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## Refusing to be silent : tracing the role of the black woman protector on the American stage/

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L I B R A R Y



REFUSING TO BE SILENT: TRACING THE ROLE OF THE BLACK  
WOMAN PROTECTOR ON THE AMERICAN STAGE

A Dissertation Presented

by

BRANDON LA HUTCHINSON

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

DOCTOR OF PHILOSOPHY

February 2004

Department of Afro-American Studies

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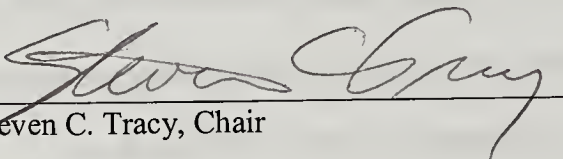
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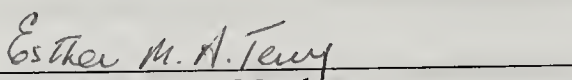
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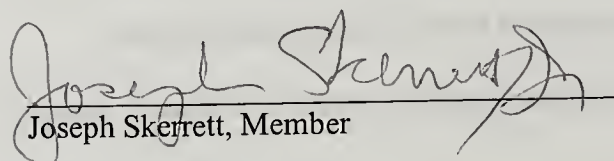
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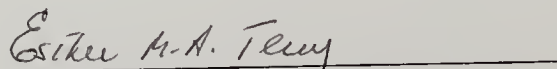
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## ABSTRACT

### REFUSING TO BE SILENT: TRACING THE ROLE OF THE BLACK WOMAN PROTECTOR ON THE AMERICAN STAGE

FEBRUARY 2004

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In the plays of Georgia Douglas Johnson, Alice Childress, and Pearl Cleage, black women are often portrayed as defenders of the physical self, protectors of identity, and guardians of the future. This study will examine how these playwrights examined the issue of protection in their plays. Although each playwright will be looked at specifically in relationship to one of the three categories—physical, social identity, feminist,—the boundaries remain fluid. Where each playwright fits predominately into one category, the overlap is noticeable as the definitions between the three areas of protection sometimes merge

“Physical protection” is the act of defending from attack and loss. In relationship to Georgia Douglas Johnson it will mean looking at how black women are unable to protect the body from physical devastation, i.e. lynching. “Social identity protection” requires the main characters to undergo a transformation that will inevitably change how they view themselves in relationship to their environment. Social identity protection is manifested in the plays of Alice Childress when the women realize that they must redefine society’s perspective on the black woman’s place. This transformation is especially significant for two reasons. First, it is the catalyst for the other characters’

journey to self-identity. Second, the journey encourages the reevaluation of their responsibility to the black (and larger) community. “Feminist protection” involves black women who are concerned about the physical safety and longevity of one another. Successful feminist protection requires that black women tell the truth and not keep silent about how their race and gender informs their lives in America. These distinct facets of protection become united in each playwright’s individual commitment to portraying the African-American experience on stage and beyond truthfully.

An examination of the history of blacks on the American stage will provide a framework that substantiates the need for this study on protection. This historical background will provide the context needed to understand what necessitated the work of Georgia Douglas Johnson, Alice Childress, and Pearl Cleage.

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# CHAPTER 1

## INTRODUCTION

In the plays of Georgia Douglas Johnson, Alice Childress, and Pearl Cleage, black women are often portrayed as defenders of the physical self, protectors of identity, and guardians of the future. This study will examine how these playwrights examined the issue of protection in their plays. Although each playwright will be looked at specifically in relationship to one of the three categories of protection--physical, social identity, feminist—the boundaries remain fluid. Where each playwright fits predominately into one category, the overlap is noticeable as the definitions between the three areas of protection sometimes merge.

