminiscent of the Rights’ reactionary foundationalism—claiming that our position as the oppressed and as victims imbues our voices and will to truth with a almost religious conviction and morality that limits our abilities to deal with the very real conditions of power and domination which characterize our moment. Failing to recognize that these reactions are indeed symptoms of postmodernity, standpoint feminist theories are doomed to be forever inside the postmodern but never capable of responding to it with coherent political strategies. Thus, our work and time is spent repudiating the messengers of postmodernity or affecting nostalgia for a transcendent model of commonality and liberation that echoes modern meta-narratives. Brown’s rejection of these symptoms as viable strategies leads her to shift the focus from will to truth, the authority of a moral stance or from being embedded in the philosophical to the political. Such a shift to the field of the political invokes the relentless process of mapping—invoking Jameson and others—a mapping of our spaces and locations that allows for analysis and possibly agency and affiliations:

Thus we struggle over political spaces and terrain, not the “truth” or “morality” of our positions and epistemologies. The resistance to the development of such spaces within the disoriented and decentered moment of the postmodern is significant: Dissipated by the increasing technocratization of would be political conversations and process, by the erosion of boundaries around specifically political domains and activities and by the decline of movement politics, political spaces are scarcer and thinner today than even in most immediately prior epochs of Western history. In this regard, their condition mirrors the splayed and
centrifuged characteristics of postmodern political power. Yet precisely because of post modernity’s disarming tendencies toward disorientation, fragmentation and technocratization, the creation of spaces where political analyses and norms can be proffered and contested is supremely important (79).

Brown’s insistence on the need for the construction of such political spaces “which are necessarily cluttered, attuned to earthly concerns and visions, incessantly disrupted, invaded and reconfigured” (80) is presented in direct contrast to some feminist calls for “shared identity.” Therefore, to avoid the danger of getting mired in identity politics which continually reverts back to the position of the speaker, she argues for a “political conversation oriented toward diversity and the common, toward world rather than self” (80-1). Citing the important process of articulating subject positions and “politicizing the I” which feminist theory has been engaged in over the past several years, Brown calls for shift which allows for the making of a feminist future:

...we may need to lessen our historically underdeveloped taste for political argument, not to overcome our situatedness, but to assume responsibility for our situations as well as to acquire perspective and aspire to possibilities that expand them (81).

Brown’s call for such a shift echoes in many ways Nicholson and Fraser’s call for Postmodern Feminism which recognizes the “diversity of some women’s needs and experiences [which] means that no single solution...can be adequate for all” (102). Important for both Brown and Nicholson and Fraser is the emphasis in such a construction on the importance of our methodologies as practice and practices which have political potential: Thus the underlying premise of this practice is that whereas some women have some common interests and face some common enemies, such commonalities are by no means universal: rather they are interlaced with differences,
even with conflicts. This, then, is a practice made up of a patchwork of overlapping alliances, not one circumscribed by an essential definition (102).

Brown and Nicholson and Fraser are interested in articulating the possibilities for a feminism that engages with both the theoretical possibilities offered by postmodernism’s anti-foundational stance, and the conditions of post modernity which surround us. In the process of that articulation all of them claim that the shift from the philosophical to the political is paramount and that in the shift we need to form new practices and create new spaces for radical change. In their theorizing both of these articles call for a series of new discursive practices which depend upon recognition of our own locations and a mapping of those locations. This is not a mapping which is based upon the essential categories of identity politics, but instead—emphasized in the use of the verb form—a process which charts the ways that the new “informatics of domination” create and effect spaces for radical interrogation, interruption, agency and change. There are several other feminist postmodern thinkers who have begun to enact this process, not to simply theorize it. Haraway’s Cyborg myth which emerges as an initial possibility is still too mired in the notions of a “shared identity” which eradicate difference and perform a new series of appropriating and oppressive moves, resulting in a renewed erasure of women of color as subjects. Nancy Fraser’s later work in her book *Unruly Practices* begins to establish the parameters of such a practice. This is specifically true in the article, “Women, Welfare and the Politics of Needs Interpretation.” This article is relentlessly political and engaged in a practice which displays the ways that what she calls the “public patriarchy” of the welfare state, as an example of postmodern power, creates the illusion that categories of
identity used to respond to the “needs” of the community are consistently depoliticized into “the social” so as to underline the illusion that such categories are natural or that such needs are analyzed on the basis of psychological or emotion problems instead of indicative of the workings of power, capital and history. Thus the welfare system constructs a myth of the individual which belies any attempt to respond to the complex workings of power that characterize postmodern bureaucratic systems. Fraser’s practice here indicates that the promise of a Postmodern Feminism that can perform valuable analysis of the conditions of post modernity and political power is possible. However, in her attempts to elucidate the workings of the welfare system and her use of extensive statistical information, Fraser still falls prey to analysis which privileges one category of analysis over others. She illustrates some important aspects of what has been called the “feminization” of poverty, but fails to engage the politics of race which may have informed her analysis and allowed it to have salience in a larger and more complex arena. This indicates a disturbing trend in much feminist postmodern analysis which needs to be interrogated. We (white feminist academics) seem to be interested in engaging theoretically the prospect and possibilities of “difference,” “other” and even “heteroglossia” but consistently fail in the elucidation of our practice to find ways to translate our theoretical concerns into that practice. Thus, a postmodern feminist discourse which recognizes the theoretical necessity for engaging with difference but which fails in its creation of new spaces or locations to address the very real material conditions which difference creates within a postmodern diffusion of power and domination, echoes the methodologies that it seeks to avoid. This is evident in Haraway’s construction of the Cyborg based upon a model “identity” called women of color, and
Jane Flax’s appropriation of black women writers’ works to support her construction of a conversational model, as well as Fraser’s failure to engage race/ethnicity in an analysis of the Welfare State. Inside the unwieldy condition of postmodernity we seem to be able to theorize about location, “political space,” “conversation,” “myths of political identity,” but unable to create such spaces within a very real and conscientious practice. Both Nicholson and Fraser and Wendy Brown point out the critical blindness of postmodern philosophy’s implicit reliance on the history of philosophy and its inability to construct a space for a theory of political practice, and feminism’s far too often reliance on easy categories of unity and foundationalism which render it at best limited and at worst racist, classist and homophobic. Both note that the gender blindness of postmodernism could be fatal and that its critique of subjectivity is suspicious, and both are aware of the problems implicit in any attempt to proffer one theory, one epistemology, which will speak for all under any historical and cultural conditions. Yet there is very little consideration, aside from Nicholson and Fraser’s rhetorical tie of theory to political practice, or Brown’s call for the construction of political spaces and an emphasis on “public speaking,” of the role or place of theory in the world, or any interrogation of the ways that the hegemony of how we do theory and what theory we value reveals another layer of domination and elitism of which the academy is an integral part. The turn toward the political and an engagement with difference is theorized not in effect practiced or developed as a practice. Thus for all the calls for self-conscious critique, the eye is never turned on the actual process of theorizing itself. Both these works are part of a larger movement in the academy toward “doing theory.” This movement itself Jameson has noticed characterizes the postmodern moment. We have classes in “theory,” concentrations in theory,
professors who “do theory,” publishing houses which specialize in theory, and a new expectation, at least in literary studies, that our experts self-consciously acknowledge their theory. How indeed does this “trend” indicate perhaps some of the new systems of dominations of, as Haraway calls them, the “informatics of domination?” Has doing theory or the existence of a new category “theory,” which indicates a crossing and intersecting of traditional disciplines, in itself a good thing, just replaced philosophy as the “queen of the human sciences” or does this shift toward an articulation, in a multitude of specialized languages and discourses, of our method(s) signal a real opening up of possibilities? 2 Certainly this shift (if it is a shift and not just a refocusing) is tied up with the promise of feminism and postmodernism and integrally tied into our ways of understanding and possibly changing or interrupting the power/knowledge system as we know it. However, there have emerged many powerful and articulate critiques of this trend toward “theory” as an institutional practice, the most significant from women of color both in and outside of the United States. Thus it becomes necessary to consider not

only the promise and problems of postmodernism and feminism but also the ways that the institutionalization of these theoretical practices, at the expense perhaps of a fully developed practice(s) which engages difference on a multitude of levels, has perhaps emptied them of their contents.

I was gradually becoming more active. I began to control my life...i knew i didn’t want to be an intellectual, spending my life in books and libraries without knowing what the hell was going on in the streets. Theory without practice is just as incomplete as practice without theory. The two have to go together. I was determined to do both. (Assata p. 180)

Much of feminist theory has indeed lost account of what was going on in the streets, and even when feminist theorists engage with the conditions of post modernity—social, economic, political—and recognize the necessity of the post-foundational position given the conditions to which we seek to respond, often our activity stalls as we try to create “spaces” where our theories and practices are radically transformed; where the false division between the two created by modern conceptions of power and knowledge systems is broken down and re-configured to fit the needs of this postmodern moment. Negotiating that relationship between theory and practice, ideas and actions within the conditions of post modernity is and has been dangerous, difficult and little explored territory.³ We have been able to articulate the need for changed practices. We have even begun to signal the parameters of those practices—they must be political not philosophical, they must consider locations not essential identities and they must not fell

³Writing these notes in the winter of 1992, no one can ignore the parallel between this issue of NLH and its highlighting of the “conflicts” between black men and women and the spectacle and circus surrounding the Anita Hill—Clarence Thomas hearings. Both of these incidents speak to phenomena that need further investigation. For a more detailed look at the effects and importance of the Thomas/Hill hearings and their aftermath see: The Black Scholar, Vow 22, Nos 1 & 2, Winter Spring 1992.
prey to large transcultural, transhistorical categories which erase difference. However, down in the street and we try to form new alliances, new ways of seeing collecting and enacting power within the diffusions of power we often see the repetition of old mistakes and the enactment of old strategies. What do I tell my students who in trying to construct a group of multiracial women who will work together to effect change inside the campus and perhaps make forages outside of it, run into a disaster of white guilt, emotionalism, racism and splintering that render the construction of the group impossible? Do I tell them that theory and practice are disassociated and that’s that? Or do I tell them to read more theory? Do I tell them to continue to examine the ways that the two come together within their specific context and within the larger context of the community and “world” in which they live? If identity politics and foundationalism—reactionary or otherwise—are useless within the conditions of postmodernity, then how do I tell them to garner power to effect change either within themselves or within the institutions in which they operate?

Following Foucault and others the question of the place or practice of the intellectual within the political sphere has been central to postmodernism’ engagement with itself as worldly, and there certainly are those who see post foundational stance proffered by postmodern philosophy and deconstruction for example, as excuses for what Spivak has called a negative metaphysics and that leads to “irresponsibility, self congratulation and fun for some people.” (122) Spivak in fact has proffered some very salient and interesting answers to questions of the distinction between theory and practice. In response to a question about the distinction between the text and investigations of the text and practice
in a recent interview she maintains that any kind of “artificial pre-critical position between the verbal text (which is what is meant by text: reading books and so on) and the picket line” is useless to us. Recognizing that activism does not allow or necessitate an escape from textuality, but instead facilitates on the part of the activist a greater awareness of the “textuality of the social” and the “text” as she is using it “is not just books.” The “text” refers “to the possibility that every socio-political, psycho-sexual phenomena is organized by and woven by many, many strands that are discontinuous, that come from way off, that carry their histories within them, and that are not within our control.”(120). Thus the artificial distinction between text or theory and practice or action serves to delimit our power to create effects of change. Thus, if we are going to do about the phenomena, we have no alternative but to involve ourselves and mire ourselves in what we are calling the textuality of the social. The real task here is to displace and undo that killing opposition between the text narrowly conceived as the verbal text and activism narrowly conceived as some sort of mindless engagement. (120-1.) This is not to embrace some romanticized version of writing and textuality as political agency, but instead a deconstruction of the facile distinctions between theory(text) and practice(action), allowing for an ever widening conception of the necessary relations between the two “activities”, while being aware of who that “killing opposition” serves. It is certainly true that we see such an interrogation in the works of African American women such as Assata Shakur, Audre Lorde and indigenous women like Mary Crow Dog and Rigoberta Menchu, where the distinctions between theory and practice, text and action, autobiography and theory and fiction are consistently undermined, blurred or blown up.
It is significant perhaps that feminist theory’s reactions against the postmodern, postfoundational stance is indicative as Wendy Brown has so eloquently argued of a resistance to the political, and despite claims to the opposite, a resistance to the struggle to create practices. Ironically such a reaction has led to an embracement of “high” theory even as we seek to undermine the irresponsibility of it. Thus feminism’s relentless call that the personal is political has become usurped by the continued presence and power of that “killing opposition” between theory and practice. Perhaps one of the strategies for deconstructing that impasse for feminist theory and for re-configuring our theorizing so that it is not just rhetorical call for “difference” or “others” or a re-capitulation of appropriation or erasure ---business as usual. What we are asking for in that the hegemonic discourses, the holders of the hegemonic discourse should de-center their position and themselves learn how to occupy the subject position of the other rather than simply say, “O.K., sorry, we are just very good white people, therefore we do not speak for blacks.” (121) For Spivak such a view of the deconstructive process allows “you to look at the ways in which you are complicit with what you are so carefully and cleanly opposing.” (122.) What in fact might such process entail? Certainly as Brown and Nicholson and Fraser have argued a shift toward the political and the construction of political spaces and practices within our theorizing, but also perhaps a radical shift in the ways that we theorize, what we recognize as theory and how we position ourselves as speakers and listeners in a series of constantly shifting engagements.
CHAPTER III
JUST DO IT: PRACTICING THEORY AND THEORIZING PRACTICE

...the silence or silencing of people begins with the dominating enforcement of linguistic convention, the resistance to relational dialogues, as well as the disenablement of peoples by outlawing their forms of speech. Anglo-American Feminist theory assumes a speaking subject who is an autonomous, self-conscious individual woman. Such a theory does not discuss the linguistic status of the person. It takes for granted the linguistic status which founds subjectivity. In this way it appropriates woman/women for itself, and turns its work into a theoretical project within which the rest of us are compelled to "fit." By "forgetting" or refusing to take account that we are culturally constituted in and through language in complex ways and not just engendered in a homogeneous situation, the Anglo-American subject of consciousness cannot come to terms with her (his) own class based ethnocentrism. She is blinded to her construction not just as a woman, but as an Anglo-American one. Alarcon 363-64

Radical postmodernist practice, most powerfully conceptualized as a politics of difference, should incorporate the voices of displaced, marginalized, exploited and oppressed black people. It is sadly ironic that the contemporary discourse which talks the most about heterogeneity, the decentered subject, declaring breakthroughs that allow recognition of Otherness still directs its critical voice primarily to a specialized audience that shares a common language rooted in the very master narratives it claims to challenge. If radical postmodernist thinking is to have a transformative impact, then a crucial break with the notion of authority as "mastery over" must not simply be a rhetorical device. It must be reflected in habits of being, including style of writing as well as chosen subject matter. Third world nationals, elites, and white critics who passively absorb white supremacist thinking and therefore never notice or look at black people in the street or at their jobs, who render us invisible with their gaze in all areas of daily life, are not likely to produce liberating theory that will challenge racist domination or promote a breakdown in traditional ways of seeing and thinking about reality, ways of constructing aesthetic theory or practice. (hooks 1992)

If feminist theory has been troubled by the critiques of women of color, considerations of race have been relatively absent from major postmodern discourses. Although many have been quick to proclaim that artistic or cultural practices which are African
American or which have their roots in African American cultural practices are "postmodern," few have investigated the significance of this observation. It is one thing to claim that "rap" is a postmodern art form, but quite another to consider the effect of such an assertion for African American culture or the effect such a statement may have on our understanding of the postmodern. Postmodern theory, on the surface, seems to be, as bell hooks has proclaimed, "most powerfully conceptualized as a 'politics of "difference"' but has consistently avoided a real consideration of difference and otherness as it works in the "everyday," i.e., the micro level or even on the level of postmodern challenges to grand narratives. The postmodern theories which have the most circulation are often, as I have pointed out in Chapter II and hooks points out above, embedded in a "common language rooted in the very master narrative it claims to challenge." Thus, we refer endlessly to the Enlightenment narrative as that which we seek to unseat, while citing critics and theorists such as Lyotard, Derrida, Jameson, Foucault and Lacan. Unable to engage critically the works of African or Africa-centered philosophy, for example, we still install white western European males at the center of our discourse, setting such voices and construction up as that which defines us by our very reaction

---

There are a number of examples of the ways that black female creativity is transformed when it is adapted to fit the conventions of popular culture, not the least of which is Oprah Winfrey’s purchase of all the film rights to the Morrison novels and the projected production of Gloria Naylor’s Mama Day for the Big Screen. Also significant is the treatment in the media of a woman rapper like Sister Souljah as opposed to the treatment of her male counterparts like Ice T and Ice Cube as well as Public Enemy and other groups. Consistently, African American art forms are appropriated by the mainstream of popular culture and subsequently transformed; however, the absence of exposure in many of these genres of black women means that their work still exists outside the boundaries of the power/knowledge complex of postmodern media culture, and once it is subsumed it often does lose its power of critique. This phenomenon becomes particularly significant as we witness the star power of writers like Morrison, Walker and Naylor within the publishing/ bestseller market and try to determine how this affects the works and their audiences and constituencies.
against it. Even feminist theory's forages into the postmodern, which have included salient critiques of its European male-centered discourse, have failed to conceive of a postmodern political practice and theory which attends to the problematics of race/ethnicity. Thus, as postmodernism has revealed itself as gender blind and racially blind in many of its manifestations, feminist theory's challenge to postmodernism has continued to operate on a single axis of gender and failed really to incorporate or to interrogate the question of race within this "new" discourse of difference. So what does postmodern theory or feminist theory or postmodern feminist theory have to offer black feminist theory or practice? Or is that another opportunistic "reversal of fortune?" Isn't perhaps the more pertinent question: what do the writings of women of color have to teach postmodern feminist theory in its struggle to re-conceptualize subject, history, power and agency? What in fact would it really mean to release ourselves (as much as is possible) from the hold which Western white male philosophers and their practices have on our ways of thinking, creating and doing theory? What would/does it mean for Anglo women interested in struggle to "do theory" with women of color without disrupting the dialogue? According to Maria Lugones, we would need to---know the text, to have become familiar with an alternative way of viewing the world. . . [we] would need to learn to become unintrusive, unimportant, patient to the point of tears, while at the same time open to learn all possible lessons. [We] will have to come to terms with the sense of alienation, of not belonging, of having your world thoroughly disrupted, having it criticized and scrutinized from the point of view of those who have been harmed by it, having important concepts central to it dismissed, being viewed with mistrust. . .(quoted in Alarcon 363). In effect we have to learn that the recognition of the intellectual vertigo
and the diffusion of the workings of power which characterize the postmodern is only a 
tip of the iceberg; we would have to learn to listen, to shut up, to remember our 
whiteness; we will have to learn how to learn.

I am not at all sure what such a release and a relearning would/will entail, nor how many 
false starts it necessitates, but I am sure that the future and vitality and significance of our 
encounters with the world (many kinds of others) and ourselves (many kinds of Anglo-
American women) depend upon this process. Much white feminist work has been done 
recently on how we have, in a myriad of ways, failed to "reach" women of color, and thus 
failed to construct a feminism which engages multiplicity and difference, and it is 
perhaps important now to consider the ways that we have made it impossible for them to 
"reach" us. Although many feminist theorists have aptly demonstrated the process by 
which we have become blind to race and class and many other subjectivities white 
feminism has balked at a real theoretical or practical consideration of how we must 
become changed in order for us to participate in the dialogue without disrupting it. 
Instead we have waited to be told by various women of color, in our lives, classrooms, 
conferences and books, what to do next. Our guilty conscience has far too often led us 
either to throw up our hands and say "Tell me what to do now!" or to cower in silence as 
we try desperately to absorb the works and ideas of women of color without considering 
their relation or relevance to our ways of seeing ourselves, our whiteness, our worlds. 
What would happen if we were really to try to "become familiar with an alternative way 
of viewing the world?" and what are the risks involved in such a process? In part this 
would entail being much more conscious of our ways of viewing the world: in effect, to
think about what it means to be white women in the United States of various class backgrounds and sexual identities. We will need to stop thinking of our whiteness as an abstraction and consider its relative privileges and problems if only to dismantle them. It will also mean considering how that whiteness is constructed within a feminist theory and how it figures in our conceptualization of the postmodern. Therefore, such a process requires that we not consider the "Other" in a passive and appropriating way, but instead that we consider the other and the self in a conscious engagement with the ways that we construct ourselves and each other in relation to our race, our class and our gender. We cannot simply be secure in a single-axis analysis with the race and class of others attached.

Several months ago, when I first read bell hooks' "Critical Interrogation", I was struck by her observation that the "new discourse on Otherness" is one being predominantly proffered by white men and women in either the academy or in the media in a radical chic appropriation of "difference" without any critical interrogation of the self, the speaker or the discursive practice. I was also challenged by hooks' call for a "discourse of race which interrogates whiteness." What in fact would such a discourse look and sound like and indeed, how would it be mediated or mediate feminist postmodern discourse? It would be just so interesting for all those white folks who are giving blacks their take on blackness to let them know what's going on with whiteness. In far too much contemporary writing . . . race is always an issue of Otherness that is not white; it is black, brown, yellow, red, purple even. Yet only a persistent rigorous and informed critique of whiteness could really determine what forces of denial, fear and competition
are responsible for creating fundamental gaps between professed political commitment to eradicating racism and the participation in the construction of a discourse on race that perpetuates racial domination (hooks 54). Hooks goes on to question the motives and effects of many scholars, critics and theorists who are white, announcing their whiteness "as though it conveyed all we need to know about their standpoint, motivation and direction," yet never really reflecting on their process or considering the importance of their racial identity in the constitution of their analysis. The assumption that whiteness represents the subject and everything non-white represents the ‘Other’, reveals in itself a cultural and psychological hegemony which when viewed from one position is quite disturbing--as Barbara Christian has said, "Some of us never conceived of ourselves as somebody else's “other." Is our romance with otherness and difference another form of appropriation or a new way to recoup our privilege by drawing attention to it, or even by exoticizing that other? What is this Other unless it is that which I have constructed as "not me?" This is a process Spivak recognizes as allowing us "to have an other to speak to" and thus allows white people to avoid "occupy[ing] the space of the marginal you would like to see me in" (Spivak 1990. 122). Hooks' call for us to engage our whiteness is a salient one, and one which also offers a way toward the interrogation of our own work on "political grounds." My questions and challenges up to now point me in a number of directions; on the one hand, we as white feminist theorists, interacting in a postmodern moment and discourse, need to listen and learn about "alternative ways of viewing the world," and this requires a rejection of much of our own previous discourse and practices; on the other hand, we also need to consider, interrogate, engage and theorize our own whiteness, as a racial identity, as a privilege and as a complex cultural
and political construct. These processes cannot be exclusive, but in fact are rooted in each other. As Timothy Maliquaim Simone has concluded, white people seeking out knowledge, styles and attitudes of their black counterparts need not do so out of "confusion of identity, self-disgust, or pretensions to “hip ness” but instead can remain "critical of the legacies and intellectual habits of whiteness" while not despising our own whiteness. The anti-racist white thinker “...feels a desire to come to terms with her own whiteness, so as to dismantle lingering impediments to the development of self-confidence and thus any capacity to be daring, provocative and generous (219). Thus, coming to terms with our own whiteness and learning to become familiar with alternative ways of viewing the world form a process which may allow for our entrance into dialogue and allow us to conceive of the postmodern with an eye toward reconstructing an agency whose commitment is to the eradication of racism and other forms of oppression. Inside the historical moment I have called the postmodern the construction of such a dialogue will have to attend to the specificities of that moment in a multitude of locations; Donna Haraway's integrated circuit, for example, as well as many other dizzy technological spaces of the contemporary moment, where image and information control consciousness. We will also have to pay attention to the new forms of disciplining, control and domination which characterize the now, using historically secure discourses of race gender and class oppression.
A. On The Outside Looking In

The reasons for the difficult conflict between the goals and aims of black feminist theory and postmodern theory are many, and the critiques which prominent black feminist critics have performed on postmodern theory specifically and the language and focus of contemporary critical theory in general are crucial to any understanding we may begin to have of the ways that black women's voices transform our notions of "theory" itself. Much of the antipathy displayed by African American women critics toward postmodern and poststructuralist theory focuses on the adoption of such critical methodologies to analyze or interpret African American artworks and experience. Many have suggested that the imposition of western European strategies upon the experience of the "other" will and has resulted in a new form of "mainstreaming" that allows black culture and experience to be co-opted by the predominantly white European male academy. Joyce in her scathing debate with Henry Louis Gates Jr. and Houston Baker in the Winter 1987 Issue of New Literary History (a predominantly white male journal), argues that the adoption of post-structural strategies by Gates, which allows him to reconceive of blackness as a metaphor, is yet another indication that the lack man is moving into the American mainstream, if in this case the mainstream is a hegemonic academic practice. Joyce points out that the role of the black American critic, until the emergence of the poststructuralist explosion, was "a point of consciousness for his or her people"; Gates' assertion that that role is more a "point of consciousness of his language" leads Joyce to slam him for his apparent immersion in the abstract and seemingly obtuse world of postmodern discourse. Joyce is most disturbed by two things in Gates' acceptance of some poststructuralist strategies, his language and his apparent
rejection of blackness as a signifier of something "real." She sees Gates' description of blackness as metaphorical to be a negation of blackness itself. For Joyce the very grounds upon which black literature asserts itself are undermined by a postmodern anti-foundational perspective which resists totalities and cohesive identities. She comments on the ability of many characters in several African American texts who are "illiterate" yet who interpret their worlds in resistant and "heroic" acts--hence what I refer to as a "poststructuralist sensibility" does not aptly apply to black American literary works (342). Poststructuralist challenges to representation cannot accommodate the lessons" of black American history, according to Joyce:

   For a black American--even the black intellectual--to maintain that meaningful or real communication between human beings is impossible because we cannot know each other through language would be to erase or ignore the continuity embodied in Black American history. Pushed to its extreme, post-structuralist thinking perhaps helps to explain why it has become increasingly difficult for members of contemporary society to sustain commitments, to assume responsibility, to admit clear right and obvious wrong (342).