“Physical protection” is the act of defending from attack and loss. In relationship to Georgia Douglas Johnson it will mean looking at how black women in her plays are unable to protect the body from physical devastation, i.e. lynching. “Social identity protection” requires the main characters to undergo a transformation that will inevitably change how they view themselves in relationship to their environment. Social identity protection is manifested in the plays of Alice Childress when the women realize that they must redefine society’s perspective on the black woman’s place. This transformation is especially significant for two reasons. First, it is the catalyst for the other characters’ journey to self-identity. Second, the journey encourages the reevaluation of their responsibility to the black (and larger) community. “Feminist protection” involves black women who are concerned about the physical safety and longevity of one another. Successful feminist protection requires that black women tell the truth and not keep silent

about how their race and gender informed their lives in America. These distinct facets of protection become united in each playwright's individual commitment to portraying the African-American experience on stage and beyond truthfully.

An examination of the history of blacks on the American stage will provide a framework that substantiates the need for this study on protection. This historical background will provide the context needed to understand what necessitated the work of Georgia Douglas Johnson, Alice Childress, and Pearl Cleage.

Slavery was not yet abolished when the African Grove Theatre was established. Its creation ran contrary to slavery's most powerful and damaging precept, which stated blacks were inferior and uncultured. The lack of entertainment options for free blacks, due to segregation, was the major motivator in William Henry Brown's creation of the theater in 1821. Based in New York City, in the back of Brown's house, the company began as a tea garden called The African Grove. In this setting free blacks could partake of food, drink, music, and the reading of poetry and drama. Another free black, James Hewlett, furthered Brown's mission by insisting that the entertainment haven become a place of drama as well. The theater's first major production, *Richard III*, began in the upper apartment of the African Grove. While the company staged mostly Shakespearean plays, they also presented *The Drama of King Shotaway*, an original production written by Brown about slave rebellion. Like the initial creation, the African Grove Theatre was popular not only because it was a place where free blacks could gather and socialize, it was deeply significant because blacks were staged with dignity (Mitchell 25).

While the company won the respect of the black community, it also became the focal point of whites. The company eventually began performing for a mixed audience,

after several complaints about the African Grove's desire to keep the setting all black. The special partition that was created allowed white patrons to sit in the back of Brown's house (Marshall and Stock 34). Whites' patronage of the company's production came at a great cost. Due to their raucous and sometimes hostile response, which ultimately caused several productions to be raided because of noise violations, the company was forced to change locations frequently (Dewberry 129). At one point, the company wound up adjacent to their rival, the premier Park Theatre, which was under the directorship of Stephen Price. Ironically, both companies were performing *Richard III*, and Price, who refused to be outdone, hired a mob to enact a riot in the African Grove Theater, so that it would be shut down. From the responses of the theatergoers to the actions of Price, it is clear that whites did not envision blacks outside of their social role as slaves. This prevalent white mainstream thinking ultimately led to the demise of the theater, which folded after two years. Ultimately, there was no room for images of black people with humanity on the stage. One actor, Ira Aldridge, had to leave the country in order to play Othello, Macbeth, Lear, and Shylock without repercussions from a hostile audience. Instead of blacks being represented on stage in this manner, white American actors became popular by performing stereotypes of African-Americans.

White audiences were interested in seeing a particular image of African-Americans on stage, one that stemmed from minstrelsy. As a result, African-Americans continue to combat these images rooted in this tradition. Minstrelsy, considered the first authentic American theatre form, truly began in 1829/1830s (Haskins 19). Blacks, however, didn't make their debut as minstrels until the 1860s (Mitchell xx). Hence, the irony in the name "black face" theater.

Minstrelsy originated on the American slave plantation where blacks presented a caricature of themselves for the master through dancing, comic routines, playing the banjo or other forms of music. Slaves were required to project themselves in a way that went along with how the masters saw them. Lawrence W. Levine reported in Black Culture and Black Consciousness that this image was recorded by whites because it “fit easily with their positive and negative images of the Negro” (18). Whites recognized that imitating blacks and making them the subject of theatrical material could be entertaining and economically profitable. Minstrelsy was popular for white audiences because it assuaged any guilt that slavery was morally wrong. If black slave life was carefully portrayed as fun and humorous, then the assumption was that slavery was not bad. If this perspective was true, then whites simply could not be associated with an institution that degraded an entire race. In fact, these productions actively worked to erase any negative perception of slavery from the American consciousness.