Joyce is making the same mistake which many white feminists resistant to postmodern theory illustrate--she is substituting language for the conditions of post modernity which create language as such.⁵ This does result in her return to what Wendy Brown has called

---

⁵ Joyce Joyce argues her position in relationship to the adoption of poststructuralist methodologies in the analysis of African American literature and art in a more lucid and developed fashion in a more recent article from NLH (Summer 1991). In this article she argues convincingly for the importance of criticizing African American male critics' acceptance of the dominant form of western theorizing, and in so doing addresses in a significant way the question of where the work of African American women critics must diverge from both black men and white women.
reactionary fundamentalism and Joyce gets lost in the muddy waters of an essential identity politics. The difficult tension between the desire to forge and maintain an identity based on difference from the dominant culture and the need to avoid dangerous fundamentalism and restriction is present in much postmodern political debate. Perhaps these difficulties can be unpacked by utilizing the strategies employed by theorists such as Mohanty, Brown and Kaplan who all try to look at identity and identity politics from new angles, including the angle of shared spaces and shared political agendas. However, it is clear that Joyce's insistence on remaining inside an identity construct that is based on a definition of "blackness" which pays little heed to historical, political and cultural specificities is very problematic. Joyce's proscription for the black critic at the close of her article reads suspiciously like the black aesthetic proposed by the proponents of the Black Arts movement in the 1960s;
an aesthetic that many other black writers and critics have taken issue with in the years following its popularity: Black creative art is an act of love which attempts to destroy estrangement and elitism by demonstrating a strong fondness or enthusiasm for freedom and an affectionate concern for the lives of people, especially black people... it should be the job of the black literary critic to force ideas to the surface, to give them force in order to affect, guide, to animate, and to arouse the minds and emotions of black people (343).

Joyce's critiques of Gates and Baker's use of postmodern or post-structuralist strategies (as if the two are automatically the same to her) leads her to distrust the use of any of the "master's tools" and in fact to argue that the use of any such tools leads you back into a form of slavery or on a new road to Uncle Tom's Cabin. Gates' response to her is by now famous for its exposition of many African Americans' "resistance to theory" and his astute consideration of the impossibility of a true representation of blackness when "the quest was lost, in a major sense, before it had even begun simply because the terms of our own self-representation have been provided by the master" (360). For Houston Baker, who was also commissioned to respond to Joyce Joyce's critique of black poststructuralist theorists, the use and revision of the work of many French poststructuralists--Derrida, Lacan, Althusser, Baudrillard--"provokes a thoroughgoing critique of western philosophy and its privilege (such as colonialism, slavery, racism and so on)" and could in effect "stand as a note in clear harmony with, say, the freedom cries of millions of blacks in South Africa bent on a new and revolutionary existence" (369). Baker and Gates clearly took Joyce's critique of their uses of certain European strategies
of interpretation personally and both responded in kind. This battle became a public
spectacle of "dubious battle" between three African American critics, the spectacle of
which took precedence over the argument itself.\(^3\) For although I agree that Joyce's
understanding of post-structuralism and postmodernism may be faulty, her recognition of
the dangers involved in a wholesale acceptance of the attitudes and ideas of the
poststructuralists without a heady interrogation of their embedded ness in the tradition
that they seek to unseat could/can lead to a "renaming of the Other" and a co-optation
which echoes those of other historical moments. Since the publication of that Winter
1987 NLH, several other, and perhaps more salient, critiques of the adoption of
postmodern ideas and discourse to the art and experience of the African American have
appeared. Many have argued that the strategies and challenges which postmodern theory
presents to identity politics and the existence of the subject render the politics of race
moot, and in fact by so doing submerge the African-American experience once again in
the hegemony of western European philosophy. Many of these critiques echo feminist
theory's earlier distrust of post structuralism and the fear that the rejection of a theory of
the subject or a large scale narrative of oppression would render any possibility of agency
dead. Still others have taken issue with the discourse of the postmodern itself and the
new "commodity of theorizing" which it represents. The fact that the academy is awash
in "theory" today and that careers, publications, exposure and power are based upon one's
facility with such "theory" has resulted in some powerful critiques of the ways that we
"do theory" and specifically of the relevance of such theorizing to the experience and art
of African-Americans and specifically African-American women. The conflict between
Joyce and Baker and Gates symbolizes the conflict which plagues much contemporary
theory in general and black feminist theory in the specific. For Joyce the role of the critic remains one of responsibility to "his or her people"--"a responsibility to participate and orchestrate [a] surge of energy--economic, political, social, personal and intellectual--to counteract the abusive, binding, numbing effect of the historical oppression of blacks around the world" (372). For Gates and particularly Baker, the possibilities offered by some "new" critical theories can in fact participate in that process. Joyce's argument, as she so aptly states in her response, is "not with Gates' 'propensity to theorize’ but with the nature of his theorizing" (381). For Joyce, "poststructuralist methodology imposes a strategy upon black literature from the outside while a direct relationship exists between Euro-American Literature and its criticism" (382). Barbara Christian makes this distinction also, by pointing out that "people of color have always theorized--but in forms quite different from the Western form of abstract logic" (Christian 336). For Christian, the act of theorizing is revealed in "narrative forms, in the stories we create, in riddles and proverbs, in the play with language" (336), and consequently these acts of theorizing are connected to the survival of the "race"--"How else could we have managed to survive with such spiritedness, the assault on our bodies, social institutions, countries, our very humanity?" (336) Thus, theory is intricately connected to the practice of survival--a model much different from the western European abstract theory which is often invested in justifying and thus upholding the practices of dominance--i.e. chattel slavery, white supremacy, colonial intervention, capitalist exploitation--supporting oppression, not opposing it. Yet Christian, unlike Joyce, is quick to point out that her rejection of "the race for theory" does not lead her to ally herself with "neutral humanists who see literature as pure expression and will not admit the obvious control of its production,
value distribution, by those who have power" (337). Instead, Christian claims literature as political in the most active sense of the word and suggests that our realization of the political nature of literary work is not "solely" connected to such proclamations from the "new philosophers, but also, or more to the point, has its roots in the Black Arts Movement of the 1960s--a movement which gave birth to the academic disciplines now known as Black Studies, Feminist Literature and now Women's Studies" (337), and more importantly she points to a history of African and African American thought and history which precedes Lyotard or Jameson or Derrida by hundreds of years.

In other words, postmodern philosophy's challenge to the legitimacy of the "grand narrative" and such concepts as "inherent truth" comes as no surprise to the colonized, who had to write (sing, speak) counter-hegemonic narratives just to survive. As Christian points out, the change is not so much in the status of "literature" but in which ways of seeing it are legitimized. Unfortunately, many of our young critics do not investigate the reasons why that statement--literature is political--is now acceptable when before it was not; nor do we look to our own antecedents for the sophisticated arguments upon which we can build in order to change the tendency of any established Western idea to become hegemonic (338). For Christian and Joyce, the "race for theory" is as hegemonic as the world it attacks," and the imposition of such strategies, which spring out of traditions specific to white, male, western elites, on the work of peoples of color will only render the work under erasure once again. Christian's rejection of the tyranny or new hegemony of the "race for theory" and Joyce Joyce's attempt to reinstate the specific, political, emotional and spiritual role of the black critic both suggest that for
"people of color" or more specifically "women of color" any indulgence in the "new philosophy" or postmodern word games is a quick step into a new kind of co-optation. For Gates and Baker, the challenges which postmodern/post-structural practices present are in keeping with the desire to maintain and nourish a counter-hegemonic discourse, a language of resistance. For Christian, echoing Toni Cade Bambara’s, "What I write and how I write it is done in order to save my life" (343). Bell hooks and Michelle Wallace offer a different view, one which takes into account the complexities and possible angers of removing yourself from the realm where the production of knowledge takes place-in this case "theory." Thus the questions which precipitated this debate remain at its close unanswered and unresolved. Can African American theory or feminist theory for that matter, engage with the philosophies of the colonizers and emerge with a renewed or revised theory which will facilitate agency in the struggle against oppression, or must necessarily all usage of such theories render us implicated in oppressive systems? If we eschew the master tools, where do we get/build/construct new ones, regain lost ones, or revalorize rusty ones? The issue seems to revolve not so much around a resistance to theory itself, but around the ways that we do theory, are taught to theorize and value other people's theorizing, including the ways that we learn to listen and value 'other' histories,’ other' sources. We need to consistently resist the desire to remain mired in one story, one source, one origin. The postmodern moment has given rise to a new beast, as Jameson has pointed out--Theory as amorphous beast characterized by highly technical and specialized terminology, endless references to other theorists, profound observations encased in jargon and what Barbara Christian has called ugly language. For some of us, such as myself, who have emerged in an academic environment that on one hand
critiqued the "new" fascination with theory in the 1980s, while on the other was being flooded with young professors who brought the ideas with them, this conflict has become part of our education, part of our teaching and a constantly disturbing part of ourselves.

My first encounters with poststructuralist theory and eventually postmodern, Marxist and post-Marxist theory were in many ways liberating while also remaining bewildering. My attempts to place these ideas in connection to my feminism rendered my dive into white feminist theory inevitable, yet my subsequent engagement with the challenges which black feminist critics have made to white feminism and white women's studies have necessitated a rethinking of my own intoxication with theory which signals a larger adulation of the part of the humanities in the academy with "theory" as we have come to learn it. My own recent attempts to develop a discourse and practice which addresses my race, class, gender and sexual identity both within the academy and within the 'world' have showed me that I need to always rethink what my theory can do and how it relates to practices-- the ways that I live my life. This includes the complex choices I make everyday about responsibility, constituency and agency within a culture that insists on white people's silence and will quickly label me a race traitor if I speak out or act against racial oppression, or oppression of any sort. What if I proclaim myself a traitor to what whiteness signals as power, what whiteness has come to mean and celebrate that proclamation? How does that change the relationship between theory and practice?
B. On the outside looking out

The failure to recognize a critical black perspective in the culture and in most scholarship and writing on postmodernism compels a black reader, particularly a black female reader, to interrogate her interest in a subject where those who discuss and write about it seem not to know black women exist or even consider the possibility that we might be somewhere writing or saying something that should be listened to, or producing art that should be seen, heard, and approached with intellectual seriousness (hooks 24).

The absence of black feminist work in the discussion surrounding postmodernism or the postmodern condition reveals a more profound absence of the black female perspective in the production of "theory" in the academic marketplace. This is not to suggest that black women are not writing or producing "art," but instead that despite the prominence of a few black woman authors in the literary and commercial market, the radical challenges which black women's work make to the hegemony of 'canon formation' and the production of theoretical discourse cause their participation to be obscured, ignored and erased. Michelle Wallace has written extensively about this problem in her piece "Variation on Negation and the Heresy of Black Female Creativity." Wallace points out that "Black feminist interpretation has been all but extinguished in mainstream and academic discourses, despite an overall cultural context in which the mechanical reproduction of interpretation and analysis through electronic media is profuse and omnipresent" (214). This is not to diminish the contribution of many important black feminist critics and thinkers, but instead to underscore the ways that these critics are "routinely kept from having an impact on how the fields of literature and literary criticism are defined and applied" (214). This exclusion can not only be attributed to the universities, museums and publishing houses' propensity to uphold the status quo, but is also evident in the surge of 'new' theory which proposes to challenge the status quo--
...postmodernists, new historicists, deconstructionists, Marxist, African Americanists and even some black female academics don't challenge the exclusionary parlor games of canon formation and the production of knowledge. Moreover, black feminists themselves are inclined to agree that black women have no interest in criticism, interpretation and theoretical analysis, nor any capacity for it (214).

Wallace's main concern in this piece is to "focus on black woman writers, the degree to which their writing explores a uniquely black feminist problematic, and the manner in which black woman writers and academics seem disproportionately under-represented in the sphere of knowledge production," yet she is also concerned with the larger issue of black feminist creativity "as a problem in Anglo-American culture" (215). The unique position which the black woman writer (critic, theorist or novelist) faces in the Anglo world is examined by Wallace by using the paradigm constructed by Barbara Johnson in her article on Zora Neale Hurston. In Johnson's analysis of Hurston's 'unpopularity' with black male writers of the 30's, she proposes a formula for understanding the black woman writer's relationship to "dominant discourse":

...approximating the Law of the Father, white men make statements of universality, white woman make statements of complementarity indicating their inevitably ambiguous relationship to the seat of power. Black men make statements of 'the other'. These positions, while still marginal and perhaps antagonistic to the status quo, are also essentially dependent for their meaning on their relationship to the center and to the Law. Black women must make do with what's left (216).

The above quotation underscores Wallace's concern with the significantly precarious and unique position of black women in relation to the production of knowledge generally and the production of literary criticism and "theory" specifically. Johnson goes on to conclude that the black woman becomes "the lower case x of radical negation," and even
more recent efforts by black men and white woman to "include black women in their progressive political and cultural formulations" never allow for black women to be seen in their own right, "but forever appropriated by the other for their own ends" (216).

For Wallace such a position for black women results in a unique kind of "creativity" in black feminism which is written from perpetual gaps in that discourse which ordinarily describes itself as rational, logical and therefore universally true," gaps which constitute signposts where the bodies—that is bodies of those who have been ignored or negated--are buried" (217). If the work of black women writers springs forth from this unique relationship to the dominant discourse, it is not a position which has been investigated or taken seriously. Often, despite the postmodern concern for "the other" or "difference," black feminist writing or creativity is required "to straddle, combine or supercede the always prior claims of white female dominated, or black male or "third world or minority dominated cultural strategies" (216). Thus, although the black woman may be best signified by "the lower case x of radical negation," in order for her to enter the arena of knowledge production, she must 'adopt' either the position of 'complementarity' or 'otherness' which has been reserved for white woman and black men respectively. If she resists that adoption she must usurp that position if only to negate it later, or straddle a series of positions which still echo back and remain "dependent for their meaning on their relationship to the center and to Law" (216). Is it possible to theorize a 'new' position which does not depend on either complementarity or otherness--"is there room beyond the 'other' as it is currently defined, for further oppositional discourse?" (216)
The 'peculiar' position of black feminist creativity and the analysis of it suggest that the possibilities for "further oppositional discourse" are indeed there; however, several factors make the exploration of such a possibility extremely complex and difficult, if not impossible, given our present cultural and political situation. For Wallace the question becomes how does black feminist creativity finally surface as writing? When it does, given that we always read in terms of what we've already read [...] isn't misunderstanding or a total lack of understanding inevitable? And perhaps most important how does black feminist creativity become critical of itself, since it is almost always forced to focus upon such primary issues as the economic survival, censorship and silencing of its own authority? (217)

The absence of black women and the analysis of black women's creativity from literary theory or canon formation, a result as Wallace points out of a series of factors both internal and external, emotional and psychological, political and cultural, means that black female creativity becomes "confined to the commercial and the aesthetic" (218), and even in those circumstances the translations of that creativity which the marketplace both literary and commercial requires insure that the lower case x of radical negation is never really revealed in its own right. Wallace uses Spielberg’s "Color Purple" as an example, as well as Oprah Winfrey's TV mini-series "Brewster Place," but one need not even be that specific because if black feminist creativity is so radically outside the dominant discourse, and is continually silenced by that discourse and its machinations, then any attempt to "produce" such works in recognizable mediums means instant translation into the terms and formulations which are recognizably those of black male
"otherness," white women's "complementarity" or even the white man's universality. Furthermore, even if the works produced manage to challenge those tropes and stretch the boundaries of existing formulations, inevitably the analysis of those works--the reviews, the responses, the eventual literary criticism which considers the works of black women--quickly place them into one or many of the recognizable patterns; Toni Morrison becomes the new Faulkner or the heir to Faulkner, Gloria Naylor is rewriting Shakespeare's The Tempest in her novel *Mama Day* or Dante's Inferno in *Linden Hills*, and the San Francisco "Review of Books" proclaims the characters in Walker's *Temple of My Familiar* "like Dostoyevsky's characters, relentlessly raising the great moral questions and pushing one another toward self-knowledge, honesty and engagement."  

For Wallace the abundance of black feminist creativity which resists ghettoization by merging in the aesthetic and commercial realms means that these two forms and principle aesthetic practices become the "key manner available to black women to make known their views of history, sexuality and culture" (220). Thus in a unique way the aesthetic becomes the theoretical.  

The 'silence' of black women in the spheres of literary criticism and theory, which Wallace recognizes as key aspects of knowledge production in this culture, and the emergence of black women's music and fiction as the actual enactment of their theorizing, mean that in order for those of us on the outside of black feminist creativity--in my case as a white woman--must learn new ways of listening in order to understand or participate in a theoretical discourse with black women. For

---

6 This is quoted from the back cover of the paperback edition of *Temple of My Familiar* by Alice Walker (Pocketbooks 1989) and credited to a review of the novel published in the San Francisco Examiner, written by Ursula K LeGuin
Wallace the question of the relationship between black feminist creativity and contemporary critical theory is not, as it is for Joyce Joyce, for example, an unimportant one—

...what challenges are posed by adapting critical frameworks to black feminist use? While critical theory now ignores black feminism's intellectual potential, it is also creating new and unoccupied spaces for subversive literary and cultural production. I am thinking particularly of Frederic Jameson's speculations on postmodernism, Third World Literature and pleasure, as well as feminist semiotic and psychoanalytic criticism of film, literature and popular culture (220).

Therefore, the relationship between what Wallace calls black feminist creativity and the practice of contemporary critical theory is a complex and under explored one. While black women are erased or ignored within the politics of canon formation and knowledge production, or they are required to take on roles which are reminiscent of the white woman's complementarity and the black man's otherness, their own cultural production in both aesthetic and commercial terms is challenging the very ways that we valorize the act of theorizing itself. However, the very uniqueness of their position, its complete alternate, renders our theoretical styles and formulations obsolete, and our analysis either commodifies the productions of black women or codifies those productions in terms and formulations that betray their original and unique position. Despite all of this Wallace and bell hooks see the need for black women and black women's creativity to engage with new theoretical frameworks in order to explore how each becomes changed by the other.

There are several obstacles and problems with exploring such an engagement, some of which have already been investigated by Wallace above, yet there also remains the problem of language and entrance into a critical language which is so entirely outside or
other than the black feminist theoretical style as witnessed in the literature or in the works
of some contemporary black feminist theorists. Wallace outlines this difficulty with
such clarity that I quote at length:

A black woman writer who wants to write seriously about contemporary cultural
issues and how they are socially constructed...is faced with an almost
insurmountable communication problem: if she takes a scholarly or academic
approach she will find herself virtually outside of language and without authority;
she will find herself unable to say what she means as she assumes one or the other
of the rhetorical emphases on "universality," complementarity or otherness, none
of which by itself can describe the complex terms of the black female
relationship to cultural production. On the other hand if she takes a colloquial
'entertainment approach'--as I did in Black Macho--then she will be read widely,
but only to be attacked and ostracized. Either way cuts the possibility of
constructive commentary—the work itself or the criticism of that work—down to
zero. The trick may be to fall somewhere in between the academic and the
entertaining, as did Walker's In Search of Our Mother's Gardens. Yet her plain-
spoken commonsense' approach has its limitations as well (223).

For Wallace as well as for Barbara Christian, bell hooks and Joyce Joyce, the explosion
of literary theory over the past two decades and the hegemonic control the theory
marketplace now exerts over knowledge production in the academy presents a specific
problem for black feminist writers and thinkers. Thus black women who want to explore
the writing of black women and have an influence on canon formation and knowledge
production are often caught in an untenable 'catch 22'—play the game of the theoretical
marketplace and in the exercising of the rules render yourself invisible or refuse to play
by the rules and you never even get to play at all. Wallace, Christian and hooks maintain
that the solution to this problem is not in arguing for a total 'resistance to contemporary
theory,' but instead an engagement with theories such as postmodernism which leaves
them forever transformed. In other words, change the rules entirely, consistently,
randomly and whenever necessary. For these theorists, the absence or silence of black
women within the powerful arena of knowledge production needs to be remedied. They are not content to argue for a "separate peace,” and for each the theories associated with postmodernism offer potential tools for exploring black female creativity and experience that cannot be ignored. However, the specific ways in which the black woman can or will engage with the theories of the postmodern are different for all three of these theorists.

Christian's in her ground-breaking critique of the theory marketplace, "The Race for Theory,” (Anzuldua 151) argues convincingly that the acceptance of the western philosophic discourse as the only proper way to theorize enacts a new hegemonic control over the literature of women of color and adds to the silencing of the works of black women in particular. For Wallace, the need to find a voice beyond "complementarity" or "otherness, a voice beyond" the other as it is currently defined for further oppositional discourse--that voice emerges for Wallace in a radical black female creativity which engages with white critical theory, but which does so on its own terms. This is also the site of an important distinction from bell hooks. Hooks, in her piece “Postmodern Blackness," points out that "it is sadly ironic that the contemporary discourse which talks most about heterogeneity . . . still directs its critical voice primarily to a specialized audience that shares a common language rooted in the very master narratives it seeks to unseat" (25).

Hooks documents the “overlooking” of many important black female thinkers in bibliographies and discussions about postmodernism despite the fact that much of what these thinkers, such as Michelle Wallace, Barbara Christian, June Jordan and of course
hooks herself, engage in and are concerned with is directly relevant to the postmodern debate and condition. In fact, postmodern theory's propensity to claim "difference" and "otherness" as its own reveals to hooks a "new" or renewed kind of white supremacy:

... I read new work in literary and cultural studies focusing on race, noting how often contemporary white scholars writing about black people assume positions of familiarity, as though their work was not coming into being in a cultural context of white supremacy, as though it were in no way shaped by that context (124).

A recurring issue throughout hook's newest book, *Yearning*, this question of white scholars who "engage in debates which highlight notions of difference, marginality and otherness in such a way that it further marginalizes actual people of difference and otherness" is central to the black women's (or man's) relationship to the discourse from which these scholars speak. Thus, not only are black people ignored in terms of their contributions to the debates and critiques about contemporary culture taking place today, they are also consistently objectified, reduced and erased as subjects within the discourse of the postmodern, despite its claim to be counter-hegemonic and radical. One of the ways this process is supported is by a failure on the part of a large majority of white writers/thinkers (both male and female) to "interrogate their perspective, the location from which they write in a culture of domination." The failure to enact this process--the failure/refusal to see yourself (ourselves) as subjects occupying a particular position in a white supremacist culture--further renders our "potentially radical discipline a field of study where old practices are simultaneously critiqued, re-enacted and sustained' (125). Thus, postmodern discourse on difference in general and race in particular has gone a long way beyond critique of the existing racist/sexist culture into a re-enactment of its hegemony and sustenance of its domination. Despite these realizations of the dangers
which postmodern theory and particularly white people within postmodern theory signal for all of those outside the dominant, hooks, like Wallace, is not prepared to dismiss the importance of some of the salient challenges and critiques which postmodern theory has performed, nor does she eschew the possibilities which the utilization of such ideas/theories have for the construction of "critical interrogation" or a "radical black subjectivity." Thus, postmodern critical inquiry has potential, but its failure to engage with the "others" it abstracts whether in theoretical debate, or by looking at their artworks, means that the abstraction of difference, sometimes even the exoticization or romanticization of difference, maintains the status quo. It removes such categories as race or racism from the moorings of a white dominated culture which houses the speaker in the first place; it renders its radical potential silent. Given that, what could postmodern challenges to identity and essentialism offer to black people and particularly black women?

According to hooks, the postmodern critique of identity is "relevant" for renewed black liberation struggle, but "is often posed in ways that are problematic": "Given the pervasive politics of white supremacy which seeks to prevent the formation of a radical black subjectivity, we cannot cavalierly dismiss a concern for identity politics" (26). Thus, a failure to "consider the implications of a critique of identity for oppressed groups" renders the postmodern extraordinarily problematic for various liberation struggles. The need for African-Americans to consistently search for new methods of de-colonization, while simultaneously maintaining awareness that the political grounds for activism are radically altered by the postmodern moment, is great and complex. That
The postmodern moment has particular and specific consequences for African-Americans and even more radically altered consequences for African-American women. As hooks points out: “For African-Americans our collective condition prior to the advent of postmodernism and perhaps more tragically expressed under current postmodern conditions has been and is characterized by continued displacement, profound alienation, and despair.” (26).

Donna Haraway's "Informatics of Domination" details the specific and crippling conditions of the postmodern but she does not address the specific effects on the populations of African Americans in the United States. Haraway's failure to explore the specificities of these conditions for African American and other oppressed groups renders her profile 'unreal' in many ways. The people most profoundly affected by these new forms of domination which Haraway describes are those whose experience her own work obscures and romanticizes. Hooks quotes Cornell West here on these conditions:

There is increasing class division and differentiation, creating on the one hand a significant black middle-class, highly anxiety-ridden, insecure, willing to be co-opted and incorporated into the powers that be, concerned with racism to the degree that it poses constraints on upward social mobility; and, on the other, a vast and growing black underclass, an underclass that embodies a kind of walking nihilism of pervasive drug addiction, pervasive alcoholism, pervasive homicide, and an exponential rise in suicide. Now because of the deindustrialization, we also have a devastated black industrial working class. We are talking here about tremendous hopelessness (27)

Therefore, although the postmodern moment was not the advent of such conditions for black folks, it was the site of their intensity and shift of focus. It is, in fact, thanks to postmodernity, which those of us in the dominate culture were forced to recognize, that we
too "now share with black folks a sense of deep alienation, despair, loss of grounding, even if it is not informed by shared circumstances" (27). For hooks, then, one of the strengths of radical postmodernism is in the empathy that such shared sensibilities may construct--"ties that would promote recognition of common commitments, and serve as a basis for solidarity and coalition" (27). Another positive potential within postmodernism's critique of identity for hooks is the rejection of essentialism and thus an essential blackness. Hooks is quick to point out that the critique of essential identity has often been met with "yeah it's easy to give up an identity when you got one," particularly in colonized groups or in the discourse of white women's feminism. Such a response, although understandable, is in the long run inadequate. If identity politics as characterized by Wendy Brown have become only a surface response to the diffusions and dispersal of power which the postmodern condition emphasizes, they are far too limited in their possibilities for radical critique or practice for African Americans as well as white feminists. The nostalgic return to categories of identity based upon old unities which cannot respond to new systems of domination, means that black critics, like a lot of white feminists, are locked into a serious reaction to postmodern conditions which are not tailored to the new forms of power and domination--oppressive systems which depend upon these new informatics of domination stay intact; black people are rendered powerless in their nostalgia. Some Post colonial and African American scholars have argued that the very construction of 'identity' and 'identity' politics is a strategy of the dominant which allows those in power through the process of naming and thus containing the 'other', to continue to exert control over them. This process is demonstrated in the works of many contemporary post-colonial or 'third world' writers.
One striking example is in Butchi Emecheta's novel *The Joys of Motherhood*. Nnu Ego, the protagonist of the novel, moves to Lagos, the capital city in Nigeria where the concentration of British colonizing power is located, at the midpoint in the novel. She goes there to marry a member of her village who has relocated of economic reasons. Upon her arrival Nnu is struck by the fact that the colonizers both linguistically and spatially refer to the native" as if they were all the same, while she has been brought up to notice differences between the blacks, tribal heritage, villages, dress, facial features and customs signify difference to Nnu, an Ibo from the countryside. Thus, while the colonizers see "black", "African" native" or "servant", she sees Ibo, Yoruba, Ashanti etc. Therefore notions of identity and essential identity are often historically constructed in specific spatial, temporal conditions which reflect the long legacy of colonization and dominance. If African American women (and/or men) continue to uncritically accept the categories of identity provided by the slave master -- they remain contained within the cycle of oppression. This process will be examined more in Chapters IV and V as I look closely at the idea of identity in three historical novels by African American women. The postmodern rejection of essential identity in fact opens up new spaces for constructing identities and "reformulating outmoded motions of identity" (28). Thus, hooks calls for a continued and profound critique of essentialism by African Americans which allows for them to be "empowered to recognize multiple experiences of black identity that are the lived conditions of our lives" (29). In the end postmodernism for hooks, as for Jameson, Huyssen, Brown, Haraway and others, is not simply a mode of thought or a style, but is a moment characterized by particular changes in the living/lived conditions of African Americans. Therefore postmodern theory, reconceived with a radical critique of white
supremacy, could be the site where coming to terms with the impact of postmodernism for black experience particularly as it changes our sense of identity, means we must and can re-articulate the terms for collective bonding. Given the various crises facing African-Americans (economic, spiritual, escalating racial violence) we are compelled by circumstance to reassess our relationship to popular culture and resistance struggle. For hooks, postmodern theory up to this point has dangerously restricted any of its own potential for radical critique or agency by ignoring both the contributions of people of color and the implications that a discourse on race would have for its theories, practices and constructed spaces; however, there are aspects of the critique which postmodernism performs of identity and essentialism, as well as its rejection of a universal, which can be of great worth in the struggle to create new modes of radical Black subjectivity. She, like Joyce Joyce and Barbara Christian, sees much of this theory as far too embedded in the discourse it needs to unseat, yet hooks is able to see ways that an engagement with certain postmodern precepts an lead toward intellectual work that connects with habits of being, forms of artistic expression and aesthetic that inform the daily life as writers" (31). One is acutely aware that hooks must be referring to different "work" than Christian or Joyce are when they rail at the obscure and rapidly hegemonic discourses of contemporary critical theory. However, hooks too is angered by the control of form and voice which both academia and other cultural institutions assert over the "others" they so exoticize (22).