The way minstrelsy was performed can be broken up into two periods: pre-and post-Civil War. Since blacks were not allowed on the stage, this “performance of blackness” required white actors to be made and dressed up to look the way they *thought* blacks looked (Gubar xiv). Within the pre-Civil War minstrelsy period, notes Haskins, blacks were portrayed in a “sympathetic” fashion (Haskins 23). Through minstrelsy whites were able to show their “unspoken admiration for the rhythms and the dances and the humor of the Negro” (Haskins 23). It was not politically or socially acceptable to acknowledge that the slaves they considered savage were talented. Instead of acknowledging the talents of slaves, white actors went to plantations for their research so that they could instead exploit the slaves’ lifestyle. This research, according to Haskins,

was the “energy or life” that provided the imitations with “wit, imagination and brightness” (Haskins 25). This background study seemingly showed an interest in presenting as much of an authentic portrait as possible.

Although Haskins suggests that the earlier form of minstrelsy was more “sympathetic,” there was no such thing. It is impossible to formulate an equation that would gauge the humanity of anything under the guise of minstrelsy. From the beginning, argues Sterling Brown, minstrelsy was used by whites to ridicule and dehumanize. Whites who composed, acted, and sang in burnt cork for white audiences succeeded, says Brown, “in fixing one stereotype deeply in American consciousness: the shiftless, lazy, improvident, loud-mouthed, flashily dressed Negro, with kinky-hair and large lips, overaddicted to the eating of watermelon and chicken (almost always purloined), the drinking of gin, shooting of dice and the twisting of language into ludicrous malformations” (Mitchell 31-32). At this time African-Americans were not performing as minstrels, but their culture/blackness was being used to project an image that only robbed them of their sensibility and integrity, let alone humanity.

After the Emancipation Proclamation and the end of the Civil War, minstrelsy was changed. White audiences were still eager to see African-Americans through a stereotypical lens; however, African-Americans who were now allowed entry to the stage where they imitated their “‘blackface’ forerunners” made strides to change this sole perception (Abramson 7). This “black black impersonation,” a term coined by Gubar to mean “blacks imitating whites who imitate blacks,” was hugely successful (Gubar 115). In response to this new form of minstrelsy, stage actor George Walker said “nothing seemed more absurd than to see a colored man making himself ridiculous to portray

himself" (Haskins 44). His comment at first glance would appear contradictory, since he made a name for himself as a minstrel and later in vaudeville musical shows. But with more study it is clear that as an actor, along with his stage partner, Bert Williams, who tried to challenge the stereotypes formed during this post-Civil War minstrel era, he had limited opportunities to make a greater difference in this tradition. Walker and Williams, however, made some changes. For example, they starred in *In Dahomey*, 1902 (written by Will Marion Cook and directed by Jesse Shipp), the first black show to ever open on Broadway. The combination of African and American themes and settings coupled with a script that portrayed characters with humor and sensibility made the show successful.

Although *In Dahomey* portrayed an aspect of black life, the main criticism was its striking comparison to the minstrel tradition because of its use of caricatures. Sterling Brown argues that the result of black face minstrelsy was that it "underestimated and misrepresented the American Negro" (Mitchell 32). Therefore, although *In Dahomey* represents an advance, blacks were still being presented through a lens originally created and manipulated by whites.

The modicum of success that Walker and the others who participated in *In Dahomey* achieved did not prevent the perpetuation of the stereotypes associated with "the stage Negro." Critic Susan Curtis identifies four major typecasts associated with African-Americans. The "buffoon" was "introduced for comic relief but not essential to the drama" (Curtis 56). The way the "buffoon" spoke English, the exaggerated physical movement, and the child-like manner was in marked contrast to white characters who not only advanced the plot but who were sober and responsible (Curtis 56). The "faithful old gray-haired servant" did not advance the plot and defended, whether "positively or

do. a minstrel chapter

negatively,” the main white character (Curtis 56). The “tragic mulatto” served as a “cautionary tale against racial mixing and underscored the inherent ‘taint’ of African blood” (Curtis 56).