It would appear that all four of these African American feminist theorists have some consistent reactions/critiques of postmodern theory. All reject the embedded ness of
postmodern theory in the language and concepts which it critiques; all reject the
ignorance of postmodern thinkers towards the works of African Americans and other
oppressed peoples; all see the exoticism of difference in abstract terms to be dangerous
and ostensibly a re-enactment of colonization; all maintain the need for theory to engage
consistently with the material conditions of the lives of those others and the importance
of writing, subjectivity and an identity—if reconstructed to do so. However, despite the
similarities in their critiques of postmodern theoretical discourses, in the long run their
attitudes about the usefulness which a postmodern critique of identity or essentialism or
even "grand narratives," as well as their understanding of what is meant by post
modernity, are quite different. Joyce harkens back to a view of literature as "pure
expression," but not the pure expression of the neutral humanists—an expression which
has its roots in the survival of the voices, history and stories of African American people,
yet her strategies strikingly resemble the "reactionary foundationalism" which Wendy
Brown elucidates; strategies which are in the end reactions to postmodernity, not
interruptions or critiques of it. Thus Joyce's seemingly more "political," less obtuse stance
as an African American critic does not allow her to engage with the very unique material,
economic and social conditions of the postmodern. Christian, while also quick to point
out that she is not rejecting "theory per se" but a particular kind of theory, sees her own
critical enterprise as the expression of "a need, a desire among folk like me to save their
own lives." Wallace, more at ease with engaging in the postmodern practices of
Marxism, New Historicism and particularly psychoanalysis, yet uncomfortable with the
restrictions the languages of such methodologies place on "black female creativity,"
wants to pursue many discourses which offer a new take on otherness. Hooks recognizes
the need to interrogate critically postmodernism around the issues of race, but is encouraged by the possibilities which a critique of essentialism/identity opens up for a re-formed radical black subjectivity. The overarching thing that ties these four thinkers together is the outward recognition of the importance that the act of theorizing has for them in political, social and spiritual terms but a theorizing (and Christian draws attention to the use of the verb) which is actively engaged in the process of individual and collective survival. This activity, as Christian points out, is not new: My folk have always been a race for theory--but more in the form of a hieroglyph, a written figure which is both--both sensual and abstract, both beautiful and communicative (336)

Cultural criticism has historically functioned in black life as a force promoting critical resistance, one that enabled black folks to cultivate in everyday life a practice of critique and analysis that would disrupt, even deconstruct those cultural productions that were designed to promote and re-inforce domination (hooks 3). Black people have depended upon "counter-hegemonic theory" for survival long before we named it as such. Thus, it is not a question of resistance to "theory" or perpetuating the racist mythology that “blackness is associated solely with concrete gut level experience conceived of as either opposing or having no connection to abstract thinking and the production of critical theory" (hooks 23). Instead, these women challenge the very definitions of theory, of theorizing which have gained such control and credence in the academy over the past twenty years. In effect, the challenges which African American women (and men) have made to the dominant discourse prefigures any challenge which postmodern theory has performed on western logocentric narratives. If we are to challenge the legitimacy of the
narratives, then we need to reevaluate our own positions within the discourse, and the workings of our own discursive practices, the exclusions and omissions and erasures.

Hooks, Wallace and Christian all see the necessity of engaging postmodern theories but insist upon doing so in terms that are historically and culturally familiar to and a part of African American culture. Thus they are not resistant to the conditions of post modernity, do not in fact ignore those conditions as many white middle class feminists do, but they do challenge the methodologies and language of what has been called postmodern or postmodern/feminist theory based upon the inability of such theories to speak to or about the conditions of black people or specifically black women in the U.S. Therefore a need for new forms of postmodern theory emerges: Theories which are fluid and open yet historical and specific, theories which engage multiple interlocking systems of domination and colonization and create possibilities for practice within the analytical, individual and political spheres. Wallace, hooks and Christian all recognize that a turn toward the work of African American women writers may enable such theories as they represent the historical necessity of African Americans to counter hegemonic theory in order to survive and resist the forms of racism and colonization which have plagued them through four centuries on this continent. The novels themselves, while challenging the boundaries between theory and "fiction," enact the theorizing that Christian and hooks remind us has been the mainstay of their cultural and political criticism and practice.
C. On the inside-looking out

As I have demonstrated in Chapter II, the integration of the theories of postmodernism and feminism has resulted in some salient possibilities for a theory which speaks to our present historical, cultural and political situation; however, far too many of these possibilities are undercut by the rhetorical nature of our engagement with “difference” and "others," words/terms which on their own fail to address the question of racism or white supremacy which is at the root of western philosophic discourse. Barbara Christian has called "academic language the new metaphysic through which we turn leaden idiom into golden discourse" ("Differences" 64) and has insisted that we try to write our "most important thinking [in] our native tongues" (65). Much of the work in which white feminists (including myself) have engaged with the challenges postmodernism poses has embedded itself in a pre-existing discourse and rendered our versions of feminism and postmodernism as "complements" to the anti-foundational work of white western European philosophers. Once again we have taken or accepted the position of "complementarity" in Barbara Johnson's model (universalit/white male; complementarity/white female, otherness/black male; the radical x of negation of black female creativity). What would it mean for white women to break that model? What could it mean for anti-racist, anti-supremacist white women to reject the existing positions offered us within academic discourse and scholarship? And how might we do it?

One place to begin such a resistance is in the insistence on the presence of our subjectivity in the work we do; to reject in fact the invisibility of our race, class, sexual
identity and many other aspects of subjectivity. This does not mean that every piece, every investigation, every analysis becomes a solipsistic imposition of ourselves upon the issues we are investigating, but instead that our own whiteness, our class privilege, our own sexual positions, become an integral part of our thinking process. Instead of beginning an analysis of Beloved, for example, by considering what narrative forces are at work in its structure, begin with the question(s): How does my being a white woman play into my reception of this text? How do I read this book differently? How does it alter my view of historical narrative along the lines of my conceptions of self and other? This may dispense with the endless interpretations of Morrison as an heir to Faulkner, or the consistent fascination in the scholarship on Beloved with "who is Beloved--ghost, escaped slave, or human?" We may, instead, learn, as Gloria Naylor in her opening to Mama Day tells us, to listen: "Uh, huh, listen, really listen this time." Listen to challenges and theories which resist complementarity and demand a "new kind" of radical subjectivity. All four of the African American feminist critics whom I have cited in this chapter see the literature of African Americans and particularly black women as acts of survival and enactments of political agency. Perhaps it is this that sent me, a now middle-class white woman of Irish heritage (first generation) to the literature in the first place. I don't think it is coincidental that one of the sweeping changes which was ushered in by modernism in literary terms was the institutionalization of literary practices which ripped literature from its connection to the everyday, from its connections to our lives. My father could talk about Yeats and Joyce with a passion that revealed the ways it spoke to his experience; I, after my education and in keeping with the historical moment of the Modern/postmodern, could not. Years ago, when I would argue with him about Joyce's
inaccessibility," he would tell me the story about the guy who used to come to pump his septic tank and could recite pages of Finnegans Wake with glee. When bell hooks talks about speak[ing] this yearning," one aspect of that yearning for me as an Irish-American white woman is the failure of the stories of my culture to speak to me: they were made distant by institutional practices which lifted them outside the site of resistance. I am aware that I was taught to 'read' Joyce and Yeats and others through the disciplined institutional practices of the modern and postmodern critical gaze. Thus, it is not in effect true that Joyce is 'apolitical' or could not inform my experience, especially as a first generation Irish American, but the Joyce I received had already been mediated and contained by the dominant discourse and emptied of its revolutionary contents. My theoretical, critical readerly skills, tailored to the maintenance of dominance and status quo, placed Joyce nostalgically mute to my present experience. Recent work on Joyce and other modernist, including Virginia Woolf challenge these practiced forms of interpretation.

African American women's literature has resisted this process of institutionalization in ways far different and specific to the position which their voices occupy in relation to power and knowledge production in this society, yet the work has resisted. Faced with a canon of "my own" emptied of its contents, I have gone in search of another literature which reinstates and insists on the connections which stories have to the survival of a culture--to the articulation of a "theory" or theories, and to the possibility for agency. I cannot speak of my "turn" to the literature of African-American women as a way to fill a gap within my own life (history, culture) without being painfully aware of how such a
move carries with it the vestiges of colonialism and co-optation. However, I need to point out how the works and the commentary on the works by African-American women such as Christian, hooks, Wallace, resisted even my new acts of colonization. As hard as I tried, I could not call it my own--could not see myself prefigured in the stories, could not "identify" with them. Instead I was confronted with an image/notion of myself as erased, unimportant, outsider, sometimes even enemy. Thus my reading of the works of black women writers did not allow for new moves of co-optation but forced me to engage as an "outsider"--forced me to be quiet and listen, as white women will need to do if solidarity between white women and women of color is to be possible. One possible method of learning new ways of thinking, of rejecting our existing systems both as "complements" and as white feminists institutionalized in our own discourse, is in our engagement with the works of African American and other post-colonial texts and in our considerations of how such works leave us changed. These works occupy a unique position as "acts of decolonization" and as strategies for "decolonizing the mind" (hooks), and there needs to be an attendant consideration both in discourse and in practice to how this process affects both the previously and presently colonized and the colonizer.

Chandra Mohanty, in her introduction to *Third World Women and the Politics of Feminism* (1991), is conscious of the problems inherent in constructing a unitary identity around the phrase "Third World Women" (a wariness which escapes Donna Haraway), yet she is also clear in her assertion of the differences implicit in the relation of third world women and white middle-class women to the centers of power:

> The major analytic difference in the writings on the emergence of white, western middle-class liberal feminism and the feminist politics of women of color in the U.S. is the contrast between a singular focus on gender as a
basis for equal rights and a focus on gender in relation to race and/or class as part of a broader liberation struggle (11)

Using the example of reproductive rights, and calling upon the work of Aidu Hurrado (1989), Mohanty argues that the proximity of white women to white men in familial terms and the subsequent distance between white men and women of color except as mediated by state institutions creates a radical distinction between our notions of reproductive freedom and those of poor women of color: Abortion rights defined as a women's right vs. men's familial control can never be the only basis of feminist coalitions across race and class lines. For many women of color, reproductive rights conceived of in its broadest form, in terms of familial male/female relationships, but also more significantly, in terms of institutional relationships and state policy, must be the bases for such coalitions (12). In other words, our position of proximity and complementarity to white men allows us to conceive of the struggle for reproductive (and perhaps other) rights within the "personal" realm as opposed to seeing such a battle within the context of state control and mediation of our bodies. This single-axis analysis results from our specific historical and political position as white women. However, this does not mean that the single-axis analysis is sufficient even for white women, or white middle-class heterosexual women: "this unitary conceptualization of gender" is not an adequate ground for struggle for white middle- and upper-class feminists either. It is not enough that we "add" race and class into our discourse to "please" women of color and try to bring them into the fold, or to affect a new rhetorical means of analysis in order to be "hip." Instead we must consider the ways in which such an analysis leaves us radically changed in our theorizing, in our practices and in our everyday lives.
. . . racism is as much an issue for white people as for people of color. . . White people are implicated in racial formulations [and cannot] lose fight of the hierarchies of power based on color and race (Mohanty 12).

Therefore, it is of utmost importance that we not only learn to listen, but also learn new methods of analysis to explain how we are/must be changed by the challenges which women of color have made to both the existing white male hegemony and to our race and class-blind discourse as white feminists. Yet that consideration needs to be brought to a different and more critical level if we are to effect change both within and without the academy. One way to begin this process is to be aware of the ways that we have sought to include "ethnically and racially" diverse texts in our curriculum, a move which many have seen as "evidence of diversity in U.S. feminist circles" but which in fact "owes as much to the relations of the marketplace as it does to the conviction to ‘testify’ and 'bear witness'" (Mohanty 34). The presence or existence of these works in our syllabi or in our curricula is not in and of itself "evidence of decentering hegemonic histories and subjectivities" (34). It is the way in which they are read, understood, and located, institutionally, which is of paramount importance. After all, the point is not just to "record" one's history of struggle of consciousness, but how they are recorded: the way we read, receive and disseminate such imaginative records is immensely significant (34) [my emphasis]. For example, Morrison's Beloved, Naylor's Mama Day, and Gayle Jones' Corregidora (the texts which I will look at more closely in the second half of this book) "collectively re-write and encode the history of American slavery and the oppositional agency of African-American slave women" (Mohanty 36). Thus, these works radically alter our visions of "history" and historiography and our understanding of the role that the "novel" plays in consciousness and the politics of everyday. These
works occupy a unique place in our understanding of the role of literature/story in the production of knowledge and theory. Thus, to teach them or present them in the context of a class on "American Literature" or "Contemporary American Literature" without drawing attention to the ways that they elude and resist that codification means that they remain only "examples" of "difference" exoticized and emptied of their radical subjective power.

I began this chapter by suggesting that both white male postmodern theory and the various complementary discourses of feminist postmodern theory have either failed to engage the works and ideas of women of color, specifically black women, or have done so in ways that abstract and thus rhetorically and practically distance us from the critiques which African American women's work performs on our processes, our notions of postmodernity. I suggested that in order to interrupt the reification of that blindness, the enactment of re-instating a hierarchy we ostensibly want to break down, we would need to learn new ways of listening, thinking, being: we would need to engage the works of African-American women, not in order to co-opt it, or to exoticize it, but to seriously consider the disruptions such an engagement causes in our understanding of self, history, culture and the possibilities for agency. Hooks, Christian, Joyce and Wallace all point "us" back to the "literature" and the possibilities which these works hold for a re-writing and a re-construction of black female creativity (Wallace) and radical black subjectivity (hooks). In fact, for these thinkers the stories of their people as well as the commentary on those stories are conscious and collective acts of de-colonization. In the last part of this chapter I have tried to consider/suggest the ways that these works, these voices, do
not add to my already existing system of knowledge, or theory production; rather they insist that I, as a white middle-class woman, reject, revolutionize, and discard that system. Thus, although I may be unable to change my position as an "insider," I must continually challenge that position and keep looking outside.

One way to engage that process is to look at how the voices of African-American women novelists in the late twentieth century--such as Morrison, Naylor and Jones--require me to alter my ways of knowing in order to listen to their voices--to try not to become Reema's boy in Mama Day, who imposes the ways from beyond the bridge on Willow Springs--but to listen:

But on second thought, someone who didn't know how to ask wouldn't know how to listen. And he coulda listened to them the way you been listening to us right now. Think about it: Aint nobody really talking to you. We're sitting here in Willow Springs and you're God-knows-where. It's August 1999—a ain't but a slim chance it's the same season where you are. Uh, huh, listen. Really listen this time: the only voice you hear is your own. But you done just heard about the legend of Sapphira Wade, though nobody here breathes her name. You done heard it the way we know it, sitting on our porches and shelling June peas, quieting the midnight cough of a baby, taking apart the engine of a car--you done heard it without a single human soul really saying a word. Pity though, Reema's boy couldn't listen like you, to Cocoa and George down by them oaks--as he woulda left here with quite a story (10).
SECTION II

DECOLOIZING THE MIN(E)DS
CHAPTER IV

UNLEARNING THE PRIVILEGE

There is an impulse among literary critics and other kinds of intellectuals to save the masses, speak for the masses, describe the masses. On the other hand, how about attempting to learn to speak in such a way that the masses will not regard as bullshit. When I think of the masses, I think of a woman belonging to that 84% of women's work in India, which is unorganized peasant labor. Now if I could speak in such a way that such a person would actually listen to me and not dismiss me as yet another of those any colonial missionaries, that would embody the project of unlearning about which I have spoken recently. What can the intellectual do towards the texts of the oppressed? Represent them and analyze them, disclosing one's own positionality for other communities in power. (Spivak, 1990. 56)

The native intellectual who takes up arms to defend his nation's legitimacy and who wants to bring proofs to bear out that legitimacy, who is willing to strip himself naked to study the history of his body, is obliged to dissect the heart of his [sic] people. (Franz Fanon, quoted in Harlow 199)

I have asked in Chapter III what it means to listen or, in the words of Gloria Naylor's collective narrator, to "really listen" this time. I have seen the process of gaining the new skill needed to "listen" as a complex and difficult one for those of us embedded in a "First World," "Western," "middle class" positionality. I have suggested that the insights and distrust of "universals" or "master narratives" which the postmodern ushered in have opened up some possibility for that process, yet simultaneously closed off others. I have found that the desire to focus on one axis of subjectivity-- gender--so common in western, middle class, white, feminist theory leads to a reinscribing of the hegemony its rhetoric so plaintively seeks to unseat. Inside all of this processing, two questions consistently echo in my mind, and I have struggled with the connections between them:
first, so brilliantly articulated by Spivak--"How do we unlearn our privilege as loss?"; the second, inspired by Barbara Harlow's last words in Resistance Literature--"How do you write about murder in a new town"--if that new town is best represented as a postmodern historical moment?" Both of these questions deserve consideration on their own, yet both overlap significantly as I embark on trying to argue that the works of literature of some African American women in the 1980's and 90's present viable models for the process of decolonization of the mind, in both an individual and collective sense and for both the colonized and the colonizer. Thus, I will deal with them successively. Recently Spivak has written and talked at length about this process of "unlearning one's privilege," and certainly the political climate in the U.S., specifically in the academy, has contributed to the commodification of a rhetoric of unlearning (multiculturalism, pluralism, political correctness) if little process has actually taken place. However, an investigation of the components of that process, or even a skeletal consideration of the stages of such a process, has been usurped in the more "glamorous" media debate about academic freedom and preservation of the canon, all thinly disguising a backlash of enormous and often frightening proportions. This backlash, to which I am reluctant even to give credence, has as its agenda a strong commitment to reinscribing a narrative of hegemony and center around which all others circulate. It speaks of a profound fear that those "others"--other narratives, other histories, other identities, other centers--have in fact made inroads toward changing and challenging us. Thus as a white women interested in unlearning my privilege and challenging the perception of such a process as a loss, my energy is divided. I struggle daily with the "backlash" and find myself continually pulled into that debate, and I continue to try to encode, record, create, and suggest ways in
which the process of unlearning can be facilitated. Despite the obvious and necessary project of combating such a backlash, I find myself caught legitimizing the argument by my very reaction to it. Thus, I find now that we need to combat such a reactionary move by focusing our (my) energies on exploring the ways, complex and daunting as they may be, that that process of Unlearning can, will, and does take place.

For Spivak the charting of this process is specific indeed, and yet she locates it within the very important first step of positioning oneself. She comments that what sent her to Derrida's work in the first place was that "he focuses his glance very specifically at his own situation as an intellectual who questions his own disciplinary production" (6). She comments that "when I first read Derrida I didn't know who he was, I was very interested to see that he was actually dismantling the philosophical tradition from the inside rather than from outside..." (7). Thus one of the principal insights of postmodern "French" theory for Spivak is its insistence on positionality, on seeing yourself as "inside" if indeed you are. In service of that process Spivak points out that her situation is particularly and specifically complicated. Commenting on the Western intellectual's turn to the East, which she says represents a "commemorating and marking [of] a repeated crisis of European consciousness," Spivak urges us to "reverse the direction of a binary opposition and you discover the violence":

The so-called non-West's turn toward the West is a command. That turn was not in order to fulfill some longing to consolidate a pure space for ourselves, that turn was a command. Without that turn we would not in fact have been able to make out a life for ourselves as intellectuals. One has to reverse the binary opposition, and today of course, since there is now a longing once again for the pure Other of the West, we post-colonial intellectuals are told we are too Western, and what goes completely unnoticed is that our turn to the West is in response to a command,
whereas the other is to an extent a desire marking the place of the management of a crisis (8).

This passage is important in two ways; for what it reveals in its deconstruction of the "turn to the non-West," and for how it displays the process Spivak is enacting of positioning herself and other postcolonial intellectuals in this historical moment, when that turn has reinstated itself. Thus, as she continues to delineate her own process and position, Spivak is both illuminating the process of the historical moment and positioning herself within it. As she has been commanded to turn to the "West" so as to legitimate her own intellectual production, she is now equally as caught in the present western desire to turn to the east as a management of crisis:

To an extent I want to say that I am caught within the desire of the European consciousness to turn towards the East because that is my production. But I am also trying to lever it off--once again this is a deconstructive project if you would like--to raise the lid off this desire to turn toward what is not the West, which in my case could very easily be transformed into just wanting to be the 'true native'. I could easily construct, then, a sort of 'pure East' as a 'pure universal' or as a 'pure institution' so that I could then define myself as an Easterner, as the marginal or as specific or as para-institutional (8).

My purpose in quoting these passages at length is to show Spivak's process and the display of how she considers the specificities of her involvement in this turn both as an insider and as an outsider, as West and East involved in a complex process. It is in fact this realization which leads Spivak to consider that the "limits of the theories of interpretation that I am working with [Western, French, etc.] are revealed through the encounter of what can be defined as 'non-Western material'" (8). Thus, how are gaps in the western narrative revealed by an encounter with non-western material, narrative, history? These gaps figure significantly in the process of unlearning. If those gaps are
revealed, then the western is unveiled as non-universal, and constructed. Our master narratives are not only deemed non-universal by our own decree, but are re-coded by their inability to account for 'all' experience, all 'others'. This indeed becomes one of the first steps in positioning yourself, a first step in unlearning the privilege. Spivak is quick to point out that this process/project of unlearning "will not come through benevolence" - the kind of easy inclusion which characterizes so much feminist discourse--"it has to be charted out very carefully step by step" (9). How might I (we) (white western feminist intellectuals, etc.) begin to "chart" that process? If we are to accept the beginnings of a model suggested in the above passages, then one of the first stages of the process becomes a strong commitment to discovering our own positionality. Such a process would have to take place on two levels--the very specific: How do I operate within various institutions and structures of power?--and the slightly more general: How do white women in the first world continue to operate as intellectuals in relationship to things "non-Western?" Such a process might be characterized in Spivak's terms as the winning back of the position of the "questioning subject" (42). However, that move leaves one firmly located within a specific context in which the "enemy is the male establishment of the most privileged Western tradition" (42). It does not allow for the realization that within the "larger female constituency in the world...I am an infinitely privileged person" (42).

Following such a consideration (which one could say was my project in Chapters 1, 2 and 3), how then do I learn to unlearn? I have suggested that this second stage of the process begins with a desire to listen and that such a listening would entail removing oneself from
the center; in Spivak's words, "try to behave as if you are part of the margin" (30).

However, such a move often leads to acts of appropriation and that infamous "speaking for and in place of the "other" which has characterized some feminist and postmodern encounters with the works of others--African American Women for example. There are two significant aspects in Spivak's sentence: "try" and "as if." The use of the word try suggests that one will always be caught in a consistent process of failure; thus the emphasis is not on the product--the stepping in to become the "other" or the complete "identification with the African American women writer or character"--but instead on the process of trying to ‘imagine yourself at the margin all the while be[ing] aware of your place in the center.’ The paradox of this position is complex. On the one hand I must consistently position myself in relation to the specific institutional structures of power, recognizing my participation in those structures; and on the other I must learn to imagine, to unlearn that positionality just long enough to hear the voices from the "margin." The recognition of such a tightrope has led to many long falls. It would be easy to fall into speaking for or appropriating discourses which challenge our interpretive modes; it would be easy to escape into the pursuit of purity or exoticism which characterizes much of white feminist work on black women or is most strikingly exhibited in the "new age" appropriation of Native American spirituality. I think that the need to walk that tightrope consistently, to participate in its discontinuity while also being aware of the specificity of your "project," is one way (possibly) to negotiate the wire.

This leads me in a roundabout way to the second question posed in my first paragraph--"How do you write of murder in a new town?" Barbara Harlow's use of this line from
Ngugi's *Petals of Blood* indicates the difficulties of reinscribing the role of "resistance literature" into a historical and cultural moment which is post-independence Kenya. Within the new socio-political structures of an independent Kenya, the role of resistant literature as testimony or as utopic has shifted. The battle lines are blurred and the ways in which literature can work as a mode of resistance is tested. I am (unabashedly) appropriating that line to signal the difficulties any works of literature (and perhaps cultural productions of any kind) encounter as they try to operate in resistance to the postmodern condition, or the postmodern historical moment in the U.S.; specifically for African American women writers who are engaged in a process which bell hooks has called "decolonizing the mind."

If the process necessary for white women at the center involves a charting of how we are to unlearn our privilege, then the process for black women (and men) which the postmodern moment urges is such decolonization. Although these are very separate processes, I do think that they are connected, and perhaps one of the sites of their engagement is in the cultural productions which attempt to re-inscribe the silent and ignored history of the colonized. Spivak suggests to her white male students who complain that they can no longer speak that "they should develop a degree of rage against a history that has allowed that, that has taken away from them the possibility of speaking" (43). She herself identifies with their frustration in her own desire to "deny history" in search of a new speaking place. Yet one of the processes beyond that rage seems to me to be to investigate the silence of that historical narrative. Look in fact at what it has ignored and why and in so doing 'deconstruct' our historical interpretive
modes. This would mean forswoering a deconstructive "reading" of Toni Morrison's
Beloved; instead looking at Beloved as a deconstructive reading in itself. Thus we would
not look at Morrison's texts for their absences, but reinvert the binary to reveal the
violence and look at Morrison's texts for their insistence on the presence of that which
has been absent from our narratives of history.

Our gaze turns from the absences of our own narratives to the presences within the
narratives of the "other." This would also shift the focus away from an infinite solipsistic
vision of what we have missed and now mean to re-instate towards the process of
unlearning our privilege by listening to the reinscription of that which we excluded. Thus
the process of unlearning privilege--the position of the colonizer--becomes engaged with
the process of decolonizing the mind of the colonized. My investigation into works like
Beloved or Mama Day or Corregidora becomes one of unlearning the privilege of my
presence even as the work consistently fuels the process of reinscribing a history of
struggle and complexity into the experience of African American Slave Mothers. I
recognize that the conflation or connection between these two processes indicates an
almost facile vision of the role of the work, and fails to consider the complex ways in
which these two processes overlap and even become conflicting. However, I do think that
the complexities of this process can be revealed by looking closely at the ways in which
the works act upon and interact with the different positions of the oppressed and the
oppressor. Some of this knowledge (or belief) is informed by my classroom experience
with these works and by a review of the critical responses to the publication of the texts,
as well as by looking at the different ways in which the texts have been ‘commodified’
and how they traffic within the postmodern moment. Cornell West has looked at the various practices of black cultural productions which may be viewed as postmodern--jazz, the sermonic, athletics--yet his seminal article "Black Culture and Postmodernism" ends with the assertion that even though he has excluded literary artists from his discussion, there remains a great deal of work to do in establishing the role of "possible critical positions for blacks both in and around popular culture, the ways in which these positions can be viewed as sites of potentially enabling yet resisting postmodernism" (96); the works of writers such as Morrison, Naylor and Walker operate not only within the confines of academic discourse but are also within the arena of popular culture, signaled by their bestseller status and the consistent interest in adapting their texts for cinema. It seems to me then that my position as a white now middle class woman "representing and analyzing" the works of African American women literary artists like Morrison and Naylor and Jones, while simultaneously trying to unlearn my privilege as loss and recognize how these works perform acts of decolonization and resist commodification, requires the careful delineation of several factors.

My analysis must consistently attend to my positionality, while also trying "to behave as if I was on the margin." I must also be aware that my position within the institutional structures of the academy at large and postmodern feminist theory specifically will preclude any incursion into the activity of these texts. Thus as I embark on the second section of this project--looking at three novels by African American women and how they challenge the narratives of history and identity which have been proffered by western white master narratives, white feminist theory and postmodern notions of radical
subjectivity---I must attend to unlearning my privilege and to investigating how these
texts work (or don't work) as acts of resistance and enactments of decolonization for both
the oppressor and the oppressed.

As for the prefix POST, here I want to emphasize the element of logical
and historical consequence, rather than sheer temporal posteriority.
Postmodernism follows from modernism, in some sense, more than it
follows after modernism....But there is more than a mere tautology to the
relation between modernism and postmodernism if we can construct an
argument about how the posterior phenomenon emerges from its
predecessor--about, in other words, historical consequentiality
(McHale, 5)

I remain quite suspicious of the term postmodern for two basic reasons.
First because the precursor term modern itself has not simply been used to
devalue the cultures of the oppressed and exploited peoples, but also has
failed deeply to illumine the internal complexities of these cultures.
Second the sheer facticity of black people in the United States historically
embodies and enacts the postmodern themes of degraded otherness
and subaltern marginality. Black resistances have attacked notions of
exclusionary identity, dominating heterogeneity and universality--or in
more blunt language, white supremacy. Yet the historical experience of
black people in North America, as well as latinos, [white] women,
workers, gays, and lesbians, always requires that one examine the relation
of any Eurocentric (patriarchal, homophobic) discourse to black resistance
West, (91).

Consistently when we consider the postmodern we must keep asking post what? Cornell
West, in the above quotation, reiterates the suspicion of postmodern theory which so
characterized the black feminist critics in my discussion in Chapter Three; however, his
suspicion extends beyond a distrust based on exclusion to accommodate the specifics of
black cultural practices and the saliency of postmodernism for defining or analyzing
those productions. Consistently, the postmodern has been theorized, as Brian McHale
does above, as a response, rejection or outgrowth of the Modern, yet that "modern"
ignored and "devalued" the cultures of the oppressed and the exploited.
Thus, a description of the postmodern as that which celebrates difference and otherness
ignores the historical conditions of the emergence of postmodern practices out of modern
ones. How can the works of African American artists in fact be postmodern or represent
postmodernism if they (collectively and individually) were not ever of the modern?
What kind of violence do we perform when we suggest that Toni Morrison forexample is
a postmodern author? Within the myriad of definitions or demarcations which have
marked the postmodern, emerged a particular understanding of what the "postmodern"
has meant in terms of literary and cultural productions. This discussion, in keeping with
the theoretical or philosophical discussion, focused, at least in its earliest incarnations, on
the works of primarily white male authors from the west, and was attentive to narrative
devices and structural elements of fiction and fiction making. Catalogues of
postmodernist features are typically organized in terms of oppositions with features of
modernist poetics. Thus, for instance, David Lodge lists five strategies (contradiction,
discontinuity, randomness, excess, short circuit) by which postmodern writing seeks to
avoid having to chose either the poles of the metaphoric (modernist) or metonymic (anti-
modernist)....Ihab Hassan gives us seven modernist rubrics (urbanism, technologism,
dehumanization, primitivism, eroticism, antinomianism, experimentalism), indicating
how postmodernist aesthetics modifies or extends each of them (McHale, 7).

Brian McHale has argued that these kinds of laundry lists of "features" do little to allow
us to understand the historical shift in poetics from the modern to the postmodern. He
looks instead at a shift in process of which all of these features could be representative.

Looking into the fact that the kinds of processes described by Lodge and Hassan are occurring in various different geographical, political and economic spaces at the same time, he concludes that postmodern narratives illustrate the shift from the epistemological to the ontological: Abandoning the intractable problems of attaining a reliable knowledge of our world, they improvise a possible world; they fictionalize....postmodernist fiction deploys strategies which engage and foreground questions like the ones Dick Higgins calls "post-cognitive": "Which world is this? What is to be done? Which of my selves is to do it?" Other typical postmodernist questions bear either on the ontology of the literary text itself or on the ontology of the world which it projects.... (McHale, 10) For McHale it is this shift from the epistemological concerns of the modernist to the ontological concerns of the postmodernist which characterizes the move from modernist poetics to a poetics of postmodernism. However, his strategy presupposes a logic of literary history which is dependent upon a western conception of knowledge, literary practice and narrative itself:

The logic of literary history brought writers in various cities--cities in Europe and Latin America well in as North America--to a crosswalk; when the stoplights changed, they had one of two options, either to remain on this side and continue to practice a modernist poetics of the epistemological dominant (as many of them have done of course), or to cross to a postmodernist poetics of the ontological dominant. The streets were different, but the crossing was the same. (11)

What's wrong with this picture? McHale's formulation, not unlike other attempts to demarcate a postmodern poetics, not only presupposes that postmodern writing must be a response to the modern, but that the move from epistemological to ontological represents a universal choice for writers across difference and in every socio-political and economic
space. Thus, the master narrative is not challenged, but instead imply altered by a
"universal" push to reconstitute experience in ontological ways. McHale's construction of
the "logic" of literary history, taken from Jakobson, presupposes that fictions, narratives,
operate in the same way, in every instance, signaled by the dominance of one particular
mode of inquiry--the epistemological or the ontological. The key word in McHale's
analysis is "dominant." for he indeed may be describing a process which takes (took)
place within the dominant discourse of western modernism to postmodernism, but what
kinds of practices, literary and narrative for example, were not dominant either in the
modern or the postmodern. The power to determine the center and the logic of literary
history is a power that has historically been located in western discourse. What happens
if we once again reverse the binary to reveal the violence and consider the narrative
practices which were outside or counter to the dominant? Within the context of the
United States, there were certainly cultural productions of all kinds which resisted the
dominant previous to the announcement of a postmodern moment; even the practices
which West mentions in his discussion were present during the modern "epistemological"
moment--sermonic, jazz, etc. McHale's construction of the move from the modern to the
postmodern in poetic terms is "shot through with political presuppositions, pre-judgment
prejudices" (West, 91. 1989) which reinstate the dominant and in no way challenge it or
critique it. One might even question McHale's presupposition that the postmodern poetic
is at present a dominant form.

So what happens if we look at Morrison's *Beloved* within the rubric of postmodern
poetics as defined by McHale (significantly no consideration of her work figures in his
text)? To begin with, the novel is ripped from its own historical roots, both in terms of its subject matter (Reconstruction Ohio) and in terms of its place within a complex history of African American cultural production and literary history. Although it may be arguable that *Beloved* as a text pursues ontological or "post-cognitive" questions--Who is Beloved? What world is she of?--and that it "dismisses rationality, instrumentality and functionality in favor of myth, montage, simultaneity and play[s] in deeply anti-utopian terms" (West, 90)--the characterization of Sweet Home for example--the text engages with the process of memory and re-memory of a lost "subjugated" narrative of experience and its insistence on the reinstatement of that experience. Fictionalizing or Fiction-making operates on an entirely different level within the rubric of Morrison's text: it is not a means to manage the crisis of the failure of epistemological inquiry, but a means to create access to an erased past. Sethe and Paul are not subjects drawing attention to their own fiction-making skills; they are subjects in search of a way to code, or re-member their pasts and the collective past of the "3560 million or more" referred to in Morrison's epigraph.

To read Morrison's text as a indication of the shift from modern (epistemological) to postmodern (ontological) may not be "incorrect," but it reveals with great clarity the position of the reader/critic’s place among the dominant. It also suggests another disturbing trend among the critics describing postmodern poetics. The desire toward inclusion of writers from the margin within pre-existing or defined structures of poetic or narrative strategies consistently empty's those works of their power to challenge those dominant structures. If I read Beloved as a postmodern novel in McHale's terms, I have
not only sweepingly brought the work into the "logic of literary history as defined by the dominant." I have also, by institutionalizing the work in this way, retained my power to name the work of Toni Morrison and rejected any way in which that work may not only critique but name me as representative of the dominant. Thus Morrison is part of a large (read western white and male) literary history and is removed from the margins, from the place of resistance. John Barth, Thomas Pynchon and Morrison are all asking similar questions, and difference as a real historical and political function is flattened out.\(^6\)

Linda Hutcheon's *A Poetics of Postmodernism*, although a more complex and compelling work, represents a similar move. As does McHale, Hutcheon rejects the definitions of postmodern poetics as a laundry list of similar devices and desires, yet she also rejects his kind of easy binarism by suggesting that postmodern works ask both epistemological and ontological questions. She reformulates the definition of postmodern fiction as *historiographic metafiction,* a structure or style which problematizes the possibilities of the writing of history and the discourse of fiction, and how the two inform each other, overlap with each other and critique each other. Hutcheon's focus on the interrogation of the discourse of history in many postmodern fictions will prove useful in my analysis of the texts. Yet she, like McHale, performs a structural violence against the specificities of the texts which she uses to support or define her argument. Quick to point out that the emergence of certain questions in postmodern theory has been accompanied by a similar questioning in fictional practice, Hutcheon reads her many fictional texts as if they are all ripped from the specificities of their own historical and political production. Thus Rushdie's *Shame*, in its relentless interrogation of identity, history and myth in India, is
compared to Morrison’s re-construction of the family history and Milkman Dead’s uncovering of myth and legend in *Song of Solomon*. Once again the desire to name a postmodern poetics might not result in a laundry list of features but emerges instead as a smorgasbord of works which are seemingly performing similar functions within the "larger" logic of literary and, in Hutcheon's case, theoretical history.  

Cornell West reminds us that "adequate conceptions of historical (literary or otherwise) periodization must keep track of...complex convergences and divergences of different cultural traditions, yet still not lose sight of the larger social and historical forces in any particular moment" (91. 1989). Both McHale and Hutcheon maintain their "sight" of the larger social and historical forces at work" only in terms of a theoretical and literary gaze. McHale does not try to determine if his shift from the epistemological to the ontological has different valences and effects in different political, social and economic situations. Hutcheon, operating from the position of a first world intellectual, retains the power to name the postmodern practices of many different types of others (blacks, lesbians, gays, Hispanics, non-westerns) within the rubric of predominantly white male western theorizing; and although she recognizes that many of these works perform critiques of "modern" narrative, she does not consider the different causes and effects of such critiques both within the different cultural traditions from which they spring and within the larger historically changing conception of "otherness."

5 Although I recognize the impossibility of ignoring the relationships between the various texts we call ‘post-modern’ perhaps what is worrisome is that we cannot do justice to that without considering both the scene of writing of the text and its specificity and the historical moments the texts refer to in very serious ways. If we fail to do this then we have in effect said all post-modern experience and narrative “look alike” and that statement is in itself deeply historically, ethically and politically problematic.
Thus our desire to name the postmodern in poetic terms, as demonstrated in these two thinkers, despite its insistence on a critique of the center, the modern, the dominant, retains the "will to power" of naming the work of the other as included in a process we see as our own. This means that the very historical periodizations and cultural demarcations we make are, in part, ideological constructs shot through with political presuppositions, prejudgments, and prejudices. Intellectual honesty requires that we make them crystal clear and give reasons why we hold them (West, 91.1990).

So what violence do we perform when we name Toni Morrison's *Beloved* as a postmodern work? If postmodernism in both the theoretical and aesthetic has been an arena which consistently ignores the work of African Americans and African American women in particular, and if the structures of postmodernism are built on either a rejection or outgrowth of processes we have grown to call modern and which have devalued the works of oppressed and exploited peoples, then such a move reveals a series of presuppositions which are both political and ideological. In order to call such a work postmodern we must ignore the specificities of the "complex convergences and divergences of different cultural traditions," and we must reject the possibility that those traditions operate outside of the "logic" of "our literary and cultural history" or even that they collide with or critique that "logic." We also must reject the differences which these texts may bring to light if looked at within the complexity of their relationship to the dominant. If I name Toni Morrison as a postmodern artist and her questions are like mine, then the differences between us become superseded by the sameness of our
activity. Thus, there is a great deal at stake in the process of naming the works and activities of those on the margin as postmodern. If postmodern theory, and in this case poetics, at first excluded the works of the oppressed while celebrating the difference of the works of the dominant, then recent moves toward inclusion only reveal a benevolent violence in our efforts to call these works "our" own and empty them of their power to critique not only the existing structures of power but also our ways of knowing and theorizing those structures. How might such a move be avoided? What would it mean to reject the "naming" of Beloved as either a literary "heir" to Faulkner, or as an example of postmodern phenomena? What would it mean to consider its convergences with the "logic" of American literary history and with postmodern fictional practices instead of focusing on its divergences? What would it mean to look at the novels of African-American women (Morrison, Naylor, Jones) within the context of their own historical production (perhaps a postmodern moment of the 1980's) and reflection? What would it mean not only to "imagine ourselves at the margin," as Spivak says, but to consider the positioning of these texts at the margin and the power of critique such a positioning allows? What would it mean to reject a co-optation of these texts or practices within pre-existing systems or definitions (the postmodern) and instead to look at how they create or propose new definitions? In effect what would it mean to give up "reading" the text of Beloved within our own discursive practices and try to see how it reads us?

Although the texts I will discuss in this section may be OF the postmodern they are not POSTMODERN per se. They are produced within the historical conditions of the present which Jameson and others (including myself) have labeled as postmodern, yet they can
not be constrained by the rhetorical and theoretical structures which we have come to call postmodernism or postmodern theory. Both Hutcheon and McHale fail to account for their own positionality in the reading of the works they call postmodern; both of them fail to make clear the political presuppositions, prejudices and prejudgments (West) which are revealed in their strategies. Yet my earlier formulation (Part I) has suggested that one of the principle tasks for me (and Spivak) in unlearning our privilege is in positioning myself in relation to that which I am analyzing and representing. Such a process also requires "imagining yourself at the margin," all the while being aware of your place in the center. How indeed can one read these texts while highlighting this process?

It seems to me that such a process begins with a shift in focus. Instead of looking at how "I" as western white feminist read this text within my constructions of postmodernism, I focus on how the text deconstructs me, my history, my conceptions of narrative, my ways of knowing, principally by presenting new approaches which I have heretofore ignored. And although I can never escape my positionality, this process of reading becomes an interactive one where yes I read the text but also the text reads me, acknowledging both my position at the center even while I try to imagine the margins. Such a process, although discontinuous and paradoxical and admittedly difficult, may make it possible to read--represent and analyze--these works without appropriating them or emptying them of their contents. This may be one strategy for reconceiving of the process of reading the works from the margins as a process of active listening instead of a re-capitulation of those works into the center.
CHAPTER V

RE-MEMBERING HISTORY

The United States, of course, is not unique in the construction of Africanism. South America, England, France, Germany, Spain—the cultures of these countries have participated in and contributed to some aspect of an “invented Africa.” None has been able to persuade itself for long that criteria and knowledge could emerge outside the categories of domination. Among Europeans and the Europeanized, this shared process of exclusion—of assigning designation and value—has led to the popular academic notion that racism is a “natural,” if irritating, phenomenon. The literature of almost all these countries, however, is now subject to sustained critiques of its racialized discourse. The United States is a curious exception, even though it stands out as being the oldest democracy in which a black population accompanied (if one can use that word) and in many cases preceded the white settlers. Here in that nexus, with its particular formulations, and in the absence of real knowledge or open-minded inquiry about Africans and African-Americans, under the pressures of ideological and imperialistic rationales for subjugation, an American brand of Africanism emerged: strongly urged, thoroughly serviceable, companionably ego-reinforcing and pervasive. For excellent reasons of state—because European sources of cultural hegemony were dispersed but not yet valorized in the new country—the process of organizing American coherence through a distancing Africanism became the operative mode of a new cultural hegemony. (Morrison 1992 7-8)

He leans over and takes her hand. With the other he touches her face.
“You your best thing, Sethe. You are.”
His holding fingers are holding hers.
“Me? Me?” (Beloved 273)
A. Introduction: Surveying the landscape of history.

Toni Morrison, in the above quotation from her recently released collection of lectures, Playing in the Dark: Whiteness and the Literary Imagination, argues, as she does throughout the entire collection, that white America needed to construct an “Africanism” against which they could judge themselves and reinforce a sense of self with a claim for subjectivity. In effect, we needed to “play” in the dark in order to construct ourselves as occupying the “clean well-lighted” spaces. For Morrison this process reveals itself in the history of that which we have come to call “American Literature.” Clear and persuasive in her argument, she contends that the presence of this Africanism in specific characters and settings as well as the profound absences of blacks in much of the literature called American reveals a need to define ourselves against the backdrop of a very powerful and intoxicating other, which allows us to work out our own fears and desires while maintaining our claim on whiteness as the only signifier of subjectivity. The process for Morrison, although linked to the processes in many other European colonizing nations, is specifically linked to the whole construction of an American Literature, an American Self. Thus, any attempts on the part of that other to claim subjectivity, an African American self in individual or collective terms, becomes subsumed within this larger process of denial and exoticism which Morrison terms “playing in the dark.” Therefore bell hooks’ claims for a “radical black subjectivity” or Michelle Wallace’s call for a black female subjectivity creates a profound challenge to a process which has heretofore defined what it means to be American and what it means to be a work of American Literature. Morrison’s investigation in these lectures of how whiteness itself within the
context of America or American literature has used and needed blackness or Africanism suggests that the American fascination with racialized discourse is not a bizarre phenomenon but in fact at the core of our (white people’s) conception of ourselves. No notion could be clearer today, as LA burns and Ted Koppel turns his camera toward understanding “race” in America. Significantly, all of the discourse around the eruption of rage and tension in LA on April 30th and May 1, 1992 has focused on “them”—what can we do for them, to them, around them, with them—to insure that “we” will not have to deal with ourselves. Boston Globe (May 1, 1992) informs us that Congresswoman Maxine Waters, in testifying before a congressional hearing on urban violence yesterday, argued that the problem was not “poverty” or “education” but racism, and the committee says Waters could not even say the word—racism. Thus, the LA riots become just another way that we define ourselves by using “blackness” as a space to work out our own fears, tensions and desires within the postmodern historical present. Very soon, if not already, “South Central” will become synonymous with “Watts” or “Detroit” or Nat Turner’s revolt or countless other “slave” revolts; all incidents where the “other” breaks free of the constructions of Africanism—albeit violently—and asserts a subjectivity. Caught in the trap of our imperialistic and colonizing history, that assertion is often accompanied by the simultaneous destruction of that subjectivity. That brings me to Morrison’s own investigation into that desire for subjectivity, identity, voice in Beloved. Sethe’s act of killing one child and attempting to kill all her children instead of sending them back to slavery radically enacts the process which the media seems to be at a loss to understand in the discussions about the LA riots: “why are they burning their own homes?” “Why would she kill her own children?” Morrison herself, in a recent lecture
at MIT on “Writing the History of Beloved and Jazz,” indicated that one of her desires in writing Beloved was to investigate the process by which a slave woman constructs or maintains self-love or self-regard against or within the institution of slavery; how does she value herself, her identity, as a mother who is inhabiting slavery? Thus, in one way (and there are so many angles to take on this text) Beloved becomes a book, a history, about the need for subjectivity within the confines of institutional slavery and the psychological aftershock of that experience. Sethe pays dearly for her assertion of herself as a mother, as a life giver, against not only the institutional rights of slave owners to her body and the bodies of her children, but the rights of the white culture to write her history and explain her decision. Her story” enacts the enormous sacrifice of that self—that “best thing”—even as the slave tries to assert it. The novel itself, in its enactment of Sethe’s inner process, and in Morrison’s own stated desire to turn the focus back on the slaves and away from the institution of slavery, makes a similar claim on both the “history” of the American self and the construction of an American Literature.

Morrison’s lectures investigate the ways that white American identity has been formed by the “presence” and construction of an Africanism which allows us to work out our own fears, passions and desires, while leaving a construction of self which is uncomplicated and intact. Thus, she wants to read American Literature by reading the ways that it has defined itself with the use of a constructed other. Such a process requires, as she demonstrates so eloquently in her discussion of Hemingway, that the other never speak; the African must never have a voice which asserts itself, lest the whole construction comes crashing down—particularly dangerous because it’s the only game in
town. Although Morrison is investigating this process in terms specific to American Literature, it is clearly enacted in history, in media, in the very fabric of the American “self.” Yet I have asked in Chapter IV what would happen if we (white folks) were to investigate the ways in which the assertion of a radical black subjectivity refigures us, in effect, what if we reject “the only game in town” in an effort to construct a new one. For although we have tried to silence the voices of African Americans both with devaluation and the construction of an Africanism which we define, we have not in essence succeeded. Postmodern theory and feminist theory, as my earlier discussions have indicated, are both guilty of partaking in the devaluation of the voices and subjectivity of the African American and are also clearly invested in the construction of an “other” which is devoid and distanced from any “real” African Americans or any other “others.”

One might see in the postmodern and post-structuralist fascinations with the “other” and Otherness another recapitulated desire to keep ourselves at the center—to keep playing in the dark. I have suggested that one possible way out of this cycle is to relinquish ‘control’ of these texts, these histories, and to consider the ways that the “real” voices of the African American and in this case the African American woman writer “read” us. Such a process does not simply entail looking at the images of whiteness within the works of African American women writers, although that may be a part of it, but instead involves a complex balancing of imagination and memory—imagine ourselves at the margin, remember that we are not—as well as an unlearning of our own privilege and an interrogation of our own discourses. The ensuing discussions will try to enact this process with careful attention to the ways that Morrison, Jones and Naylor all refigure history, knowledge and imagination and most importantly subjectivity.
agency, in ways that radically alter not only our visions of “blackness” or Africanism but of ourselves. Perhaps the attention to such an unlearning or a new kind of listening may lead to a serious disruption of the racialized discourse which plagues the Western notion of self. Then, although “somebody forgot to tell somebody something,” the past finds its way back into our memory, lest like Beloved, we risk erupting into separate parts. Perhaps that is one reason why African-American women writers are now writing African-American historical novels. As we move into another century when memory threatens to become abstract history, they remind us that “if we want to be whole, we must recall the past, those parts that we want to remember, and those parts that we want to forget.” (Christian 1990 340-41 Braxton)

All three of the novels which this section will deal with could be called historical novels in Christian’s definition; all three deal with the period of institutional slavery; all three focus on the importance of memory and the maintenance of memory of that period, and all three investigate the paradox of that re-memory—the flood of parts which one doesn’t want to remember—the pain of that memory and the fear that to inhabit it is to succumb to it. Each of these works chronicles the process of re-memory from various distances: Beloved is set in 1874, 19 years after Sethe has escaped from Kentucky and nine years after the end of the Civil War; Corregidora is set somewhere in the twenties during the massive migration of African Americans from the south to urban centers in the north, two generations from slavery in the U.S.; Mama Day is set in the future, 1999, on the eve of a new century, and yet the main character Miranda Day is 100 years old, and the story of the family and the community of “freed” slaves they descend from is of
central if not paramount importance to the present. Thus, all of these novels enact the
importance of memory, the memory of slavery, not on a larger and institutional scale, but
on the individual and the community level in terms of the necessity to construct a
subjectivity by claiming one’s own history; and all are also radical depictions of the way
that memory, as opposed to history, “remains in the dream, in the folk tale, in the wind
and in the imagination” (Christian 340)—in the psyche. Thus, all three of these novels
confront the imprint which slavery and colonization have left on the collective memory
of African Americans and African American identity. Unlike earlier works by African
American women, which were constricted by the historical moment at the scene of
writing, such as slave narratives which often “omitted” the details of memory or abuse
due to the supposed audience—white abolitionists—or because they were invested in an
gentility which would free black women from the stereotypes of a Sapphire or a beast; or
novels from the Harlem Renaissance which were invested in the construction of a black
female subjectivity which “rose above” the memory of slavery and which asserted itself
on “equal” footing with white women, these novels, all written within a thirteen-year
span from 1975-1988, indicate a profound need to re-instate memory as central to the
construction of a subjectivity, a collective self. Such a claim is doubly important for
African American women whose identity has been subsumed not only by white male
institutional practices, but also by the enactment of patriarchal exclusion on the part of
black men. Thus, the specificity of the subjectivity of African American women remains
at the center of these texts. Sethe and her battle with the process of what Morrison calls
re-memory, made “real” in the construction of the girl Beloved, is a central focus of the
narrative, yet also the emphasis on mothering and the re-construction of a matrilineal
line for Sethe, Beloved and Denver creates a collective female consciousness which exists at the core of this novel. This does not suggest that the parallel story of Paul D. and Halle and other male characters in the text is excluded, but instead that it is refigured through the gaze of the slave woman, whose voice has been subjected to a double erasure. Ursa, in Jones’ Corregidora, emerges as a woman who must come to terms with a matrilineal history which has determined her “history” and her present. Her search is to construct a subjectivity which recognizes the role that Corregidora, a colonizer and whoremonger, plays in her subjectivity and yet also to disentangle self from the trap that inhabiting that relationship would maintain—she must learn a new way to “make generations.”