The final typecast is the most crucial as it had a more pressing impact on the social and political world of African-Americans. The first three perpetuated a horrible stereotype, but the fourth image worked to prevent blacks from achieving any political or economic success. “The savage beast” who was either a “blood thirsty slave or a monstrous rapist” was a “creature of instincts, irrational and out of control. Its example was to justify the lack of rights and opportunities for blacks after the Civil War” (Curtis 56). Thus, through this image, blacks were to be seen as incapable of ever achieving the same rights and privileges as their white counterparts. Despite Haskins’ attempts to categorize the humanity of minstrelsy based on time period -- pre-and post-Civil War -- minstrelsy stood as a medium to enact whites’ perception of blacks. Before the Civil War, minstrelsy was used to show that blacks didn’t need to be freed from bondage because they really were happy the way they were. After the Civil War, the typecasts used, often played by whites, showed that blacks really were not rational enough to have equal opportunities. In both cases, humanity was denied. The minstrel tradition was used to back up racist rationals that rallied for the subservient position of blacks in society.

Due to this limited mindset, there was no room for African-Americans to be seen with sensibility. Actor Charles Gilpin described the ramifications of minstrelsy and “black black impersonation” when he said, “apparently, colored folks were not supposed to be regular human beings, with a knowledge of life. They were just human

eccentricities that did certain old tricks, wore certain kinds of queer clothes, and were funny, the way monkeys in a zoo are funny” (Haskins 58). Blackness had to be performed in this way because it reiterated to the American public that blacks were inferior. The white stereotypical personification of blackness, which unfortunately became nationally known and celebrated, was necessary in order to keep the social hierarchy intact.

While these characterizations of African-Americans were established in the 19<sup>th</sup> century, they remained in full force well into the 20<sup>th</sup> century. In the article, “The Colored Players,” James Weldon Johnson argued against the limiting perception of African-Americans. African-Americans could only fit into debasing categories, “a conception which ignores the other side of the truth – that the life of every thinking Negro in the United States is part of a great tragedy” (Johnson 8). African-American playwrights in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century were vigorously fighting to change the limited and circumscribed projections “that always teetered on the edge of grotesque stereotyping and appropriation” (Gubar xiv). The significance of the notion of protection should be understood in this context. Black life was used as theatrical material. It was manipulated in a way where a true sensibility was erased from the stage. Hence, they became objects when their experience was staged stereotypically. African-American playwrights during the early 1900s were rallying to reverse this trend and reclaim their aesthetic subjectivity. Through the production of their black written plays, black characters became subjects.

The turn of the twentieth century marked the “Golden Age of the Negro in Theatre” or the slow demise of blacks’ participation in minstrel shows. The wealth of energy that existed within the African-American communities during this time could

finally be funneled into channels that would stimulate the creation of a new Black theater. In 1915 the NAACP initiated a Drama Committee so that the stage would be used to effect social change. It was constructed to encourage black written dramatic works.

While there was a great activity within the African-American community to champion a change in their perception on the stage, some white writers were offering contribution that strayed from stereotypes. For example, Eugene O'Neill is celebrated by Montgomery Gregory in The New Negro for his success in dignifying and popularizing Negro Drama (Gregory 153). Simultaneously, however, DuBois considered O'Neill to only "handicap" the image of African-Americans (DuBois, "Krigwa Players Inaugural Bill"). Despite the varying viewpoints, O'Neill created an audience for the viewing of black drama.