Mama Day begins with the elucidation of the elusiveness of Sapphira Wade, her great-grandmother: A true conjure woman: satin black, biscuit cream, red as Georgia clay: depending upon which one of us takes a mind to her (3) Thus, the legend of Sapphira Wade in all of its manifestations is the reconstruction of the creation myth with a woman—as slave woman—as the creator—the mother. In all of these cases the focus of the narrative is on the re-construction—re-memory—of a self, a subjectivity, a power, which has been forgotten and erased, not only within the colonizer’s history, but even within the adoption of that history by black men, who have often sought to re-make themselves in the image of the white man in order to gain access to the colonizer’s power. Consistently black feminist critics discuss the impossible position into which they have been forced—asked to deny their gender by black men or asked to deny their race by white feminist women. In the case of all three of these novels, the assertion of
the impossibility of such a separation is foregrounded, and the novels, drawing on the oral tradition and an emphasis on memory as agency, enact the ways that a black female subjectivity has been formed and maintained.

Gloria Naylor’s invocation of the legend of Sapphira Wade could serve as an epigraph to any of these three texts:

She could walk through a lightning storm without being touched; grab a hold of lightning in the palm of her hand; use the heat of lightning to start the kindling going under her medicine pot: depending upon which of us takes a mind to her. She turned the moon into salve, the stars into a swaddling cloth, and healed the wounds of every creature walking up on two or down on four. It ain’t about right or wrong, truth or lies; it’s about a slave woman who brought a whole new meaning to both them words as soon as you cross over here from beyond the bridge (3).

It is significant that crossing over here from beyond the bridge does not invoke a magical or fantastic island, but that Naylor modeled her community of Willow Springs on actual communities of freed or escaped slaves who ran to the thousands of islands off the coast of Georgia and South Carolina and there formed their own communities uniquely African American in their mixture of a multitude of African languages and customs, Cherokee, Seminole, Creole and other European cultures. Some of these islands came to be called the Gullah islands and are the subject of Julie Dash’s stunning and inspiring new film, “Daughters of the Dust.” Thus, despite the comparison of Mama Day with Shakespeare’s “The Tempest,” and clearly Naylor is making some literary illusions, especially in the naming of her main character Miranda, the novel operates, as do Corregidora and Beloved, out of a uniquely matrilineal African American historical and literary space. This fact in itself should make us question the “labeling” of these works
as “postmodern,” a term, as my previous chapters would suggest, which is uniquely western and European and most of the time male. The unique and complex relationships between memory and history, between the past and the present, or the scene of writing in these novels, does partake of some of what Linda Hutcheon has argued characterizes the postmodern poetic: What postmodernism does, as its very name suggests, is confront and contest any modernist discarding or recuperating of the past in the name of the future. It suggests no search for a transcendent timeless meaning, but rather a re-evaluation and a dialogue with the past in the light of the present. We could call this once again “the presence of the past” or perhaps its “present-ification.” (Hassan, quoted in Hutcheon 1988, 19-20) It does not deny the existence of the past; it does question whether we can ever know that past other than through its textualized remains. (Hutcheon 1988, 20)

However, as postmodern novels and postmodern theory according to Hutcheon must displace a modernist “discarding” or recuperating” of the past, these novels operate within a tradition and from a margin which, despite its infusion with the western logic of modernism, has always existed on the margins of that “logic”; thus, as Hutcheon argues that historiographic metafiction (her term for postmodern novels) inscribes and then only subverts its “mimetic engagement with the world” (20), she never considers whose world. Sethe’s narrative of her experience as a slave woman has wholly been erased or never uttered in any “textualized remains”; even the research which Morrison herself did to prepare for the writing of Beloved never gave her access to Margaret Garner’s voice, only to the newspaper clipping written by P.S. Basset in the abolitionist “The Liberator” (March 14, 1856), and a host of editorials, including one in the New York Times on March 11, 1856, which discussed only the legal battle that the “Cincinnati Slave Case”
had sparked. Any notion that Margaret Garner herself may have a voice was precluded by the issue of law which her case threw into bas relief. Morrison’s description of her own process as the scenes of researching and writing the novel illuminates a need disparate from what Hutcheon has characterized as the postmodern. Morrison began her research for Beloved after viewing “The Liberator” article about Margaret Garner with a desire to give the focus back to the slaves and away from the institution of slavery, yet she was aware of the requisite dangers of such an enterprise even for a late twentieth-century African American woman. She wanted to “inhabit slavery without succumbing to it,” and thus her research began with a myriad of what she called “data”—histories, analyses, re-constructed histories, slave-owner diaries and even the few available slave narratives by women. However, all of this reading left her at a loss. She found herself looking in the empty spaces, at the things that all this other material had not touched on; what she called “the absences that history could and should not provide.” In a dramatic reading from a slave owner’s diary, Morrison catalogued one slave woman’s refusal to be “broken” after countless whippings and escape attempts. It was her desire to understand the construct (re-construct) of that woman’s voice which propelled her to write the novel she eventually wrote. Using the example of the bit which Paul D. tells Sethe was in his mouth the last time he saw Halle, her husband, Morrison showed how her attempts to get a mental or physical picture of the bit failed her; instead she wanted to construct what the bit felt like and what it meant. Thus, “data” failed to articulate the subjective experience of Paul D. Morrison never describes the bit in the novel, only what it feels like and tastes like and signifies—an inhibitor of speech, of self, of community, of subjectivity. In fact, the passage where Paul D. tells Sethe about the bit being in his mouth sets off a trail of
significations for Sethe, back to the plantation where she was born, to her mother—the bit becomes a metonymy for the oppressive impositions of slavery itself.

Morrison is interested in re-membering the past BEYOND its textualized remains. If historiographic metafiction “change[s] irrevocably any simple notions of realism or reference by directly confronting the discourse of art with history” (Hutcheon 20), then Beloved insists upon the confrontation of history with its erasures through what Morrison has called “Imagination tempered by data”—thus, the novel expresses not a distrust of history per se, its possibilities or failures, but of A history—the colonizer’s history, the slave owner’s history, and the abstract history that threatens to make memory obsolete. Elsewhere I have argued that the complex mediation of Harriet Jacobs’ narrative in Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl renders it circumscribed by its transmission through white abolitionist editors to a white female audience in 1853. Thus, even Jacobs’ narrative is characterized by its absences—absences which Morrison is trying to re-member.\(^6\) If “modernism’s nightmare of history is precisely what postmodernism has chosen to face straight on” (Hutcheon, 88), one must consistently ask whose nightmare are we in?

\(^6\) Many critics have noted Jacob’s silence and obfuscation in reference to her own sexual abuse at the hands of her master. That silence is often attributed to the ‘sensibility’ of her audience and her desire to present herself as a good Christian woman. Thus even when the slave mother is granted a voice in the time of her won slavery she is silenced by other conditions—her real experience is covered up. Morrison and others are able to re-member those silences in ‘fiction’ in the later 20\(^{th}\) century.
Hutcheon argues that the postmodern “reinstalls the historical contexts as significant and even determining, but in so doing, it problematizes the whole notion of historical knowledge” (89). But unlike the postmodern novels of Doctorow and others, which Hutcheon claims as prime examples of “historiographic metafiction,” *Beloved*, *Corregidora*, and *Mama Day* cannot or do not reject the possibility of historical knowledge that would allow a reinstatement of the erasure of their objectivity, but draw attention to the absences of that history and the role that history (the colonizer’s history) as a system by which we make sense of the past” plays in the continuing oppression of African Americans. These are not works which rejoice in the free play of various versions of the past, but have a stake in the assertion of a history, a memory which gives value and expression to the experiences of their peoples. Therefore, despite all the ways, and many more which will become clear, that these novels seem to utilize the devices of the postmodern or postmodern literature, their relationship to such a construction, whether as a definition of style or as an encoding of the present historical moment, is radically different from works written by and evoking a white, western, male tradition such as Doctorow, Graham Swift or countless others. One of the significant ways that these novels require us to re-think the political and ideological implications of our postmodernisms is in their re-figuring of “history” and “memory” as processes by which the self is erased or encoded.

Michael Roth, in his brief, yet useful, articulation of the major disruptions in the debates about history and historiography over the past forty to fifty years, points out that from the forties through the sixties in the United States, “discussions by philosophers of the value
of history were discussions about the quality of historical knowledge as a science.” (240)

Yet in the 60’s, in keeping with the tumult in both political and academic landscapes, “there developed more interest in understanding what historians did when they wrote about the past and less effort to tell them what they must do to behave like scientists” (240-41). Most important in this shift is the acknowledgement that history could no longer serve as a form of knowledge, but instead we must “focus” on history as a form of writing (241). Roth makes a parallel between this moment in the 60’s and the decline of Hegelian Marxism in France over the period of 1945-60:

For the Hegelians, history was the reservoir of all truths and values; as dramatic pragmatists, they saw in history the court of world judgment. By the end of the decade, Hegelian historicizing declines with the loss of faith in the meaningfulness of history. Contemporary events made a mockery of the idea of history as a reservoir of significance and direction, and the development of sophisticated methodologies of the synchronic in linguistics, anthropology and cybernetics legitimated a retreat from the historical (241).

This “retreat from the historical” in the face of the impossibility of articulating the history of the holocaust and nuclear warfare, is accompanied by the structuralist attack—Roth cites Levi-Strauss’ critique of Sartre in The Savage Mind—on the historical as a viable form of knowledge. The subsequent attack, by now standard and familiar, on the structuralists’ pretensions toward the scientific by “post-structuralists” such as Foucault and Derrida created an opening in western critical and philosophical discourse for history to be “recuperated: not as a form of knowledge, but as a text, a kind of writing” (241). One of the principal figures in the development of a post-structuralist take on history as a form of writing, Hayden White, argues the “historical writing” in its achievement of the “reality effect” made the criteria for distinguishing among texts
subjective and impossible. This shift in post-structuralist thought from history as a form of knowledge to history as an impossible science back to history as a form of writing where “no longer are we to ask about the sense of history, but to puzzle out how it was put together, how it worked” (242), runs parallel to the postmodern distrust of universals and authorities—that is, master narratives. However, the narrative which Roth himself tells of this shift reveals a great deal about his position and the lines of the debates themselves. If, within such a post-structural or postmodern discourse, historical understanding has been seen not as a necessary or neutral context, but as a trope to be used, a literary device to be employed for proper (or subversive) effect,” then we [white western critical theorists] have succeeded not in confronting the modern nightmare of history but in erasing it. Even “New Historicism’s effort to return to history presupposes the linguistic turn just described. . , presupposes a necessary if not arbitrary connectedness that allows the historical to be read in much the same way as literary texts” (242). If, as Roth points out, for all the contributors to this special issue of NLH (Winter 1990), “History and. . . ,” there is a presupposed understanding that “history has been undone,” what then is at stake in such an assertion?

Carolyn Porter’s article for that volume expresses a marked and passionate concern that New Historicism return to the historical via this linguistic shift which wipes out the assertion of “reality” as such. In her reading of the “social text” as a literary text, in a re-encoding of formalist literary terms which subsequently erases (yet again) “those multiple and heterogeneous ‘others’ which oppositional (Marxist, African Americanist, feminist, third world) forms of scholarship and critical practice have made visible” (257),
Porter’s salient critique of New Historicism’s re-inscription of formalist hegemonic tendencies gives way to her assertion which endorses a specific reading of Foucault, Jameson and others, allowing for the construction of a figuring of the discursive field “as a plane” or “depthless,” thus “constructing the discursive field as flat.” Such a move for Porter makes it possible for us to avoid or defend against “a residual belief in transcendence, liberation and so on” (266). Using LaClau and Mouffe’s attempts to articulate practical-discursive structures” that “do not conceal any deeper objectivity that transcends them and at the same time explains them, but rather forms without mystery pragmatic attempts to subsume the ‘real’ into a symbolic objectivity that will always be overthrown in the end” (quoted on 267), she allows for the possibility of “contingency in the field of articulatory practices, a contingency that follows from the belated claims that ‘power’ is never foundational” and “no discursive formulation is a sutured totality” (267).

For Porter this move towards the construction of a depthless discursive field which creates a contingency whereby those sutures in the social text become visible combats the erasure of Foucault’s “hostile encounters with ruptural effects of conflict and struggle, that functionalist and systematizing thought is designed to mask” (267). Thus, this approach “might enable us to re-examine both the voices engaged in ‘othering’ and the voices of those othered in the process” (268). This trail for Porter leads her to Bakhtin and his notion of heteroglossia or double-voicedness:

Now if both “othered” discourses and “othering” ones exhibit what Bakhtin called double-voicedness and both occupy the same heterogeneous discursive space at any given moment, two consequences follow. First, the voices of those “othered” by the dominant discourse acquire a new authority, no matter how marginalized or effaced they may have been. Further, because they are double-voiced, they may be understood not as always already neutralized by the ideologies they must speak through in order to be heard, but rather as inflecting, distorting, even
appropriating such ideologies, genres, values so as to alter their configuration. Secondly, since the dominant voices engaged in “othering” are also double-voiced, heterogeneous voices in struggle with each other become audible even in the texts of canonical authors, texts which can therefore come unsutured, revealing the wounds left from the hostile encounters which “othering” requires (268)

What indeed is the relevance of this complex and seemingly obtuse debate about the role of history or the construction of historiography? What does it have to do with the writings of three African American women writers in the late twentieth century? It seems to me that the turn back to history, post-post-structuralist, in critical theory evidenced in the explosion of New Historicism and the ever-presented debate about the possibility or status of historical knowledge in critical theory is connected to the recent concern and investigation of history and particularly the histories of slave mothers. Such a parallel is problematic for its facile appearance, yet the emergence of a strong and passionate concern for the pursuit of the history of the slave mother specifically and the matrilineal line more generally in African American women’s fiction, criticism and autobiography over the past thirty years indicates a shift in focus that cannot be ignored. Indeed, the exploration of the past of slavery is part of the project that Porter outlines in the re-figuring of the discursive field. The erased past of the slave mother is “sutured” into our present by means of these works and re-sutured into the individual and collective identities of African American women in the 90’s and beyond.

The central importance of pursuing the matrilineal line in the construction of a radical black female subjectivity cannot be over-emphasized. The presence of the “ancestor figure” in Morrison’s work, the re-inscription of extra-literary artistic practice in Alice Walker’s essay “In Search of Our Mother’s Gardens” and the passionate personal testimony of black female critics and activists such as June Jordan, Assata Shakur, Gloria Wade Gayles and others all indicate that in a general sense the re-inscription of the matrilineal line or the mother’s story creates
a sense of empowerment which “applies specifically to African-American female artists and more broadly to African-American women in general” (Kubitschek 1991, 3). The inscriptions of the voices of the mothers (ancestors) allow for inscriptions of the abstract histories of their oppression: They empower me to speak. I am no longer content to feel sheer bafflement and frustration when I think that I have suffered or that I am oppressed. It is precisely the Black women’s history—from servitude and slavery to freedom—that tells me how to live, how to survive, and how to be” (Erlene Stetson, quoted in Kubitschek, 3).

This return to the matrilineal history for black women is not uncomplicated, yet consistently is witnessed as a central element in the construction of a “self” within the present which may act as an agent. Such a pursuit is not a romanticized search for role models, but instead a need to understand “the truths of our mother’s lives even if those truths are sometimes ‘cruel enough to stop the blood’” (Kubitschek, 4). Thus, the investigation of the slavery period which dominates much black women’s history, autobiography and fiction is necessary while simultaneously being dangerous and painful:

For me, and I suspect for many other Black women researchers, the slavery period is personally the most painful and difficult to explore. The omissions, the neglect, and the deliberate distortions found in Black history in general are repeated a thousand fold in slave women’s history. Moreover, this period reminds us of our traumas, insecurities, and wounds that never make sense and are difficult to convey (Stetson, quoted in Kubitschek 4).

Kubitschek postulates that the coming to terms with this history is a “fundamental necessity for the construction of a tenable black female identity” (5). Tracing a line back through African American women’s fiction in the twentieth century, she discovers that consistently the failure to come to terms with that history and community has meant the psychic and sometimes actual destruction of many central characters. This is visible in books as diverse both historically and socially as Nella Larson’s Quicksand and Passing
and the much more recent *Tar Baby* by Morrison. However, in an analogous fashion characters better grounded in historical experience—Zora Neale Hurston’s Janie, Paule Marshall’s Avatara Johnson, Gayle Jones’ Ursa—share the pains and joys of developing an increasingly sharp definition of self, the individual’s place in the community and the community’s place in history (5-6). Thus, the role and importance of historical knowledge has a specific and central place in any quest for “identity,” and the status of that knowledge is constantly under revision. If the “linguistic turn” in the western philosophic narrative of “history” represented a distrust of the scientific paradigm—the possibility of knowing—then as representatives of the occluded and erased contents of that scientific paradigm, the histories of the African American woman/slave mothers is not a result of that distrust, a re-inscription, but precedes it and operates from a place of always already distrustful of a model which erases the self. Thus, the re-memory of the stories of the slave mothers automatically challenges not only the hegemony of the scientific model, but also the narrative of historiography provided by Roth and the post-structuralists. The proclamation that history is no longer a way of knowing but a way of writing indicates the empowering position of a speaker who can declare that “history” is undone when “history has been your story.” For black women in general and novelists in particular, the re-memory of the erased and subjugated narratives of their experiences is one source of empowerment. To reduce that to an invocation of a linguistic or literary technique once again grabs power away from the disenfranchised even as they hold it in their hands.
This is not to suggest that for Morrison, Naylor or Jones the invocation, exploration or re-memory of that historical experience partakes of a naive pursuit of truth or transcendence. On the contrary, their explorations of the importance and status of historical knowledge and memory attests to the complexities, contradictions and paradoxes implicit in any pursuit of the “past,” or any attempt to re-encode lost or forgotten knowledge. Their position as always already outside the discourse of “history” presupposes the inability of a narrative of history to represent any totality of experience. The re-memory of the past, and specifically the past of the slave mother, is not within the realm of either a scientific paradigm or the illusiveness of a linguistic assertion, but operates between, around and among such discursive practices. Thus, the works I am discussing here begin with an assertion of the factual—Margaret Garner did try to kill her children, the Gullah islands are real places, and Ursa in Corregidora does evoke the experiences of several blues queens of the 1920’s—yet consistently underscore the impossibility of such knowledge to convey experience without the benefits of “imagination tempered by data.”

Barbara Christian, in her discussion of African American women’s historical novels, argues that the emergence of the historical novel in black women’s fiction, particularly novels dealing with slavery, in the 70’s, 80’s and 90’s is indicative of this historical moment in which they appear. Writers during the Harlem Renaissance did not have access to any concept of history which would recognize the erasures of their experience. This denial of access is not at the level of understanding, but at the site of production. Citing the history of the transmission of texts like Our Nig and Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl, Christian points out that the possibility that an African American woman
would have possession of the skill and language to convey experience as Jacobs and Wilson do was considered impossibility. Thus, both works were buried under questionable authorship” and lost for one hundred years or more. Also, the nineteenth century had a rampant distrust or derision for any attempt by black women to articulate experience in a language that was theirs:

Yet African-American language could not be seriously fashioned by nineteenth-century writers to dramatize their characters’ essence; for that language was considered at best to be comic, at worst, a symbol of ignorance. Nineteenth-century writers like Brown and Harper imbued their heroines and heroes with language that indicated their superiority, a language that in no way was distinguished from the language of well-bred white Americans. When these writers do use “dialect,” minor characters employ it for comic effect. If one compares Celie, Dessa Rose, or Sethe’s language to the language of Clotel or Iola, one immediately feels what is missing. For it is difficult to communicate the authenticity of a character without investing her language with value. If there is any one false sounding note in nineteenth-century novels about slavery and reconstruction it is the language of the characters, the way the imagination of the authors is constrained by the language their characters use (Christian 332).

Christian is careful to point out that memory has always been a central concern of African American women novelists, and that novels written during the periods which Beloved, Corregidora, Dessa Rose and Mama Day evoke did display a profound interest in the inscription and re-inscription of black female experience. However, these works and later novels into the twentieth century were constricted by the social and political landscapes in which they emerged. Nineteenth-century novels, such as Clotel or Iola LeRoy, do indicate an awareness of the power of memory; however, as the focus of a work such as Clotel was on “the evils of the institution of slavery,” the specific feelings or complexities—the “personal and emotional aspects of Clotel’s suicide”—are ignored. “Nineteenth-century novelists could not be much concerned with the individual slave as
they were with the institution itself. They therefore had to sacrifice the subjectivity and
the memory of their characters to an emphasis on the slaveholders and their system”
(333). In this way the very construction of a process of re-memory challenges the
institutional notion of “history” while simultaneously recognizing the importance of a re-
vised history:

Re-memory is a critical determinant in how we value the past, what we remember, what we select to emphasize, what we forget, as Morrison has so beautifully demonstrated in Beloved. But that concept could not be at the center of a narrative’s revisioning of history until the obvious fact that African- Americans did have a history and culture was firmly established in American society, for writers would be constrained not only by their readers’ points of view but also by the dearth of available information about the past that might give their work authenticity (Christian 333).

Re-memory begins with a disruption or eruption of the seamless contents of “history”—the emergence of an article on Margaret Garner—but moves beyond such “data” to expose the connections between the individual and collective, uncharted memory—the elucidation of that process is central to the construction of a subjectivity for African American women (and other colonized folks), but that process is not dependent upon, in fact belies, the possibility of one history, one narrative, one story—instead a collection and collective of memories which articulate what Morrison has called “a quality of hunger and disturbance that never ends. Classical music satisfies and closes. Black music does not do that. Jazz always keeps you on edge. There is no final chord” (quoted in Kubitschek, 6).

The structuralist banishment of history and its recapitulation in some postmodern theories and the new historicism as a way of writing or a methodology reveals a parallel between the complex trajectory that Barbara Christian recognizes in African American women’s
novels and their treatment of history, and these moves in contemporary Western theory. The earlier novels from the late nineteenth and early twentieth century were unable to approach history as a methodology, but instead were politically and culturally determined to establish the evils of the institution of slavery itself, and the focus turns away from the relationship of the slave or subject to history or historical events. Thus, the establishment in the 1960s, 70s and 80s of a “history” or a legitimacy to the history of African American peoples, created a space for the complex and imaginative treatment of memory and history that we witness in novels such as Beloved, Mama Day and Corregidora. This, coupled with the narrative provided by Roth, which reveals the re-inscription of history as narrative and methodology in postmodern discourse, albeit an untrustworthy one, would suggest that the historical moment of production of these books (1975-1988) is significant in any consideration of ways that they deal with history and memory. It is both a moment in the history of critical theory and a significant moment in the history of African American women’s literature when the erasure of the past can be re-codified and re-membered in ways that encompass the scope of its power and imagination.
B. Re-memberings

There has been much comment on Morrison’s use of the term rememory in recent scholarship about *Beloved*, yet a careful examination of the OED definitions of memory and rememory provide some interesting insights into the use of this distinctive form.

Morrison uses rememory to invoke the ways that Sethe and other characters interact with their past—SweetHome and slavery. Yet the Oxford English Dictionary (OED) tells us that this form is rare and obscure and evokes the term remembrance: “a memory or recollection in relation to a particular object or fact.” And although remembrance has nine definitions in the OED, only a few of the others stand out:

2. *That operation of the mind which is involved in recalling a thing or fact, a recollection b. faculty or power of remembering or recalling to mind.*
4 *The memory (or thought) which one has of a thing or person.*
8. *A note or entry serving as a record or reminder.*
9. *an article serving to remind one person of another.*

What each of these definitions of remembrance evokes is a very specific personal activity, one that relates to an individual and the process by which that individual relates to experiences and people from his or her past. Thus remembrance and by extension rememory become terms which are located within the realm of the subjectivity of the individual and the power of that individual to “put to mind” another. Therefore Morrison’s use of this term has many possible effects. We are firmly located within the individual process of remembrance and we are conscious of the process of remembering and its gaps, erasures and consequences for the individual. It is also significant that if one pursues the verb form of the word—remember- which the OED tells us has no entomological root with memory itself, we find “Re-member”: “to put together again. To supply with new member.” Thus Morrison’s continued use of the verb form remember
and the obscure and rare form rememory evokes process not product and narrative in progress—a story emerging—not a complete narrative. It is also a process which involves for Morrison and perhaps by extension African American women novelists dealing with history, a firm focuses on the subjectivity of that process and the re-inscription of the African American slave woman as a subject in memory, not simply an object in our historical narrative. As I discussed earlier, unlike Hutcheon or McHale’s construction of a postmodern process, which sets up a narrative only to erupt the constraints of that narrative of history, these works operate out of an always already profound distrust of a history which denies them as subjects. Therefore Morrison’s construction of memory and rememory becomes central and significant in any understanding of the ways that these works reconstruct or refigure the ways that history and memory operate or need to operate in order to construct a subjectivity which is uniquely African American and female.

The significant differences between the concept of history and the concept of memory emerge as the two terms are interrogated and juxtaposed. History emerges as the dominant collective narrative of significant events and although recent postmodern and new historical approaches to history and historiography grant the importance of the position of the historian, and feminist approaches to history have popularized the process of focusing on the lives of the “everyday” people in a given historical moment, such interrogations are still located within the realm of the dominant versions of history. Morrison’s switch to memory enables a more extensive and salient critique of the impossibility of history as a narrative form which can convey collective meaning.
Memory, with its focus on the individual and the various ness and multiplicity of interpretations of a given experience, allows for a conscious engagement with the hegemony of the colonizer’s history, by infusing it with the re-membered, re-imagined subjectivity of those under erasure. This does not place Beloved, and the other “historical novels” mentioned by Christian for example, in opposition to history, but instead as processes which are firmly embedded within both the historical moment in which they are produced and the historical moment which they harken to re-present; consistently challenging any hope of singularity, while also inscribing the experiences and effects of those who inhabited the institution of Slavery, and connecting them to the present of African American women.