The debut and success of Ridgely Torrence's *Three Plays For A Negro Theatre* (April 5, 1917) is an example of white authored black theater that did not receive contradictory feedback within the black community. The overwhelming positive response from the African-American community was attributed to the fact that they were "engaged in a race drama that sounded their desire to become legitimate participants in the making of American culture – to find their reflection in the looking glass of culture" (Curtis 13). The significance of this debut was so great that Gregory considered April 5, 1917 to be the "first important movement in the development of an authentic drama of Negro life" (Curtis 203). *Three Plays* not only presented more than what DuBois called "silly songs and leg shows" but it gave the African-American community hope that offensive caricatures of blacks could be replaced with accurate depictions (Curtis 171). Both African-Americans and whites took note of the magnitude of this performance. Before

the debut of this production, the author of the *Crisis* article “Art” noted that “the white theatrical community stubbornly persisted in casting blackface white performers in African-American parts [even] after the advent of successful all-black shows” (Curtis 40). This trend was being reversed with the onset of productions like *Three Plays*.

The early 1920s marked the beginning of the “Little Theatre Movement,” whose purpose was to change the images of African-Americans and extend the spectrum in which the race was seen. This new movement was chock full of plays that were intended to erase the stereotypical, “not yet thoroughly normal” images of blacks (DuBois “Krigwa Players Playbill” 1926). In talking about the movement that African-Americans leaders hoped would turn into a “national Negro theater,” Gregory asserted that only the Negro could be charged with this responsibility because “he alone can truly express the soul of his people” (Patterson 29). These new images would be manifested through “native dramas” which could have a dramatic or comedic element. Native dramas consisted of “folk” plays or “race or propaganda” plays. Each accomplished a distinctive purpose: folk plays focused on education and entertainment while race plays focused on the oppression of blacks.

Folk plays avoided a focus on oppression and the daily racial tensions African-Americans faced while still representing their experience. The purpose was to “educate and entertain without offending its audience” (Perkins 3). Supporters of folk plays believed that this venue would reach a larger audience, one outside of the black community. Believing that the production of propaganda plays would be a “mistaken effort” Gregory suggested that African-Americans could win a “broader recognition” through folk plays (Perkins 7). Playwright Eulalie Spence shared a similar perspective.

Where she avoided propaganda plays because she believed that her background as a West Indian sheltered her from the treatment of black in America, she emphasized that propaganda could not ensure success. She considered herself a “folk dramatist” whose purpose was to entertain (Perkins 106). Propaganda plays dealt with the oppression African-Americans faced and were written to stimulate social change. Where there were varying perspectives, the unifying gel between both fashions was the desire to depict the race realistically.

The promotion of black theater by African-American playwrights was encouraged by Charles S. Johnson of *Opportunity* magazine, W.E.B. DuBois and Jessie Fauset of *Crisis* Magazine, and Howard professors Alain Locke and Montgomery T. Gregory. Through their own journals, they worked to stimulate playwrights’ interest in writing about “their race life” (Gregory 29). Annual contests with monetary prizes during the years of 1925 and 1927 were given to the playwright of the best one-act play. Many playwrights, a great number of them women, got their start and achieved fame by participating in these annual contests. These contests sparked the shaping of a new theater—one non-subversive, one that would allow African-American writers to use their art to tell the story of their experiences.

The purpose of this study stems from DuBois’ call for meaningful theater. A 1926 playbill for the Krigwa Players, a theater guild created by W.E.B. DuBois to promote black theater, outlined his philosophy. Black theater, according to DuBois, should fulfill four major qualifications. In order for it to be considered “real Negro theatre” it must be:

*About Us:* That is, they must have plots which reveal Negro life as it is. *By Us:* That is, they must be written by Negro authors

who understand from birth and continual association just what it means to be a Negro today. *For Us*: That is, the theatre must cater primarily to Negro audiences and be supported and sustained by their entertainment and approval. *Near Us*: The theatre must be in a Negro neighborhood near the mass of ordinary Negro people. (DuBois "Krigwa Players Inaugural Bill")

Focusing on the works of African-American women playwrights Georgia Douglas Johnson, Alice Childress, and Pearl Cleage will illuminate how the call for the presentation of truth in black theater was being responded to in the early 1900s and is still being answered. The concerted effort to protect and further this corrected image of blackness on the American stage is a major link amongst the chosen black women playwrights.