Each of these novels charts a complex relationship between the subject, memory and the colonizers’ history which indeed reveals “a quality of hunger and disturbance which never ends.” This juxtaposition and interrogation is perhaps most apparent in the opening pages of Gloria Naylor’s Mama Day. The novel’s first three pages display the “documents of history which are familiar within the Eurocentric tradition—a map, a family tree and a bill of sale. Yet each of these “documents” reveals upon clear examination the very apparent gaps and erasures implicit in such documents and thus in the Eurocentric tradition of historicizing itself. The map, which locates Willow Springs as an island smack dab between the borders of South Carolina and Georgia and which gives us the rudimentary geography of the island itself, including Mama Day’s trailer, Abbey’s house, Ruby’s house and Chevy’s Pass—where Bascombe Wade is buried—and other important locations for the text, is illustrated with broad strokes and very limited
cartographic detail. It shows us the general location of these places, but does not display
detailed routes or topographic information, and in its evocation of scale shows Willow
Springs as large and central and the mainland as remote and peripheral. Therefore, the
use of a map which evokes the rational and western strategy of containment is undercut
by the way that the map itself is constructed. Our mapping skills cannot necessarily
contain the landscape of Willow Springs except in broad and general terms which are
unfinished and insufficient. Yet Naylor places Willow Springs at the center of the
“world” by insisting upon its prominence on the map. The family tree performs a similar
function. The tree implies a system of ordering and explaining relationships which is
patriarchal and specifically western European, yet it undercuts our expectations for such a
document in several ways. The top of the tree is occupied only by Sapphira Wade, not
the traditional patriarch. The tree then traces the lineage of the family through the line
only of the seventh son of Sapphira, Jonah, whose birth evokes the renaming of the
family as the Days—“God rested on the seventh Day and so would she”—and his seventh
son John Paul, who has three daughters, Miranda, Abigail and Peace. Abigail gives birth
to three daughters herself, Peace, Grace and Hope. Grace has one daughter Ophelia, and
Hope has one daughter Willa Prescott Nedeed, whose fate is traced in an earlier Naylor
novel Linden Hills. Upon clear examination the family tree reveals many gaps. As
mentioned earlier there is no named father for Sapphira Wade’s children, and this
coupled with the biblical reference to the naming of the family implies that we are tracing
here not a historical lineage, but a creation story. Also, although the fourteen sons and
grandsons of Sapphira are listed, only the “issue” of Jonah and John Paul are accounted
for and in both cases the names of their wives or the mothers of their children are under
erasure. The same is true for Abigail, Grace and Hope—their husbands or the fathers of
their children are not named. At no place in the tree do the names of both parents emerge.
This fact figures significantly in the story of George and Cocoa, and the re-memory and
re-enactment that they are part of in the summer of 1985 depends strongly upon their
ability to come together to save each other. The tree also displays birth dates for only four
people, Sapphira, Miranda, Abigail and Ophelia (Cocoa). This indicates the tracing of
the lineage through the matrilineal line and the need to establish the direct connection
between Cocoa and Sapphira by way of her grandmother, Abigail, and her great aunt,
Miranda. Thus, the family tree, a patriarchal tool traditionally used to establish male
bloodlines and origins, is rendered faulty and mysterious by the gaps and absences which
it reveals. Any knowledge we might hope to glean from the document or any
expectations we may have for it within the Eurocentric tradition are undercut and
rendered useless. The inclusion of the Bill of sale creates similar tensions for the reader.
This is no ordinary bill of sale. It tells us that Sapphira is sold to Bascombe Wade on the
third of August 1819. Yet it also tells us that she answers to the name of “Sapphira,”
implying that she has retained the power to name herself, a power often stripped from
slaves upon their arrival at the auction block. It also tells us that the sale of this slave is
made under no warranty, as she is “half prime, inflicted with sullenness and entertains a
bilious nature, having resisted under reasonable chastisement the performance of field or
domestic labour.” Thus Sapphira has resisted slavery successfully, even after punishment
and probably severe whippings, which the slave owner’s code for “reasonable
chastisement” indicates. The bill of sale also informs us of Sapphira’s talents as a
midwife: “Has served on occasion in the capacity of midwife and nurse not without
extreme mischief and suspicions of delving in witchcraft”. Thus, Sapphira’s abilities as a “conjure woman” are confirmed even by the colonizer who has a stake in the erasure of such information. The conditions of the sale are final and carry with them no warranty. This bill of sale figures significantly in the end of the story as well, as Mama Day finds it in her father’s ledger, too faded and worn to be read completely. Thus the reader is sent back in a circular motion to the beginning of the text to confirm her own knowledge of the document. Many more narrative devices will underscore this insistence on the cyclical process of reading, understanding and conveying meaning in history and memory.

The bill of sale sets up certain expectations for the reader and then undercuts them as do the map and the family tree; thus all three of these documents presented at the opening of the book, then the reader has no other information, undercut her own validity and require varied skills with which to decipher their importance, skills which significantly cannot be gained without reading and experiencing the narrative process itself. The “textualized remains” of history cannot be deciphered outside of the narrative process, and that process depends entirely on our listening skills and our subjectivity. Thus the understanding of “history” is dependent upon the process of memory and imagination, or as Morrison has put it “imagination tempered by data.” The narrative of the novel itself enacts this process on several levels, both in its use of narrative point of view and in the mediation of the reader’s experiences through the character of the outsider to Willow Springs; George. The opening chapter establishes firmly the reader’s relationship to Willow Springs as that of an outsider, and insists upon the recognition of one’s own
subjective relationship to the space—Willow Springs; the legend, and the story of George and Cocoa which occupies a central place in the narrative. It is also this chapter which frames the narrative itself, the speaker and the reader in a temporality outside of our own present: “We’re sitting here in Willow Springs and your god knows where. It’s August 1999—ain’t but a slim chance it’s the same season where you are.” (10)

Thus, even as the reader’s subjectivity is made central to our relationship to the material and the traditional textualized remains of history are rendered useless, we as readers are placed in a temporal and spatial relationship to the material which is beyond our own historical moment, outside of our own spatial understanding. This first chapter is significant for its emphasis on the conflation between the reader and this collective narrator, and yet its simultaneous insistence on the differences between our location, our ways of knowing and our methods of historicizing. We are in essence invited into the place of the eavesdropper and guided there by the collective narrator, who is consciously aware of our inabilities. Our position as eavesdropper evokes both the orality of the text and also renders us powerless to interfere or appropriate; we are only listeners, but listeners who must strip ourselves of the trappings of our own ways of knowing in order to hear.

The first section of Mama Day, presented in essence as a kind of preface or introduction, establishes not only the collectivity of the narrating function in the novel, and our position as listeners, but also establishes a historiography of Willow Springs which is rooted in a unique language and is elliptical. There is an acceptance of the
mystery of the unknown and the unknowable which would be impossible in a western historiography. However, the introduction also insists upon a history of resistance to colonization in Willow Springs, both in political and economic terms. As much as the narrative insists upon the inability to know the truth of history:

And somehow it all happened in 1823: she smothered Bascombe Wade in his bed and lived to tell the story for a thousand days. 1823: married Bascombe Wade, bore him seven sons in just a thousand days, to put a dagger through his kidney and escape the hangman’s noose. Laughing in a burst of flames. 1823: persuaded Bascombe Wade in a thousand days to deed all his slaves every inch of land on Willow Springs, poisoned him for his trouble and bore seven sons—by person or persons unknown. Mixing it all together and keeping everything that done shifted down through the holes of time; you end up with the death of Bascombe Wade...the deeds to our land...and seven sons. (2)

The narrative also insists upon an understanding of the importance of “keeping everything that done shifted down through the holes of time.” The process of shifting is not portrayed as static but instead the introduction testifies to the ever-increasing flexibility of the historiography and language of Willow Springs. 1823 represents a “textualized” remnant, written literally in the landscape and lineage of the island, yet also echoing the failure of language, and by extension historiography, to capture the “truth” of its meaning:...and we guess if we put our heads together we’d come up with something—which isn’t possible since Sapphira Wade don’t live in the part of memory we can use to form words. (3) But 1823 takes on new meaning throughout the course of the island’s evolution to the present moment. Despite the fact that “the name Sapphira Wade is never breathed out of a single mouth in Willow Springs,” the collective unconscious or unspoken memory of her power and her resistance allows the islanders to resist the acts of exploitation and colonization which plague them, whether that be the economic exploitation of the mainlanders buying their shrimp or a host of other “events” which they

*Not to mention these new real estate developers who think we gonna sell our shore land just because we ain’t fool enough to live there.* (4-5)  

As Willow Springs is constructed outside of the boundaries of historiography as we know it; it is also outside the containment or cartography of the world as we know it, existing “right smack in the middle where each foot of our bridge sits is the dividing line *between them two states.*” (5)  

And the history of Willow Springs itself exists outside the institutional history of slavery in the U.S., as Bascombe Wade is “Norway born” and Sapphira Wade is from Africa. Thus the lineage and deeds to Willow Springs completely bypass the history of slavery in the U.S.—it emerges as a truly unique African-European independent community (at least at the outset). The significance of the establishment of Willow Springs outside the boundaries of the United States historically, linguistically and geographically cannot be overestimated. The narrative resists colonization in its very construction, and insists upon the construction of a new space from which to view it. The profound distrust which the collective narrator shows for anything from the mainland radically rejects any process of assimilation as well as exploitation, and although Willow Springs loses many of its children to the dreams of capitalism and assimilation (witness Linden Hills), the choric narrator representing the past, present and future of Willow Springs delineates and connects the varied forms of colonization which have endangered the island and its people: economic exploitation—the real estate developers and shrimp buyers—state colonization—taxes and tariffs, war and Depression; and eventually that narrator levels its critique on the impositions of particular ways of knowing and even the subtle yet very powerful forms of colonization and oppression exemplified in the
anthropological/sociological methodology so wonderfully parodied in the characterization of Reema’s boy.

The boy goes off to the mainland to school and returns to “put Willow Springs on the map,” not recognizing as the narrator tells us that Willow Springs might be better served by being kept off of every map except its own. Reema’s boy, tainted by “education,” has forgotten a great deal, and he comes to the island spouting language like “ethnography,” “cultural preservation” and “Unique speech patterns,” yet his “field work” leads him to a conclusion which further emphasizes the inability of the mainland view to account for language and experience on Willow Springs:...he done still made it to the conclusion that 18&23 wasn’t 18&23 at all—was really 81 and 32 which just so happened to be the lines of longitude and latitude marking off where Willow Springs sits on the map. And we were just so damned dumb we turned the whole thing around. (8) The narrator(s) then instruct us as to how we might really gain the insight into Willow Springs, its people and its history. Taking us on a path through the stories and memories of the people of Willow Springs—thus as in Morrison the resistance to the colonizer’s history exhibits itself in the insistence on memory and individual experience of certain historical moments—the 80’s and the silent depression for example—as they are then woven together in the listener’s experience of them. Such a journey leads one eventually to Miss Abigail Day’s—where we meet up with her and she relates the history of the island as it is written in her memory and the experience of the Days:

... as he heard about Peace dying young, then Hope and Peace again. But there was the child of Grace—the grandchild, a girl who went main side, like him, and did real well. Was living in Charleston now with her husband and two boys. (9)
Thus the incantation to listen to the real history of Willow Springs depends upon the listener letting go of all preconceived notions of history—maps, family trees, historical “documents”—and re-orienting herself to history as orality, experience and memory. Eventually the listener must follow Cocoa when she comes back every summer as she heads for the graveyard and eventually the “other place” out over the Sound where she sits down and “talks with George for over two hours” with “neither one of them saying a word.” It is in this act of sanctioned eavesdropping that “Reema’s boy” and by extension the reader is able to listen and imagine the experiences and memories which make up the truth of “18 & 23.” Thus our access to history or memory does not depend upon the textualized remains of history—at least not exclusively—but on our ability to listen “without either one saying a word”—to imagine the absences in those texts and by so doing access the voices of history and memory which elude us in the empirically centered history which comes from “mainside.”
C. Re-tellings

The opening framing section of Mama Day walks us gently to a place outside the confines of institutional history and into a space which some may call imagined memory or even magical realism. Yet one of the central elements of the construction of memory and history within the text of Mama Day is the insistence on history not as progress or as a linear progression toward transcendence, but instead as a series of cycles represented in the memories and stories of individuals who are collectively affected by all which precedes them, and whose experiences are overlapping. This is one of the central distinctions within these three novels in their treatment of history. As each harkens back to slavery and the elusive experiences of the slave as subjects and individuals—the erased texts—each asserts that the collective unconscious of the African American today (or at any subsequent point in history) is profoundly affected and constructed in the memory of those experiences. Unlike early African American novels, which sought to erase the black mark of slavery, these novels assert the importance of that history and the paradox implicit in the need to remember those experiences and the need to forget them—not to inhabit them. Thus, Morrison, Jones and Naylor all explore in detail the relationship between their varied protagonists and the memories which form them, both individual and collective. Sethe must come to terms with her experiences at Sweet Home and in the shed, Ursa must find a way to release herself from the memory of Corregidora and yet still “make generations,” and Cocoa must relive the tragedy of the cyclical stories of Willow Springs, yet change that story, add to it, revise it, to survive. In all three cases the central character experiences history/memory as an integral part of their own subjectivity. Unlike the European/American definition of postmodern narrative, personified in authors
such as Barth and Barthelme where the individual is cut off from history and abandoned by it, these characters are defined by their relationship to that unspoken, erased, collective memory. Even Hutcheon’s description of historiographic metafiction, which asserts the blurred lines between history and fiction-making and draws attention to its own construction, operates under the assumption that there is a consistent relation between the individual and history as a narrative. In these novels the individual relationship to memory/history is not consistent, but instead determined by an elaborate relationship between the collective experience of slavery, the particular community and conditions—Willow Springs 1999, Cincinnati 1873, Kentucky 1947--and the specific ways in which the family has been marred by the effects of slavery and colonization.

Thus, the prevailing paradox in each of these works surrounds the need for the African American woman to create access to the memory of slavery, the erased and hidden history—in order to establish a subjectivity within that narrative and, yet the danger of occupying that memory and thus maintaining an image of self as the colonized, the slave, the victim. Therefore, these novels not only explore the need for a re-creation of experience in order to claim subjectivity, but also a need to create other vantage points from which to view that memory so that it empowers, not enslaves. Memory is not accepted as the easy way to transcendence or celebration, but a difficult and conscious process. Unlike the “victor” who writes history according to the elaborateness of his bounty, for these novelists memory is rendered paradoxical—striking the desperate balance between re-membering to make the subject whole and forgetting to allow the self room for re-creation. This process is most vividly enacted in Beloved, as the novel
struggles with the elusiveness of memory and yet enacts the process of re-memory in several stages—in effect charting the historiography of Sweet Home, Sethe, Paul D., Denver and the community, a historiography which radically challenges any of our notions of history, memory and experience. Paula Giddings, in her history of African American Women, *When and Where I Enter*, tells us that as slavery “became more viable in the South with the invention of the cotton gin and the demands for cotton to feed England’s nascent “industrial revolution,” coupled with an increased number of freedmen and women and the rise of the new abolitionists, it “demanded a new southern strategy.” (41) This strategy is dramatically elucidated in the creation of Sweet Home, where slavery has become ‘domesticated’:

> It became a “domestic institution which came to mean slavery idealized, slavery translated into a fundamental and idealized institution, the family.” Especially among the wealthier planters, this meant that slave masters adopted a new ethic and a new image. No longer the cruel and sadistic abusers who kept slaves in submission by beating them half to death, they became “benign,” if stern, patriarchs who lorded over their black “brood.” (41)

This shift, following a number of conditions and events after 1830, is well illustrated in Morrison’s portrayal of Mr. and Mrs. Garner. Mr. Garner is quick to point out that his slaves are men, not boys, yet he continues to control their every move through a kind of benign influence coupled with a continued legal enslavement, which only serves in giving them the illusion of some “freedom.” His insistence that they are his “equals” while he continues to hold them in slavery evokes a kind of “for your own good” attitude that dramatically illustrates this new found ethic of domesticated slavery. The Sweet Home men are treated
as though they are “family” and “the stick was replaced by the carrot. Masters
provided protection, physical necessities, and minimum brutality in return for
slave obedience and loyalty.”(Gidding 41) Morrison’s expressed desire to
illustrate slavery from the position of the slaves themselves allows us to see the
effects of this “domestication” from an entirely different angle than Gidding’s
investigation of the “textual remains.” Sethe’s complex feelings about her Sweet
Home memories dramatically illustrate this. Sethe, not unlike other victims of
what we might now call Post Traumatic Stress Syndrome, has been able to erase
the memories of Sweet Home which are most painful: “she worked hard to
remember as close to nothing as was safe” (6), yet certain stimuli would evoke the
powerful images of Sweet Home which contradict her experience there:
... and suddenly there was Sweet Home rolling, rolling, rolling out before her
eyes, and although there was not a leaf on that farm that did not want to make her
scream, it rolled itself out before her in shameless beauty. It never looked as bad
as it was and it made her wonder if hell was a pretty place too...Try as she might
the sycamores beat out the children every time and she could not forgive her
memory for that. (6)

Morrison’s ability to enact the process of memory and re-memory in Sethe, the memory
of a place with the promise of safety, the beauty of “Home,” establishes Sethe and by
extension the African American woman as a subject whose complex relationship to her
own past operates within the contextualized historical moment of this domesticated
slavery. Giddings’s description of this mythological Big House, where the slaves represented extended “family,” in effect describes Morrison’s Sweet Home:

Thus prevailed the resplendent myth of the Big House with the wily mammy and the house slaves—some of whom may have been the Master’s own progeny. Thus the tranquil picture of the field couples in their cabin surrounded by grinning pickaninnies; of aunties and uncles with eyes lidded by years of obedience. And what better authority figure than the paternalistic slave master, aristocratic in bearing, bragging that his slaves were better treated than the working classes of Europe? And of course there was the mistress, patronizingly tolerant and as loyal to Mammy as Mammy was to her. (42)

However, what Giddings’s description lacks and Morrison’s “imagination tempered by data” allows for is an elucidation of this mythology and a radical challenge to it from inside the subjective and collective experience of the slaves, the African Americans themselves. Thus each of these novels with their engagement with history re-written as memory, and historiography re-inscribed from the vantage point of those who inhabited slavery and were abused by it, enact the process of de-colonizing the mind/memory of the protagonists, while also radically challenging the post-structural distrust of history. There is a re-membered history, both singular and collective, imbued with an authority here that cannot be ignored or dismissed in a flurry of relativist or “multiple” perspectives. We (white western peoples or in this case women) are forced to look at the effects of colonization from inside the emotions and psyches of those who have been abused by it, and to chart the memory of that violence and abuse. Thus we are unable to escape our own complicity in a blaze of abstractions about the “other” or by undermining the authority of any historiography with a distrust of “our” ability to represent the “truth” of history in any guise. Morrison, Naylor and Jones make no truth claims while
simultaneously insisting on the “truth” of their collective experiences, thus making the reader operate from a vantage point far outside the centered and complicitous gaze of institutionalized historiography. In effect it does not matter whether Beloved exists—a preoccupation of much of the early scholarship written predominantly by white women on Beloved ⁹—because she does exist in the collective and singular unconscious of African American women—as not a textualized remain, but as a memory, an ancestor and a constant remnant of the self as a colonized other.

“...Not a house in the country ain’t packed to its rafters with some dead Negro’s grief. We lucky this ghost is a baby. My husband’s spirit was to come back in here? or yours? Don’t talk to me. You lucky. You got three left. Three pulling at your skirts and just one raising hell from the other side. Be thankful why don’t you? I had eight. Every one of them gone away from me. Four taken, four chased and all, I expect worrying somebody’s house into evil. (5)

Baby Suggs’ admonition to Sethe upon her suggestion that they might move from 124 indicates recognition on Baby’s part of the collectivity of their experience. The presence of the ghost is not for her an indication of singularity but instead a permanent and pervasive condition in the entire country. The legacy of slavery and racism exemplified here as “some dead Negro’s grief” is at the center of our identity as “Americans.” Sethe, Paul D. and Denver’s relationship to that grief is what makes up the text of Beloved the novel. Beloved becomes for them a representation of both the collective grief which precedes them, and their own grief and the specificities of its manifestations. Baby Suggs’ invocation of this so early in the novel sets up this process for the reader. Thus Beloved emerges as another of Morrison’s “ancestor figures”:

---

⁹I am referring to the very nascent scholarship on Beloved after its release and before Morrison was awarded the Nobel Prize.
There is always an elder there. And these ancestors are not just parents, they are a sort of timeless people whose relationships to the characters are benevolent, instructive and protective, and they provide a certain kind of wisdom... It was the absence of the ancestor that was frightening, that was threatening, and it caused huge destruction and disarray in the work itself. (Morrison in Evans 343)

However, Morrison’s earlier commentary, quoted here and written in the early 1980’s before Tar Baby and the completion of Beloved, indicates that the ancestor is a benevolent figure, and the presence or absence of such a figure determines the central character’s ability to get along. In Beloved we have an ancestor figure who becomes the representation of “some dead Negro’s grief”—the ancestor emerging who is hurt, abused, lost and unable to understand, and yet that ancestor is also timeless and the characters’ relationship to Beloved as an ancestral figure is also indicative of their relationship to their own grief, their own history, their own abuse. Thus, as Pilate in Song of Solomon represents the connection to an ancestral past where both genders are active in the nurturing, Beloved—the girl-- represents the lost, exploded past of the grief of slavery and particularly the severing of the matrilineal line which slavery represents. Morrison’s assertion in this earlier article that “when you kill the ancestor you kill yourself” predicts in effect the horror of Beloved’s return to Sethe, Paul D., Denver and the entire community. Her assertion that “I want to point out the dangers, to show that nice things don’t always happen to the totally self reliant, if there is no conscious historical connection” (Morrison 1984 344) in effect foreshadows the process of Sethe as she begins the novel in denial of memory “work[ing] hard to remember as close to nothing as was safe”; and that position in denial of conscious historical connection is dangerous and

---

10 Pilate, one of the seminal characters in Song of Solomon is mysteriously born without a navel. Thus she is “not of woman born”. She also has characteristics that define her gender identity as decidedly not feminine in the western patriarchal sense.
in some cases deadly. Pilate as ancestral figure is guided later in the novel by two other “ghostly” presences—the ghost of the man that she thinks she has killed and the presence of her father, an ex-slave who tries to make it during reconstruction as a farmer and is shot for his efforts and his resistance. Thus, one figure represents her need to come to terms with her own failures and another need to come to terms with her own past which is rooted in resistance. In Beloved Morrison takes her investigation of the ancestor and its collective affects a step farther. For the contemporary reader, specifically the African American reader, all the characters in Beloved represent ancestors. They are the slaves whose voices and subjectivities have been erased from history, and yet they too must come to terms with an even deeper ancestor figure that represents another erasure: Sixty Million or more. Morrison interrupts this process of erasure by creating or incarnating the dead of the middle passage, of the auction block, of slavery itself, in the seemingly singular figure of Beloved, the murdered daughter. And Beloved is connected to the individuals at 124 not only in terms of her historical function, but also as she comes to be for them an enactment of their own grief and memory of slavery—thus her effects are both singular and collective—she is both “representative of the tribe and in it” (339)—and her presence makes each of the characters investigate the ways that they too have “a tribal or racial sensibility and an individual expression of it.” (339)

The novel is structurally organized to emphasize the process of historicizing—not a static product of “history.” This is most dramatically exemplified in the ways that several incidents are told and retold from various points of view and scenes of construction. This is first demonstrated in the telling and retelling of the story of Denver’s birth. The story
is re-told in two places in the text, once relatively early as Denver witnesses that the
“white dress knelt down next to her mother and had its sleeve around her mother’s waist.
And it was the tender embrace of the dress sleeve that made Denver remember the details
of her birth”(29), and later again as Denver recreates the story of her birth for Beloved,
finally able to fill in the gaps which Sethe’s own narrative has left. Both of these
“tellings” provide different information and a different perspective on the happenings on
that day on the “bloody side of the Ohio river.” Yet both also represent a significant
moment in the process of historicizing the self for Denver—the process of writing the self
into history. In the first incident she has seen what she believes is the ghost of that baby
girl yet she appears as a “grown-up woman,” and the tender embrace evokes images of
Amy Denver’s rough but caring treatment of Sethe, as she is about to give birth on the
river. We, as readers, are brought into the story by entering Denver’s memory of her
mother’s re-telling of the “magic of her birth, its miracle in fact.” (29) Denver’s entrance
into the story is configured as a journey and process of imagination which requires that
she ...start way back: hear the birds in the thick woods, the crunch of leaves underfoot,
see her mother making her way up into the hills where no houses were likely to be. How
Sethe was walking on two feet meant for standing still. How they were so swollen she
could not see her arch or feel her ankles. Her leg shaft ended in a loaf of flesh scalloped
by five toenails. She could not, would not, stop, for when she did the little antelope
rammed her with horns and then pawed the ground of her womb with impatient hooves
(29-30). Thus, in order for Denver to begin the process of historicizing, she must
imagine, enter, the subjectivity of her mother—she must recreate those hills, those
feelings, that fear, pain and exhaustion. In order to place herself in history—and what
better way than the story of one’s birth—she must re-member the details and feelings her mother had provided in bits and pieces over time. In effect Denver’s two re-tellings of the birth story echo the process which Morrison herself is enacting the construction of the novel as a whole, and as Denver’s birth story enacts the “miracle” of her birth and the possibility for cooperation and assistance from white women, the story of the failed escape, the attempted recapture and the murder of the “baby girl” also must go through several re-tellings in the historicizing process. The narrative begins with that invocation to imagination, placing oneself in those hills, and then once Denver and the reader are placed we enter Sethe’s own process as she tries to make sense of her recognition of the baby kicking as a grazing antelope. Therefore, as Denver’s process requires a return to the scene of her birth, Sethe’s process at the time of that birth requires a return to her own recognition of matrilineal connection:

She guessed it must have been an invention held on to from before Sweet Home when she was very young. Of that place where she was born she remembered only song and dance. Not even her own mother. Who was pointed out to her by the eight year old child who watched over the young ones—pointed out as one of the many backs turned away from her stooping in the watery field. (30)

Sethe, without access to the story of her own birth, without the voice of her mother to provide that historicizing of self, without the ancestor figure to tie her into a history, is lost in a way that Denver’s need to come to terms with her history dramatically parallels. This first re-telling of the Amy Denver story displays Denver as the listener; the second retelling portrays her as the teller—an important distinction. In the forty or so pages between the first and second telling Denver has moved from one who thirsts for her own history to one who writes it, tells it, becomes it.
“Tell me,” Beloved said, “how Sethe made you in the boat.”
“She never told me all of it,” said Denver.
...she swallowed twice to prepare for the telling, to construct out of the strings that she had heard all of her life a net to hold Beloved. (76)
And it is Beloved’s thirst for knowledge, for the storytelling, which Sethe has noticed earlier, that propels Denver to a new kind of knowledge and understanding of that moment in her own history: Now watching Beloved’s alert and hungry face, how she took in every word, asking questions about the color of things and their size, her downright craving to know, Denver began to see what she was saying and not just hear it: there is this nineteen year old slave girl—a year older than herself—walking through the dark woods to get to her children who are far away. She is tired, scared maybe, and maybe even lost. Most of all she is by herself and inside her is another Baby that she has to think about too. Behind her dogs, perhaps; guns probably; and certainly mossy teeth. She is not so afraid at night because she is the color if it, but in the day every sound is a shot or a tracker’s quiet step. (77-78)

Denver needs to conceive of herself as an active subject in history in order to begin to “see” Sethe’s experience during that birth and the encounter with Amy Denver, but she also must see herself as a writer of history inside an active and participatory audience in order to recreate the story for herself:

Denver spoke, Beloved listened and the two did the best they could to create what really happened, how it really was, something only Sethe knew because she alone had the mind for it and the time afterward to shape it: the quality of Amy’s voice, her breath like burning wood... (78)

This process does indeed reenact the process of rememory which Morrison herself is invoking in the construction of the novel Beloved. As much as Sethe’s experience represents the erased contents of American history—the interior experiential life of the slavemother—Morrison and by extension the reader must work together to weave a “net to hold Beloved,” and all that Beloved represents about the lost material of African American history. Yet this process is dependent upon a recognition of the impossibility of perfect or true “representation”—instead we must be aware of our role as mediators even
as we are trying to re-member the contents that have been lost. This aspect of participation on the part of the reader has preoccupied Morrison for some time, and she describes her efforts in an earlier cited article. Commenting on her own efforts as a novelist who is African American, Morrison tells us that her work operates within a tradition that demands participation and reaction from the audience:

> It should deliberately make you stand up and feel something profoundly in the same way that a Black preacher requires his congregation to speak, to join him in the sermon, to behave in a certain way, to stand up and to weep and to cry and to accede or change or modify—to expand on the sermon that is being delivered...To make the story appear oral, meandering, effortless, spoken—to have the reader feel the narrator, without identifying that narrator, or hearing him or her knock about and to have the reader work with the author in the construction of the book—is what’s important. (Morrison 1984 341)

It is in *Beloved*, written several years after this article, that Morrison begins to tie this process together with the all important process of memory and historicizing. History and the writing of history is not the simple recording of data or information, nor is it the post-structuralist activity of a kind of writing—it is instead a complex process which requires agency and participation on the part of the reader and the writer—rememory becomes a way to claim your place within history by becoming a constructor of it. Thus the emergence of the subjugated narratives which Foucault so brilliantly evokes in his later lectures is not only dependent upon the process of recovery but an active process of re-construction, revision, re-memory.