It is significant to mention that all three of these dramatists also used other mediums, namely poetry and novels, to convey messages about the black experience. The focus here is not to overshadow their other forms of art, but to celebrate their involvement in the black theater tradition. Written in anticipation of performance, theater provides a unique opportunity to communicate in a particular way. The intention of performance allows for the creation of a reciprocal or dual experience. The actors perform, thus bringing the experience to the audience. Essentially, what happens is the transformation from written to oral. Johnson, Childress and Cleage responded to DuBois' charge to create meaningful theater by heightening the consciousness of their audience. Their plays are informed by their racial and gendered experiences as African-Americans. Portraying "physical," "social identity," and "feminist" protection from this standpoint stunts the perpetuation of false depictions of African-Americans on the American stage.

This study will move chronologically beginning with an examination of Georgia Douglas Johnson in Chapter Two, "Lineage," Alice Childress in Chapter Three, "Coming in Second," and Pearl Cleage in Chapter Four, "Eye Toward Survival." Concluding remarks will come in Chapter Five, "Epilogue." "Lineage" will feature three of Georgia Douglas Johnson's anti-lynching plays, *A Sunday Morning in the South*, *Blue-Eyed Black Boy* and *Safe*. Lynching was a dominant topic until the 1930s. The major thread unifying this chapter is that due to the sociopolitical climate, a black mother's ability to protect her family was questionable. Through an exploration of the three protagonists various strategies and tenuous outcomes will be revealed. Each play culminates in a different outcome. In *A Sunday Morning in the South* grandmother Sue Jones is unable to protect her grandson. Through ambiguous cunning, Pauline Waters in *Blue-Eyed Black Boy* is able to save her son from being lynched. New mother, Liza Pettigrew in the play *Safe* redefines the notion of protection and equates it with killing. The discussion of Johnson will conclude with an examination of other anti-lynching plays of the period. A look at the selected work of her contemporaries, both white and black, will supply a well-rounded context to assess the ways other women were using anti-lynching dramas as a form of propaganda.

Georgia Douglas Johnson's representations of lynching demonstrated her unyielding desire to have the black experience portrayed with truth and integrity. The chapter "Coming in Second" will show how Alice Childress continued the crusade, beginning in the Little Theatre Movement, to correct the images that whites had created of African-Americans. The major argument connecting all three plays, *Florence, Trouble in Mind*, and *Wine in the Wilderness*, is that a proper and healthy self-identity must be in

place in order for the main characters to help others, particularly artists, to recognize their responsibility to the black community. After a conversation with a supposed liberal but still racist white woman in a train station, Mama of *Florence* no longer feels that her daughter's place has to be at home raising her son while working as a domestic or at a job specifically for black women. Instead, she is able to be fully supportive of her daughter's acting career. Once Wileta of *Trouble in Mind* fully grasps the social and political consequences of her current role in a theatrical production, she is able to separate herself from the staging of black stereotypes. Tommie of *Wine in the Wilderness* is transformed once she realizes that she is more in tune with the needs of her community than her middle class black associates. Her journey forces the other characters, mainly Bill, to reevaluate their thoughts on blackness and black womanhood. All three main characters eventually find comfort with their identity after replacing the image of black womanhood created by white society with one of their own. After this they are able to champion for the protection of a positive and authentic image in the arts. The women in "Coming in Second" are not fighting to physically protect the black body, but instead their image of black womanhood, assessed and defined in their own language. The inclusion of other selected plays by African-American women will chronicle the playwrights' urgency to address the relationship between personal transformation/self-identity and artistic protection.

The discussion of protection will continue in chapter three, "Eye Toward Survival" where the theme becomes equated with black women teaching each other how to save their lives. This assures the longevity and survival of black women. In essence, protection is taught. In Cleage's three plays *Flyin' West*, *Late Bus to Mecca*, and

*Hospice*, life saving information is passed on through black women-centered communities. For example, it is through the incorporation of ritual, and conversation between women that women are taught to identify and name their fears, claim their wants, and reject what is negative and abusive. Ultimately, black women are provided with the tools to protect themselves.