There are several places in the novel where this process breaks down, where characters are overcome by memory or unable to express it and are left in a kind of impasse. This is most dramatically demonstrated in Baby Suggs’ inability to deal with the stuff of her own
memory and the gaps within it; thus she ends her life in the contemplation of colors. Or when Paul D. tries to understand the story of Sethe’s “crime” from the perspective of the newspaper article, and even in his failure to “see” her experience on that day as she tries to relate it to him. Stamp Paid fails to tell Paul D. his own “story” of that day; he fails at that process of re-memory which Denver has invoked and which has allowed her to “see” Sethe in those hills. He goes to see Paul D. with the intention of showing him the article but also to tell him how it happened and perhaps even hint at why. Stamp Paid’s failure reveals an inability to indict the community and its “meanness” in not alerting them of the arrival of the slave catchers, and in their expression of that meanness and jealousy of Baby Suggs the community breaks down and thus has a part in this tragedy. Because of Stamp Paid’s reluctance to indict the community he lets the institutional and white voice of the newspaper speak for him—he gives over the power to create his own history and this results in disaster for Paul D. and Sethe.

So Stamp Paid didn’t say it all. Instead he took a breath and leaned toward the mouth that was not hers and slowly read out the words that Paul D. couldn’t. And when he finished Paul D. said with a vigor fresher than the first time. “I’m sorry Stamp. It’s a mistake somewhere cause that ain’t her mouth.” (158)

Paul D. is being asked to understand a history that is mediated in a language that he cannot literally and figuratively understand, and his denial of that happening is indicative of his distrust of that mediation. This sends him to Sethe to confirm his own disbelief. And it is in this encounter between them that the specificity of Sethe’s experience as a slave mother, a mother and a woman is solidified in the text. It is here that the difficulty which Paul D. displays in understanding her actions, motivations or more importantly her
way of speaking about them, remembering them, that makes “a forest spring up between
them.” (165)

Paul D. begins this encounter with a profound distrust of the information that he has
received, but he ends it with a realization that his perceptions of Sethe were limited and
based upon a memory that was mediated by eighteen years. He begins by connecting to
her story through the scraps of history that they share and moves away from that as
Sethe’s role/self which is the mother confounds him. As Sethe tries to describe her
feelings of power and empowerment that are represented in her engineering of her own
escape, her gathering together of her own children on the free side of the river, her sense
that the freedom to love her children as her own, Paul D. is able to connect to his own
experiences in the prison camp in Alfred, Georgia. Their simultaneous recognition that
the real pain and oppression of slavery and colonization was the restriction placed on who
and what you could love creates a connection between them. As Sethe asks him “But
When I got here, when I jumped off that wagon—there wasn’t nobody in the world that I
couldn’t love if I wanted to. You know what I mean?” (162) he admits that “he did know
what she meant,” and he is able to take that leap because he invokes his own re-memory
to do so:

Listening to the doves in Alfred Georgia and having neither the right nor
permission to enjoy it because in that place mist, doves, sunlight, copper
dirt, moon—everything belonged to the men with the guns. (162)

However, that process breaks down when Sethe’s experience as a mother is evoked and
Paul D. is unable to find a place to connect:

Because the truth was simple, not a long drawn out record of shifts, tree
cages, selfishness, ankle ropes and wells...She just flew. Collected every
bit of life she had made, all the parts of her that were precious and fine and beautiful and carried, pushed, dragged them through the veil, out, away, over there where no one could hurt them. Over there. Outside this place, where they would be safe. (163)

His recognition that the Sethe he had been imagining all these years is not the Sethe who is speaking to him at this point leads him to recognize the failure of his own vision and to connect her to a world of women which is foreign to him. “This here Sethe talked about love like any other woman; talked about baby clothes like any other women, but what she meant could cleave the bone. This here Sethe talked about safety with a handsaw.” (164)

The poverty and impossibility of Sethe’s choices in that yard that morning escape Paul D., and her insistence that she did what was right is what alienates him.

“There could have been a way. Some other way.”
“What way?”
“You got two feet Sethe not four,” he said, and right then a forest sprang up between them; trackless and quiet.(165)

Ironically Paul D.’s invocation of this bestial metaphor echoes the very reason that Sethe felt compelled to kill her children into safety. It was Schoolteacher’s codification of her and her children as “animal” which pushed her over the edge into escape and it was that which forced her to try to kill the children—to keep them from the classification as animals as well as the very real physical and emotional torture of slavery. Paul D’s use of this image aligns him with the oppressor, and the specificity of her experience of slavery as a woman and a mother is underscored. Elsewhere I have argued that as much of the erased content of African American history is male, much more of those contents under erasure are female. Locked within the double bind of both racial and sexual oppression,
black women’s experiences have existed on a double and interlocking margin. Each of these novels re-inserts that experience and does so by demonstrating the ways that the black woman’s experience of slavery interacts with the black man’s; almost as if we have Harriet Jacobs and Frederick Douglas really speaking to each other. The legacy of that collective colonization is gendered, and yet all three of these novels go to some extent to enact the need for those gendered experiences to be viewed in conjunction with each other. Thus, the parallel stories of Paul D.’s struggle with his own memory and the “tobacco tin” of his heart which his history has rusted shut are juxtaposed with Sethe’s attempts to come to terms with the re-memory which Beloved represents. Ursa’s need to come to terms with her own collective unconscious memory of the sexual and physical exploitation which Corregidora personifies is paralleled by Mutt’s need to deal with the politics of his own desire for possession rooted in his grandfather’s history, and George’s lack of history and community signaled by his orphaned past and his prostitute mother, is set off by Cocoa’s rich and illusive history on Willow Springs. The structure and narrative of Beloved is designed to consistently highlight the necessity for the interactive process of re-memory and historicizing which characterizes Denver’s process, Stamp Paid’s original failure and Paul D.’s difficulty with Sethe’s explanation of the murder. The collective unconscious of their own subjugation which Beloved comes to represent and the process of re-memory and historicizing which her arrival sparks, is echoed in the central figures of Sethe, Paul D. and Denver, but also reverberates to the more “minor” characters like Stamp Paid, who eventually returns to Paul D. to tell him “two things”—the story of his first wife’s death at his own hands, and about the roaring voices he has heard at 124. None of these characters, not even the white abolitionist Edwin Bowden, is
constructed outside the larger history which slavery and its savagery have wrought. Thus history and memory are not construed as that illusive impossibility which might characterize many post-structuralist approaches but instead as endless, discordant possibility, enacted as a dangerous but necessary function of survival.

The arrival of **Beloved** signals the onset of the process of rememory and the need for each of the characters (and by extension the reader as well) to come to terms, from an infinite variety of vantage points, with the memory of slavery and colonization upon which this American identity is built. The novel demands an active engagement with that process and displays in the re-telling not the need for a unified and seamless history but an ever-growing and complex network of histories/memories which insist upon the insertion of the subject into data—by way of imagination and storytelling. Thus, unlike other visions of history as discussed in Hutcheon’s construction of historiographic metafiction, where the author sets up the colonizers’ history if only to blow it apart—**Beloved** and **Corregidora** and **Mama Day** all assert the centrality of the re-memory of the voices and experiences of the colonized.
D. Intimate histories.

Thus, one reason for Ursa’s telling her story and her mother’s story is to contrast them with the “epic,” almost impersonal history of Corregidora. I think that in Corregidora I was concerned with getting across a sense of an intimate history, particularly a personal history, and to contrast it with the broad impersonal telling of the Corregidora story. Thus, one reason for Ursa’s telling her story and her mother’s story is to contrast them with the “epic,” almost impersonal history of Corregidora. (Jones in Tate 92)

As in Beloved and, the history of slavery and the ways that it plays itself out in the conscious and unconscious lives of African American women at any point in American history figure strongly in Corregidora. However, Jones’ focus on what she calls “intimate history” creates a different kind of tension in this text, which connects to Beloved and Mama Day but enacts the process of “decolonization” inside the twenty-year relationship between Ursa and Mutt beginning in the post-war years (1947) and concluding in the turbulent 60’s (1969). However, despite the incredible span which these years represent within the “broader” and more “epic” history of African Americans, Jones’ narration focuses exclusively on the interiors of her central character, making little or no reference to the “exteriors” of the historical moment. Jones herself attributes some of the reasons for this focus in the construction of herself as a “black woman writer”:

With many women writers, relationship within family, community, between men and women and among women—from slave narratives by black women writers on—are treated as complex and significant relationships, whereas with many men the significant relationships are those that involve confrontation—relationships outside the family and community. (92-3)

This focus on the specificities of the black woman’s gaze and construction of self is indeed borne out by much of the recent historical novels by African American women,
but I would argue that the complexity of that shift or “difference” in vision cannot be attributed to an “essential” difference in gender, but instead signals the intricate way that African American women are situated within the interlocking systems of oppression characterized around race and gender and class. Thus, Michelle Wallace’s invocation of Barbara Johnson’s “radical x of negation” and her desire to empower that space instead of leaving it under erasure is underscored by the ways that these writers approach historiography often from a space of intersection where the broader more epic history plays itself out within the lives, memories and psyches of their characters. This shift is particularly apparent within Corregidora where the almost claustrophobic nature of Jones’ narrative immersion in Ursa’s thoughts, memories, dreams and fantasies illuminates the significance of that epic history of Corregidora—the colonizer’s history—within the psychological and sexual lives of the descendants of the colonized.

Echoing the narrative strategies in Beloved and Mama Day (or in effect preceding them chronologically), in Corregidora Ursa’s narration invokes the oral tradition’s emphasis on story telling present in much African American women’s fiction. However, unlike Beloved where we as “listeners” witness the ways that the characters “re-member” the history of their experiences of slavery through the enigmatic character of Beloved and through their own historicizing process, or Mama Day where we are “eavesdroppers” on the ways that Cocoa and George re-write and revise the story of that summer of 1985 every subsequent summer while “talking over the Sound” without either one saying a word, Ursa’s narration charts the close and intimate ways that Great Gram’s story, Gram’s story and eventually her mother’s story play themselves out within her psychic
and sexual experiences. Thus, this historiography emphasizes an even deeper interior, an even more buried unconscious experience of colonization.

One of the striking specificities of the slave woman’s experience which can be noted in slave narratives and the subsequent re-memory of the slave woman’s experience represented in these contemporary novels is the ways that the sexualized body becomes the site of colonization. This is dramatically represented in Harriet Jacobs’ description of her attempts to avoid the sexual harassment of her master and even more vividly represented in Sethe’s description of the “boys with the mossy teeth” who rape her and steal her milk. The body of the slave woman becomes literally the site of colonization, as women were subject to forced “matings,” rape, and sexual abuse at the hands of their masters with a ferocity and consistency which is overwhelming to imagine. As the reproducer of the slave population and the victim of continued sexual molestation and violence, the Slave woman/mother’s experience of “that peculiar institution” is radically different than the man’s. Amy Denver’s description of the Chokeberry tree” upon Sethe’s back recalls not only the physical violence to which she has been subject, but also the sexual violence which has marked her permanently. This is reiterated as Paul D. traces his hand along the scar when they are making love even as Sethe recoils from him even seeing it. Corregidora highlights the complexity and psychic consequences of this intersection between physical, sexual and psychological violence for slave women even when it is two generations removed. As Mama Day insists upon the importance of the legend of Sapphira Wade for the construction of subjectivity for the people of Willow
Springs into 1999, this novel demonstrates the legacy of that abuse through the year 1969.

*Corregidora* opens with Ursa’s description of her marriage to Mutt in 1947 and its disastrous “conclusion” as he in a drunken fit of jealousy effects her fall down a flight of back stairs, resulting in her losing their child in the first trimester as well as her losing her “womb” in an emergency hysterectomy. Jones’s narrative immersion in Ursa’s voice is heightened right away by the complex interaction between the ‘scene of writing’, presumably after 1969 and the events being depicted, 1947-1948. Thus the novel evokes the enactment of a fictionalized autobiographical process where there is a complex interaction between the scene of writing and the “actual events.” We are listening to Ursa as she recounts these experiences in an effort to construct herself as teller. This parallels the process we witnessed in *Beloved* as Denver tries to tell the story of her birth and Sethe and Paul D. try to make sense of their separate experiences. However, unlike *Beloved* and *Mama Day*, here we are firmly grounded in the process of self-construction common in an autobiographical act—the self becomes both subject and object as the “author” mediates between the scene of writing and the scene from the past. Ursa is in effect trying to historicize herself from a particularly intimate vantage point. It is in effect in the process of the telling that she is able to make the connections between her own experiences and her mother’s experiences and to draw the complex patterns between her relationship with Mutt and the history of the matrilineal line’s experience of slavery and sexual subjugation at the hands of *Corregidora*—the Brazilian slave master and whoremonger whose name she still carries.
If one of the major foci of all three of these novels is to chart the process of decolonization through the engagement with history and the reconstruction of historiography, particularly through the erased matrilineal line, then *Corregidora* demonstrates this process by diving into the interior and showing the relationship between that interior and the “epic” production of “history.” Thus, from this inductive position we are forced to view the legacy of colonization, but also to look at the ways that various methods of historiography for these descendants of the slaves can create disaster, not transcendence. Gayle Jones re-inscribes the paradox of history through the continued reenactment of the power dynamic implicit in sexual relationships and set against the backdrop of a legacy of colonization which expresses itself through sexual abuse and violence. Ursa and Mutt play out the drama of Martin and Correy (her parents) and also the drama of Gram and Great Gram and *Corregidora*, yet they do so within the structure of a jazz lick, as Morrison says—ragged and discordant, variation building on variation, yet the theme is seemingly unaltered. It is true, as Melvin Dixon has argued, that “what Jones is after is the words and deeds that finally break the sexual bondage that men and women impose upon each other.” (Evans 237) However, what Dixon’s commentary on *Corregidora* misses and what many other more psychoanalytically-based critiques have obscured is the relationship between the reactions that Mutt and Ursa have to each other and the history of colonization and slavery which has created each of them. Dixon argues that the oral and physical connection emphasized by Gram and Great Gram and her mother serve to re-create the specter of *Corregidora* for Ursa and thus imprison her in history. Jerry Ward argues that “Ursa’s thinking is rooted in the ego’s acceptance of a
predetermined historical role,” and this results in an “arrested personality,” (Evans 253) but what Ward and Dixon fail to examine is that the relationship to that history is also central to the development of a personality at all. Thus, this novel, like Beloved and Mama Day, dramatically reenacts the process of decolonization, but that process cannot result in a complete rejection of the history of her matrilineal ancestors; it must result in a new way and new vantage point from which to view that history. Gram and Great Gram adopt the colonizer’s strategy to try and beat him. They try to “dismantle the master’s house with the master’s tools.” (Lorde 112) By insisting that the only way to keep the memory of their abuse, slavery and colonization alive is by “making generations,” they have re-created the role of the slave mother as a breeder, but altered it only slightly. Instead of reproducing the labor force or the stable of prostitutes as Corregidora has done, they will reproduce the memory of his abuses. It is not the claim to memory that they exercise that is devastating, but the methodology they enact to achieve it. Thus their desire to write their history both in the role of breeder and equally as powerfully in the endless re-telling of those abuses fails to focus on the slave as a subject but instead recreates their experiences as objects, victims. All of Ursa’s memories of her grandmother and mother’s talking chronicle Corregidora’s abuses and his exercising of power over them; none of the stories tell of their efforts to reject or resist his power.

Ultimately it is Ursa’s understanding of what Great Gram had refused to tell her grandmother or her mother—her eventual control of Corregidora in a moment when she can reverse the power—that allows her to begin to conceive of herself as a subject in history and actor in her own “personal history.” Thus the novel does not insist, as some
other commentators have suggested, that the desire to remember slavery itself is the
problem, but instead the way that the characters choose to re-member it. It is also clear
that both Ursa and Mutt, like Martin and Correy before them, are locked into a complex
pattern of reenacting the roles of colonizer and colonized, slave and master, whore and
pimp, because they are not presented with alternative ways to write the history of their
collective oppression. Dixon argues, significantly from a position of a male
commentator, that it is Mutt who enables Ursa to break the pattern of her oppression by
pushing her down the stairs and ending her ability to “make generations.” Dixon seems
to be suggesting that the origin of this pattern lies in her matrilineal line, not in the
collective and singular effects of the history of colonization on the consciousness of the
colonized. Yet Jones shows us through the interaction between Martin and Correy, Ursa
and Mutt and even through the story of the young black slave who tells Great Gram that
he wants to escape and go to Palermes and join the marooned slaves that the “sexual
bondage men and women impose on each other” is a result of the very real bondage that
has been imposed on the ancestors of these African American women and men. Both
Mutt and Martin are unable to see either Correy or Ursa outside the construct which
slavery itself has wrought for black men and women. As Paul D. is unable to see the
poverty and complexity of Sethe’s choices, they are unable to break the pattern of their
own historical relationship to slavery. Martin, when faced with the legacy of
Corregidora as it is represented in the house of Ursa’s birth and the continual retellings
which Correy and Martin overhear, expresses his own frustration with the powerlessness
of his choices. On Corregidora’s plantation, the women were both field slaves and “on
the side” subjected into sexual slavery; the men were field slaves and occasionally
subjected into the role of breeder. There is not room within this structure for the free expression of love or desire for either the men or the women. Jones demonstrates, as has Morrison in her description of Stamp Paid’s murder of his first wife, that both the matrilineal Corregidoras in their reinstallation of the women as reproducers and Martin and Mutt in their insistence on blaming the women who are subjugated into the role of prostitute have recreated roles assigned to them within colonization. Martin blames both Correy and her mother and grandmother for the roles which slavery has forced them to play. For despite the fact that the stories keep the memory of Corregidora alive, the experience of slavery would not disappear if Gram and Great Gram stopped talking. Their attempts to assert control over their own history/memory by reproducing it both verbally and literally in their daughters signal a resistance to erasure, yet they fail to recognize the necessity for the variations, additions and improvisations which characterize both jazz, significantly the expression which Ursa chooses, and African American memory, as Morrison has demonstrated in Beloved. They are forever lost in a process of repetition, and that will not allow for new voices, new experiences which build on and re-member the lost parts of a collective self. Melvin Dixon fails to recognize the ways that both the black men and women in this story become actors in this drama of repetition: Martin becomes the whoremaster when Correy goes to see him in Cincinnati.

I only went back to him once. He was staying at this boarding house, Ursa. All he did was start beating on me. He started beating on me. He told me to get out of there and I did. He said, “Go on down the street lookin like a whore. I want you to go on down the street looking like a whore.” (121)

Unable to touch her because her identity has been subsumed within the history of Corregidora, he takes on the role of Corregidora and reasserts the power of sexual
violence which her mother and grandmother had been trying to resist. This same scene reenacts itself with Mutt as he is unable to see Ursa outside the construct of possession. At this intersection of racial and sexual oppression, Mutt enacts the role of possessive patriarch, and his threatened auctioning off of Ursa, coupled with his intense jealousy, reenact Corregidora’s role as whoremaster and pimp, exemplified in his outburst over Great Gram’s talking with the young black slave. Here those two passages are dramatically juxtaposed to show that pattern of repetition.

“Tha’ what I’m gon do,” he said. He with his arms up in the air. I was on my way to work. “One a y’all won’t to bid for her? Piece of ass for sale. I got me a piece of ass for sale. That’s what y’all want, ain’t it? Piece of ass. I said I got a piece of ass for sale, anybody want to bid on it?” (159)

The complex interaction between power and possession throughout all the relationships in the novel whether it be mother and daughter, husband and wife or even friends—demonstrated in the relationship between Cat and Ursa or Cat and Jeffy—testifies to the continuing haunting legacy of slavery and colonization within the conscious and unconscious of these black peoples. Each of them enacts a role in an effort to seize power which recreates the system of oppression they are trying to escape. However, Ursa and Mutt, because of a series of factors, are perhaps able not only to enact the process of colonization but to begin the process of decolonization, not by denying history or escaping it, as Dixon and Ward seem to suggest, but by giving it expression in new forms; in so doing seeing the self as a subject in history, not an object of it.
I have said earlier in this chapter that Morrison’s reconstruction of history as memory allows for the insertion of the self into historiography. Denver is able to create a voice for herself only by connecting to her mother’s memories in the telling, and Paul D. is only able to connect with Sethe when he can relate her experiences to his own separate experiences of oppression and imprisonment. The emphasis in Beloved and Corregidora is on the act of telling, speaking, and relating. However, Corregidora shows that the telling must be altered and changed in order to release one from the repetition of colonizing relationships. The stories of victimization, abuse and violence, both psychological and sexual, which Great Gram and Gram insist must be passed down through the making of generations, do not allow for memory or the intersection of multiple memories/stories. Instead they preserve history and protect against erasure by repeating it. However, the answer to the paradox reflected in the novel is not whether to remember and relate the history of slavery but how to: How to preserve that history but not be victimized and destroyed by it. Ironically it is only Ursa who, although marked by the matrilineal re-memories, is able to enact a process that breaks the repetition. Hers is an engagement with the process of re-memory which is conscious and eventually creative. Thus, as much as her mother’s stories cripple her, they enable her as well.

Both Melvin Dixon and Jerry Ward maintain that Mutt’s pushing Ursa down the stairs sets into motion the breaking of that pattern. However, as much as both of these critics maintain that Ursa has not made a choice to break that pattern previous to losing her womb that is simply not supported by the text. Ursa has left home to sing the blues and
has done so after expressing to her mother that she is resisting the pattern they have set out for her:

I told her she didn’t have to embarrass me, pulling me out of Preston’s like that with all them people watching. She coulda just told me. She said she are never known any Corregidora to behave with just telling. That was when I told her I wasn’t no Corregidora. She just kept looking at me, and then she told me she had better not catch me at Preston’s no more or else I have the devil come out of my behind as well as my mouth....We just kept having riffs like that until I got on the bus and came to the city. (147)

Ursa displays similar resistance to Mutt’s desires to possess her and silence her voice.

When he tells her that she should give up singing because she is now his wife, she resists. Even after he tries to pull her off the stage and escorted out of Happy’s, she keeps on singing: “The men got him out the door. Tadpole came over to me and asked if I was ok, if I wanted to stop, but I said naw, I was all right. I finished out the show. (167)

It is in fact her resistance to his possession that leads to the confrontation in the alley and that leads to her loss of her womb and of her ability to make generations. Caught between the possessive desires of both her mother and Mutt, Ursa tries to construct a self that allows for both a sexual expression of self—she unlike her mother is able to enjoy sex with Mutt and even desire it—and a maternal expression of self—she wants the baby she is carrying when she falls down the stairs—and she is unable to do it within the confines and tropes available to her at the beginning. Several things contribute to Ursa and Mutt’s final moment of reconciliation, which implies an end to the repeated patterns of reenacting the relationship between the colonizer and the colonized. However, central to any one of these things is the rejection of an image of herself as only an object, either of her matrilineal heritage or of Mutt’s patriarchal possessiveness. Before they are married
Mutt becomes for Ursa an audience of one; “he kept coming into the place and somehow even though he’d never come up to me he got to be the man I was singing to.” He also displays an interest in her voice and its unique expressions: “Where did you get those songs? ...I made them up.” (148) Yet after they are encoded within the institution of marriage he moves into another role—he begins to enact the role of patriarch and in so doing echoes the memory of Corregidora. Despite his insistence that he and Ursa are not the ancestors that each of them evoke—she Corregidora, he his grandfather who buys his wife’s freedom, only to lose her to debt collection as she is legally his property—Ursa does not trust him.

“Whichever way you look at it, we ain’t them.”
I didn’t answer because the way that I had been brought up it was almost as if we were.
“We’re not Ursa.” I had stepped back suddenly. (168)

She recognizes the potential for such a repetition and perhaps that the unconscious memory of those ancestors cannot be ignored or erased by simply saying so. Mutt’s subsequent behavior proves that. Therefore, Ursa’s process of recognition and the complex ways that she inserts herself into history to have a voice, to be a subject, is multilayered—it begins early in her life and culminates in the autobiographical expression of self and history which the text of the novel represents.