*Flyin' West* is a story about black women who learn and pass on what it means to be “free” women. The play deals with the importance of protection on a variety of levels. The women teach each other to protect what is theirs: land, history, and a sense of self. *Late Bus to Mecca* provides the reader or viewer a clear cut blueprint for what women need to teach other. In order to protect, women must forget about labels; class barriers and social standing cannot get in the way of protecting other women. In the play *Hospice* a dying mother instructs her daughter to live her truth and not stay in any boxes delegated for women. Where Cleage’s work will be at the forefront of this chapter, an examination of her contemporaries’ writing will show the varying ways that other playwrights pass on survival information.

The “Epilogue” will re-visit DuBois’ mission on creating a new black theater. Johnson, Childress, and Cleage responded to DuBois’ call but also expanded the notion of “for us” and “about us” by creating plays with a woman’s perspective. In a review of the core chapters it will be clear that these playwrights were adept at representing the concerns of the whole community while simultaneously making a space to talk about gender.

The theme of protection is the major connecting link in the work of playwrights Georgia Douglas Johnson, Alice Childress, and Pearl Cleage. All three playwrights are

connected by their desire to create images of blacks and the world with accuracy and sensibility. Despite the circumstance, whether it is the physical or symbolic ramifications of lynching that prevent people from being comfortable with their identity, or inaccurate portrayals, these playwrights create women characters that seek to transcend their situation the best way they know how. And ultimately, they become even better protectors.

## CHAPTER II

### LINEAGE

A fresh and focused examination of the widespread ramifications of lynching will not only illuminate the experience, but its particular effects on and implications in the lives of black women. Black women's efforts to end lynching were not limited to urgent pleas, political statements or societal renunciation echoed through playwriting; in fact, their investment in anti-lynching was evident in their involvement in organizations like the Southeastern Federation of Colored Women's Clubs, the Commission of Interracial Cooperation (CIC), and the Association of Southern Women for the Prevention of Lynching (ASWPL). Black women activists like Ida B. Wells, Mary Church Terrell and Francis Ellen Watkins Harper not only spoke out about the travesty, but in their writings and speeches they worked to change the fictitious thought that lynching was done on the behalf of white womanhood in order to expose the true barbarism of the white mob.

Charlotte Hawkins Brown, another black woman at the forefront of the anti-lynching movement, discussed the perpetuation of this perspective and charged white women with the responsibility of rectifying this image. At the Women's Interracial Conference, Brown encouraged white women to actively participate in the end of lynching by specifically controlling their men:

"The Negro women of the South lay everything that happens to the members of her race at the door of the Southern white woman. Just why I don't know, but we all feel that you can control your men. We feel that so far as lynching is concerned that, if the white woman would take hold of the situation that lynching would be stopped, mob violence stamped out and yet the guilty would have justice meted out by due course of law and would be punished accordingly" (Speech Given at the Women's Interracial Conference, Memphis, Tennessee, 8 October

1920).

Black women activists continued to insist upon white women's involvement in debunking the myth that lynching was any form of "protection," and to instead spread the truth: that it was lawless violence. Interracial cooperation not only proved successful in destroying the foundation on which the practice of lynching rested, but Black and White Southern women were responsible for disseminating information on how women could be involved in preventing lynching. For example, the ASWPL's list of ten things that any woman could do to prevent lynching ranged from studying material, soliciting signatures from organizations, talking with superintendents of schools, performing awareness programs at churches, and getting the support of the press (Association of Southern Women for the Prevention of Lynching Papers). Organizations such as the ASWPL did not only empower women as they pledged their activism, but their work contributed to the demise of the practice. In the first eight years, the ASWPL contributed to a fifty percent reduction in the incidence of lynching in the South (Charlotte Hawkins Brown, Commission on Interracial Cooperation).