Ursa begins her own process of decolonization through asserting her voice against the constraints provided by the Corregidora’s—one and all—and against the constraints imposed by Mutt in his reenactment of patriarchal power. After Ursa’s hysterectomy Cat tells her that her voice has changed:
...Maybe even more moved, because it sounds like you been through something. Before it was beautiful too, but you sound like you been through more now...Not for the worse. Like Ma [Rainey] for instance, after all the alcohol and the men, the strain made it better, because you could tell what she’d been through. You could hear what she’d been through. (44)

The loss of her womb and of Mutt makes Ursa a changed woman, but it also makes her voice more powerful, more authentic; she is no longer singing only the stories sent down to her of Corregidora. In a significant dream sequence in the middle of the novel, Ursa confronts the singularity of the legacy she is asked to perpetuate:

But she’d speak only their life. What was their life then? Only a life spoken to sounds of my breathing or a low playing Victrola. Mam’s Christian songs and...it was grandmama who liked the blues...what’s a life always spoken and only spoken? Still there was what they never spoke...They squeezed Corregidora into me and I sung back in return. I would rather have sung her memory if I’d had to sing any. What about my own? Don’t ask me that now. (103)

In talking to Mutt through this dream sequence, Ursa begins to understand that she needs more than Corregidora, she needs her mother’s memories, her mother’s story and by extension the story of her own birth. She goes back to Brackton to talk with her mother, and it is here that her process of decolonization begins. Not unlike Denver who must first hear the story of her miraculous birth and then feel it in her own retelling, Ursa must hear the story of her mother’s pain, her marriage and then sing of it in order to gain her own voice. It is the listening to her mother’s story, which encompasses the stories of Gram and great Gram but is finally not subsumed within them, that propels Ursa to begin to hear her own memory:

Then suddenly it was like I was remembering something out of a long past. I was a child, drowsy, thinking I was sleeping or dreaming. It was a woman’s voice and a man’s voice, both whispering. “No.”

“Why don’t you come?”
“No.”
“What are you afraid of?”
“I’m not. I just not going with you.”
“Why do you keep fighting me? Or is it yourself you keep fighting?”
...I never heard that man’s voice again. I was thinking that now that Mama had gotten it all out, her own memory—at least to me anyway—maybe she and some man...But then I was thinking what had I done about my own life? (132)

This realization propels Ursa to begin to examine her own memory, and to re-member the story of her relationship with Mutt with the stories of her childhood—both her own experiences and the constant echo of Corregidora in the house. The long mediation, memory, and dream sequences that make up the third section of the book represent the act of Ursa suturing her own story to her mother’s and her grandmother’s and her great grandmother’s, yet that process eventually leads us up to the last scene in the novel, Mutt’s return in 1969, and her realization that Great Gram’s power over Corregidora was indeed sexual, and it was this power that allowed her to escape and resist while also encompassing her desire. In that moment of realization Ursa completes the patterns and makes the connections. it is here that she realizes that they have all been living out the patterns of power and colonization within their own relationships;

But was what Corregidora had done to her, to them, any worse than what Mutt had done to me, than what we had done to each other, than what Mam had done to Daddy, or what he had done to her in return, making her walk down the street looking like a whore? (184)

That pattern is not broken until she makes the connections and until she gives up the desire to hurt and expresses her own needs, not those preordained in the colonized relationship:

“I don’t want the kind of woman that hurt you,” he said.
“Then you don’t want me.”
“I don’t want the kind of woman that hurt you.”
“Then you don’t want me.”
“I don’t want the kind of woman that hurt you.”
“Then you don’t want me.”
He shook me until I fell against him crying.
“Then you don’t want me.”
“I don’t want the kind of woman that’ll hurt me neither,” I said.
He held me tight. (185)

The pattern and repetition is even elucidated in this last exchange in the novel and evokes the blues rhythms that have made up Ursa’s voice and especially her dreams throughout the novel. However, here the pattern is varied and interrupted. Finally both come together in what Melvin Dixon has characterized as a blues duet, where both voices exist and react and respond to each other, not only within the expected ways but within the discordant and different, unfinished and raw and new way that jazz and blues evoke as the expression of African American voices.

Thus, the novel as representative of Ursa’s fictional autobiographical gesture is finally the medium which displays to the fullest the complexity and multiplicity of her voice, and her memories and her relationship to that history of colonization which is inside of her. Her fictional autobiography does not banish history or the epic and broad history which Corregidora represents, but instead re-members it, re-connects it to the present varied and multiple consciousnesses of Ursa. It is in this act of telling everything, memories, dreams, fantasies, desires, and stories, that Ursa escapes the prison of “history” and becomes a writer of it. The novel as it represents the construction of Ursa’s voice weaves and contains the many histories/memories which make up her voice—the Corregidora’s’, her Mother’s, Mutt’s, Tadpole’s, Cat’s—but does not insist that any one of them can stand for the whole. The novel and by extension Jones are able
to do this through the mediation of Ursa’s narration within the verbal and linguistic representation of the form most able to contain such a complexity—the blues/jazz lyric or lick. Thus the novel becomes a linguistic rendition of a blues song, which connects the various parts of memory without privileging or erasing any of them but by expressing the connections between them, and by so doing creates a new kind of historiography—one that elucidates the relationship between the intimate and the epic, the self and the other, the individual and the collective.
E. Conclusions: Remember to forget

If our history has taught us anything, it is that action for change directed only against the external conditions of our oppression is not enough. In order to be whole, we must recognize the despair that oppression plants within each of us—that thin persistent voice which says our efforts are useless, it will never change so why bother, accept it. And we must fight that inserted piece of self-destruction that lives and flourishes like poison inside of us, unexamined until it makes us turn upon ourselves in each other. But we can put our finger down upon that loathing buried deep within each of us and see who it encourages us to despise, and we can lessen its potency by the knowledge of our real connectedness arcing across our differences. (Lorde, 1984, 142)

Toni Morrison has said that one of the primary motivations for writing *Beloved* was to examine how a slave woman/mother could, within the horrible and impossible conditions of slavery, create and hold on to any sense of self-love. Each of these novels shows in their persistent and innovative engagement with remembered history that central to that process of self-love, subjectivity is an insistence on the process of de-colonization. Significantly this is not a process limited only to those folks who had experienced slavery first hand, but all the subsequent generations who have been marred and “poisoned” by its oppression and the continuing institutional and pervasive oppression in our culture. One of the most important steps within the process of de-colonizing the mind and the heart is a constructive engagement with memory, both individual and collective. Such an engagement involves, at least in the case of all three of these novels, a complex series of contradictions, intersections and conflicts that cannot be “resolved” per se but must be elucidated. Thus, Beloved “returns” as an enigmatic representation of all “dead negro’s grief” and her desire, which cannot be met without the death of Sethe, to be presented with some coherent and non-contradictory narrative of why—some story which will explain to her why her mother has left her—is disastrous and deathly. Beloved desires a
return to the past and plays into Sethe’s desire to re-write history instead of re-membering it:

...and the more she took, the more Sethe began to talk, explain, describe how much she had suffered, been through for her children, waving away flies in Grape Arbors, crawling on her knees to a lean-to. None of which made the impression it was supposed to. Beloved accused her of leaving her behind. (241)

Sethe’s attempts to “make sense” or “explain” are useless; there is no explanation which exists in the places where we can form words, as Naylor says. Beloved is in effect more than Denver’s baby sister, coming back; as Denver herself realizes, she is the “disremembered and unaccounted for,” she is the emblematic of a erased and erupted memory, and all of the attempts to contain her within narrative and explanation fail. In order to contain her, if only for a short time, each of the characters must enact a new process of rememory, a new and imagined way of writing history that accounts for all the “despair that oppression plants within us.” It is significant that Sethe’s dangerous engagement with memory in this text, through the character of Beloved and all the voices which she comes to represent for Sethe, her mother, her ancestors, her erased memory, leads her to alter her form of resistance. In the yard when Schoolteacher comes hunting, she has been abandoned by the community, and she tries to enact a godlike choice to save her children by killing them. Yet at the close of the novel, with the help of the community she is able to direct that anger against the oppressor—or the image of the oppressor—not against her own. The women singing bring Sethe back to the Clearing before Baby Suggs had given up, before the white man had entered their yard, and in a stunning reenactment of that historical moment Sethe is able to act:
For Sethe it was as though the Clearing has come to her with all its heat and simmering leaves, where the voices of women searched for the right combinations, the key, the code, the sound that broke the back of words. Building voice upon voice until they found it and when they did it was a wave of sound wide enough to sound deep water and knock the pods off the chestnut trees. It broke over Sethe and she trembled like the baptized in its wash. (261)

It is in this moment that Sethe puts her finger on the poison inside of her and is able to resist the urge to turn upon “ourselves in each other.” This is also true for the women who for 20 years had shunned 124 because they were unable to face the tragedy of what had happened there and their part in it or because as Ella says “she didn’t mind a little communication between the two worlds but hers was an invasion.” (257) The invasion of the ghost and the invasion of Schoolteacher come together, and this time the community responds in a rage against the possibility of the past coming to eat up the present or the future, the possibility that the poison could come back to kill them all. This scene in Beloved represents one of the few moments in the text where agency exhibits itself and does so with a sound that is not linguistic, but which is unutterable. The women come to exorcise the ghost, but they also come to exorcise their own ghosts—Ella’s dead white baby whom she refused to nurse, for example—ghosts which pack to the rafters every house in the country and beyond. It is after this epiphany that Sethe and Paul D. and Denver, now “grown,” can begin to re-constitute their family among the living.

One of the echoes which I have been trying to follow through all these texts is that echo of the past of memory which is central to the process of decolonization, but also paradoxically dangerous to the construction of the self—a decolonized self—a self which is able to “love anybody that I wanted to.” (163) This process is multi-layered and
complex in its renditions in these novels; however, in the insistence on memory and re-
memory instead of history or the epic history of the colonizer, the novels begin to
recreate the notion of a historiography which is enacted both within the texts, by
characters such as Sethe, Denver, Ursa and Cocoa, but also in the very ways in which the
novels themselves construct history as the imagination tempered by data. By wresting
not only the contents of history from the colonizer, but the very methods of historicizing
and historiography from the white western patriarchal discourse in which they have been
imprisoned, the novels present us with new ways to theorize about the self and its relation
to the past and the action of memory, both individual and collective. Thus, these novels
present us with not simply a rejection of the colonizers’ history but re- figure the role of
memory, and the collective conscious and unconscious memories of slavery and
colonization play in the construction of contemporary African American women’s voices.
The enactment of this process in these novels presents us with new ways to approach the
idea of “historicizing” the present; historicizing ourselves. They offer perhaps new ways
to make the connection between “theory,” “history” and the everyday and how to re-
member the self into history; successfully becoming both subjects of it and agents in it.
CHAPTER VI

CONJURE WOMEN

To whom do I owe the power behind my voice, what strength
I have become, yeasting up like sudden blood from under
the skin’s bruised blister?
To whom do I owe the symbols of my survival?

Audre Lorde (Zami 3)

Throughout my discussion of the role of history and historicizing in Beloved, Mama Day and Corregidora, as well as the earlier investigation into the possibilities of a postmodern feminism which is refigured by a careful attention to the politics of race, class and gender, one question consistently emerges: what part does the articulation of a theoretical practice play in the construction of a “radical” agency? Clearly the postmodern methodologies of Jameson, Foucault, Spivak and others operates under the presumption reminiscent of Marx’s own definition for critical theory, that critical theory is the “self-clarification of the struggles and wishes of the age.” Yet it has also become clear that the position of the speaker seriously affects what one defines as those “struggles and wishes” and how one sees them being articulated and theorized. Thus, the novels and voices of African American women show us that their concern for the establishment of a historical practice which engages with the contents of their history which has been under erasure and simultaneously—almost because of—redefines what it is we mean by “history” itself. In so doing these novels also begin to ask that we refigure what it is we mean by “identity” and agency. For Morrison, Naylor and Jones, as well as many other
contemporary African American writers, the re memory of a lost and erased history is central to the establishment of a working and surviving identity construct for African Americans in a postmodern moment. Morrison’s “ancestor figure” and Jones’ “generations” attest to the need to establish the voices of those who preceded them in the quest for survival in a hostile and alien space. The ravages of slavery and institutional racism are imprinted on the collective unconscious of all African Americans and all Americans, and the specificity of sexual and physical abuse for the slave mother means that this task has a specific importance for African American women trying to create a “radical subjectivity.” Within this process it becomes important as Morrison herself has pointed out to discover how within the confines of chattel slavery and later colonial oppression black women in the United States found ways to survive, create, love and resist. Thus, in each of these novels we are not engaged in a reading process which mimics a kind of victim studies, but instead we are engaged in the process of reestablishing a legacy of survival and resistance that has its roots in the African traditions and in the voices of African American women who have revolted against the restrictions that a white supremacist culture has consistently placed upon them. Perhaps the central ancestral figure who symbolizes this in these three novels is Sapphira Wade—a true conjure woman—and her children, Mama Day and eventually Cocoa, who embody the power of vision and an alternative way of seeing which redefines not only historical knowledge but power itself. The focus in Corregidora on Ursa’s ability and even necessity to sing—“They squeezed Corregidora into me and I sung him back out”—indicates another expression of the power of conjuring; for Ursa the need to take the pieces of her generational past and weave them together within the story of her and Mutt
indicates that the only way that is possible is through an act of conjuring—storytelling, singing, making music. Sethe conjures up first Paul D in the opening pages of the novel as her memories of Sweet Home keep flooding back in, and she turns that corner and there he is, and she then conjures Beloved herself, as Beloved’s emergence from the riverbed is preceded by her “breaking water.” That act of conjuring sets in motion many other multiple acts of conjuring, most visible in Denver’s retelling of her birth story in order to birth herself and thus be able to step off the porch to ask the community to help save her other. Baby Suggs’ role as preacher in the clearing recalls a long and important tradition of “calling out” or “call and response” that allows the community to feel both hurt and love and in the cleansing love themselves:

Here, she said, in this here place, we flesh; 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 don’t 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 your hands. Those they only use, tie bind chop off and leave empty. Love your hands! Love them. Raise them up and kiss them. Touch others with them, pat them together, stroke them on you face ‘cause they don’t love that either. You got to love it, you!...This is flesh I am talking about here. Flesh that needs to be loved. Feet that need to rest and to dance; backs that need support, shoulders that need arms, strong arms I’m telling you. And O my people they do not love your neck unnoosed and straight. So love your neck; put a hand on it, race it, stroke it and hold it up. And all your inside parts that they’s just as soon slop for hogs, you got to love them. The dark dark liver—love it, love it and the beat and beating heart. Love that too. More than eyes, feet. More than lungs that have yet to breathe Free air. More than your life holding womb and your life giving private parts, hear me now, love your heart. For this is the prize. (89)

Baby Suggs’ speech in the clearing as it is remembered by Sethe, is both an act of conjuring—she is asking the community to conjure and create themselves—and an act of critique or theorizing. As Barbara Christian has pointed out, “My folk ...have always been a race for theory”; however the “methods” and uses of that theorizing has been quite
different from the dominant western hegemonic vision of theorizing. Christian tells us
that “our theorizing (and I intentionally use the verb not the noun) is often in narrative
forms, in the stories we create, in riddles and proverbs, in the play with language, since
dynamic rather than fixed ideas seem much more to our liking.” (336) Thus these acts of
theorizing are connected at their base to the act of surviving. Baby Suggs here is
performing a sophisticated critique of white supremacy, while she is also invoking the
need to resist it. Her speech performs a complex critique of the multiple systems of
oppression; including the obvious exposure of white supremacy, there is also an implied
critique of chattel slavery—“They do not love your hands. Those they only use, tie, bind
chop off...”; of lynching—“they do not love your neck unnoosed and straight”; and of
the silencing which is so central to any oppressive and colonizing relationship—“What
you say out of it they will not heed. What you scream from it they do not hear.” There is
also contained within this calling an implied rejection of the kind of Christian dogma that
many saw as a way to keep African Americans from working toward any kind of radical
or revolutionary change. This dogma consistently called upon the slaves and ex-slaves to
believe in a “God” and a “Heaven” which would reward them in the afterlife for the pain
they had suffered on “earth”. Baby Suggs’ preaching is not in fact a kind of “Christian”
or evangelical call for belief in the abstract “God,” but instead a call for a belief in
themselves; this renders her call both an act of theorizing and a political act. The
importance of Baby Suggs’ speech and the whole idea of the “clearing,” a place where
“long notes held in four-part harmony was perfect enough for their deeply loved flesh,”
is central to the novel as a whole; later it is the “sound that broke the backs of words,”
the singing of the women from the community that begins the “healing” for Sethe and
allows her to direct her rage not internally at her self and her own children but at the white man who enters her yard—albeit another misrecognition. Those women singing in the front yard of 124 are the echo of the clearing or the four-part harmony of Baby Suggs’ admonition to love themselves and each other. Even Baby Suggs’ own rejection of the vision she promulgates in the clearing is indicative of her understanding of the basic overwhelming inequalities and injustices that are based on a white supremacist ideology—“Those white things have taken all I had or dreamed and broke my heartstrings too. There is no bad luck in this world but whitefolks.” (89)

Thus Baby Suggs’ conjuring, and Sapphira Wade’s conjuring, are not simply acts of magic, which can give way to some exoticized vision of the power of African American women, but instead are indicative of a powerful challenge to the ways that we view critical theorizing and a powerful political engagement. Sapphira Wade after all changes the course of history on Willow Springs and does so in ways that are illusive to the present occupant’s of the island, but as I mentioned in chapter V, the methods by which Sapphira Wade manages to get the blacks the deeds to their land are “Mysterious.” What matters is that she did. Thus the image of her as a “true conjure woman” cannot be reduced to a kind of fantastic image of a mythological creation figure, but is constructed on the knowledge of her resistance, revolt and eventual victory over the slave master, proven by the fact that “you end up with the death of Bascombe Wade (there’s his tombstone right out by Chevy’s Pass), the deeds to our land (all marked back to the very year), and seven sons (ain’t Miss Abigail and Mama Day the granddaughters of that seventh boy?).” (1)
Mama Day, as the descendant of Sapphira Wade and one who possesses her power, also emerges in the novel as a conjure woman, but once again that construction is made complex by the portrayal of her as a powerful force in the temporal and spatial realm of the everyday. She is a midwife, whose healing powers are based on sound medical principles even within the western hegemonic tradition; thus Dr. Smithfield has a reluctant but earned respect for her.

For years Miranda and Brian Smithfield have had what you call a working relationship...No point in prescribing treatment for gout, bone inflammation, diabetes or even heart trouble when the person’s going straight to Miranda after seeing him for her yea or nay. And if it was nay, she’d send em right back to him with a list of reasons...And although it hurt his pride at times, he’d admit inside it was usually no different than what he had to say himself-just plainer words and a slower cure than them concentrated drugs...Being an outsider he couldn’t be expected to believe the other things Miranda could do. But being a good Doctor, he knew another one when he saw her. (84)

The “other things Miranda could do” are always underscored, by the scientific knowledge which backs up all of her “remedies” and “magic”. She shows George the Foxglove from which his heart medication is made; her placing of silver nitrate around Ruby’s house recreates in fact the scientific conditions for an experiment that allows lightening to strike twice in the same place. Later on George muses on the strangeness of this lightening, questioning that anyone in Willow Springs would have that kind of knowledge:

But, oh, no, there was something strange about this lightening. It struck twice in the same place. Theoretically it is possible but not probable, for lightening to strike twice in exactly the same place...Unless of course, in a scientific experiment someone purposely electrifies the ground with
materials that hold both negative and positive charges to increase the potential of having a target hit. No one was running around with that kind of knowledge in Willow Springs, and it was highly improbable that it would happen naturally. (274)

Therefore, consistently Mama Day’s knowledge that from some exoticized view might be perceived as magic is in fact “knowledge” and the kind of knowledge that even western empirical logic must heed, has in fact depended on for its own “scientific” conclusions. Her power cannot be relegated to the realm of the supernatural, but instead represents the relationship between all that western abstract logic has legitimized and beyond it. Her conjure is about the weaving together of those seemingly disparate ways of seeing, knowing. Even the illness which strikes Cocoa has a “scientific” explanation as well as a historical one. Ruby has woven deadly nightshade into the corn curls on her head. The effects of that nightshade are well documented as hallucinogenic and eventually poisonous. Cocoa’s symptoms are well in keeping with the effects of that nightshade—delusions, paranoia, sweating, welts, vomiting and insomnia. And George’s distrust of that diagnosis indicates his inability to think outside the western or more specifically American Dream paradigm which created him. Even Mama Day’s process through the later third of the book can be explained/translated into terms which specifically postmodern theorists could understand. Mama Day, not unlike Sethe and Ursa, must ‘re-member’ the pieces of history which have been lost or erased in order to be able to read and understand the present situation on Willow Springs. There is an implicit rejection of history as progress and instead an emphasis on the need to recapture the subjugated narratives of history so that she may construct/conjure the tools to save both George and Cocoa. History here is cyclical and yet altered in each version, not unlike the repeated
patterns we see in Corregidora, which are only broken when they are revealed and re-written in that final jazz lick at the end of the novel. It is in fact Miranda’s ability finally to name the women from whom they are all descended, to meet her in her dreams, that gives her the knowledge to save “Baby Girl” or Cocoa. For despite the possible scientific and “rational” explanations for Cocoa’s illness, there remains in Miranda the knowledge that Cocoa and George are connected up to the lost memory of Jonah, John Paul and eventually all the way back to Sapphira. She stares at the name and trying to guess.

“Sarah, Sabrina, Sally, Sadie, Sadonna—what? A loss she can’t describe sweeps over her—a missing key to an unknown door somewhere in that house. The door to help Baby Girl. (280)

And Mama Day does meet Sapphira in her dreams, as in that final dream she is given to understand herself as the daughter, a daughter to the legacy of Sapphira Wade, a daughter who establishes the connection between the pain of the past and the present.

Daughter. The word comes to cradle what has gone past weariness. She can’t really hear it ‘cause she’s got no ears, or call out ‘cause she’s got no mouth. There’s only the sense of being. Daughter.

It is this dream that leads her to open the well that her daddy had nailed shut so tightly to “look past the pain” and to see or hear the history of the family and the several generations which led to this moment. Mama Day finds her great-grandfather’s journal in the attic and in the back of that journal is the remains of the bill of sale for Sapphira Wade. The whole history of Willow Springs is built on the knowledge that this woman “was nobody’s slave,” but she needs to know her name and that represents the need to know the history that has been denied her. Her opening the well is the opening of the pain
which has been contained within it and the “other place,” and when she opens the well and hears “all that screaming. Echoing shrill and high,” she sees that “Once, twice, three times peace was lost at that well.” (284). The absence of the names of the mothers in the family tree is finally clear for the reader. This is the story of a slave woman who broke Bascombe Wade’s heart and her descendents, who lost Peace/peace in that well as the mother tried to follow her child to death.

A woman in apricot homespun: Let me go with peace. And a young body falling falling toward the glint of silver coins in the crystal clear water. A woman in a gingham shirtwaist: Let me go with peace. Circles and Circles of screaming. (284)

Yet the central question for Mama Day is not only to decode the mystery of their history but also to look past the pain and look for the strength to re-create, to conjure:

...the losing was the pain of her childhood, the losing was Candle Walk, and looking past the losing was to feel for this man who built this house and the one who nailed this well shut. It was to feel the hope in them that the work of their hands could wipe away all that had gone before. Those men believed—in the power of themselves, in what they were feeling. (285)

Mama Day’s eventual vision leads her to a similar place as Baby Suggs’ holy. To the space—the clearing—where looking past the pain allows one to see the possibility to “believe in the power of themselves and what they were feeling.” The pain of the history of slavery and colonization which is most destructive is the dissolution of belief in the self—the erasure of feeling. Sethe tells us that as she jumped off that cart and stood in the yard of 124 for the first time she felt that she could finally love—“when I jumped down off that wagon—there wasn’t nobody in the world I couldn’t love if I wanted to. (162)

The narratives in Beloved, Mama Day and Corregidora speak to the process by which
through theorizing, storytelling, critiquing and conjuring which may in fact encompass them all, it becomes possible through the reconstruction of a erased history—the imagined rememory—to create a self both collectively and individually that looks past the pain and begins a process of healing, changing, agency. For there is no doubt that George and Mama Day do indeed save Cocoa. George is unable at the last minute to trust in the power of his own hands, for it is his hands that Mama Day sends him to the chicken coop, the site of his own worst phobia, to find...what? When he is unable to trust in the joining of his hands with Mama Day’s, the weaving together of the two disparate ways of knowing and historicizing that they each represent—his heart explodes. Yet in that moment of his death he finds peace: “But I want to tell you something about my real death that day. I didn’t feel anything after my heart burst. As my bleeding hand slid gently down your arm, there was total peace.” (302) Thus the cycle is reversed; from the multiple deaths of peace emerges the peace of death. It is a peace in fact that allows Cocoa to begin the searching for answers in new ways. Significantly all three of these texts embody the possibilities for agency in the daughters, Ursa, Sethe/Denver, and Cocoa. Each of these women establishes the matrilineal history which defines them, even as such a search/process requires that they look at the pain of this lineage, the pain of slavery, and that they look past the pain to the strength of the will of their multiple mothers to survive. Denver in fact expresses her understanding of the connection between Beloved and Sethe, and in that understanding is able to move from the place of silence and confinement she had willed herself into:

...anybody white could take your whole self for anything that came to mind. Not just work, kill or maim you, but dirty you. Dirty you so bad you forgot who you were and couldn’t think it up. And though she (Sethe) and the others had lived through it and got over it, she could never let it
happen to her own...White might dirty her alright, but not her best thing, her beautiful, magical best thing—the part of her that was clean. (262)

And it is Stamp Paid who comments that Denver, the little baby who he himself saved from the handsaw, is “turning out fine, real fine.” In each of these novels the journey to re-member the past is not performed as an exercise but as an act of survival, illustrated in the transformation of Denver, Ursa’s reunion with Mutt, and eventually Cocoa’s ever-changing interpretation of her own history and her yearly conversations over the sound with George. When Mama Day comes out to find her:

And some things are yet to be. She always finds her in the same place, sitting on the rise over The Sound. It’s a slender body, but the hair is streaked with gray. And when she turns around there are fine lines marking off the character of her face—the firm mouth, high cheekbones and clear brown eyes. It’s a face that has been given the meaning of peace. A face ready to go in search of answers, so at last there ain’t no need for words as they lock eyes over the distance. (312)

All three of these novels employ multiple images of conjure/conjuring— which transform our notions of history, memory, theorizing and agency. Far from the abstract logic of western theorizing or the linear insistence of western historicizing or the unified or fragmented self of modern/postmodern literature, they present to us a view beyond the limits of any one of these generic glances. It is a vision or revision of all of these activities and an insistence on their interconnectedness which makes us look differently at our acts of historicizing and theorizing, but which also demands that we reexamine the tools upon which we are depending to grasp the present or define the “struggles and wishes of our age”.

207
BIBLIOGRAPHY


-----“Is it Useful to Revolt?” *Philosophy and Social Criticism* 8 (Spring 1981)


__________.” Authority, (White) Power and the (Black) Critic; It's All Greek to Me ” *Cultural Critique* 7(Autumn 1987) 19-46.


“Mapping the Postmodern.” Universal Abandon, Ed. Ross, University of Minnesota Press 1989


Johnson, Charles, Middle Passage.


_____.”When Mama Comes to Call.” *Essence* 13 (August 1982): 78-81.


_____.”Graceful Passages.” *Essence* (May 1990): 134. Staging a...


_______. *The World, the Text and The Critic*. Cambridge Massachusetts: Harvard University Press 1983


_______. *The Question of Palestine*; New York: Vintage 1992