Black women playwrights of the early 1900s joined in the crusade against lynching by writing and staging one of America's greatest horrors. One form of exposure was seen specifically through the playwright's focus on the mother's inability to protect herself and her family. An examination of lynching dramas will bring to the forefront the nature of lynching and the widespread ramifications for black families, and in this case, black mothers. Even in the home, where one is thought to be safe, thoughts of lynching lingered as black women sought ways to protect their children.

Georgia Douglas Johnson, considered one of the most "prolific of black dramatists of the Harlem Renaissance" and whose bibliography lists approximately 20

plays, addresses these contradictions (Brown-Guillory 7). She portrays the black mother's experience during the early 1900s as one with many bitter contingencies as she tries to protect her family from lynching. *A Sunday Morning in the South* (1925), *Blue-Eyed Black Boy* (1930), and *Safe* (1929), are three of five anti-lynching plays by Johnson which most clearly portray the issue of protection. The discussion of Johnson's work, along with an examination of other plays by black and white dramatists of the period, will provide a solid context in which to study and understand their representations of lynching and protection.

A lynching drama is defined in Strange Fruit: Plays on Lynching by American Woman as "a play in which the threat or occurrence of a lynching past or present, has major impact on the dramatic action" (3). There are three characteristics that are commonly found in women's anti-lynching dramas. First, the action generally takes place in the home. The setting is either in the kitchen, living room, or dining room and the play usually opens with the woman cooking, cleaning, praying, or sewing. The combination of the action in a setting that is often relegated to women with the absence of a father or husband creates a woman's sphere. Scholars have studied the black woman's home and its connection with resistance, empowerment, and the affirmation of humanity. For example, bell hooks asserts in Yearning: Race, Gender and Cultural Politics that where sexism has relegated the woman to the home, black women use the "homeplace" as a place of activism. The home becomes what Jacqueline Jones calls a place of "domestic nurture" or an environment where the family is protected from white society (Jones 323). In these plays the home is more than a place of shelter. It is an atmosphere of empowerment where the woman makes the decisions and is in the position of

protecting the family. Simultaneously, Johnson highlights how easily this environment of education and atmosphere of resistance is taken away from black women. In one minute black women may be passing on resistance information but in the very next, the home can be entered and the son dragged away and lynched. This results in a "theatre of jarring contrasts and incongruity" for those who consider the 'American home' to be affiliated with protection (Stephens 9). The short time in which the home can change from a place of resistance to a place of terror is illuminated in these anti-lynching plays.

Emerging from this woman's sphere is the second characteristic, the black woman's voice. The black woman speaker describes or re-creates a lynching incident that has taken place in the past or is presently occurring. The intimate connection the speaker has with the lynching places her in the position of *griotte*. It is in her telling that the personal becomes the tool for political change. The personal story of a woman's experience is not only used to evoke sympathy, but is the leverage the playwright uses to rally against lynching. Essentially, in these cases the personal story is the backdrop of the protest writing.

There are usually two black women speakers. The first is the neighbor or a friend of the family who brings the news of the impending lynching. The exchange of the news between black women strengthens our notion of the woman's sphere as we wait to see how the women will work together to protect and save the black male. The second and most important speaker is the mother or grandmother of the male to be lynched. It is through the telling of her story that we experience her helplessness, her rage. In this capacity, the black woman speaker echoes and honors the work of activists like Ida B. Wells, who according to Judith Stephens is "possibly the first person to publicly recite the

horrors of lynching" (Stephens 11). In addition to carrying on the legacy of black women activists like Wells, playwrights have created characters that manifest what Will Harris terms the "dual liberation motif" (Harris 205). The characteristics of the "dual liberation motif" are "dramatizing the plight of their race" and the formulating of "dramatic strategies which enabled them to stage substantive, independent African-American female presences, and thus propose their sexual equality" (Harris 205). The combination of a discussion on lynching with the black woman telling of it in her own words is an example of the "dual liberation motif." In these three plays, we understand the particular experiences and circumstances a woman faces from the perspective of the mother. From this specific viewpoint comes the truth and sensibility of the black mother during the 1900s. This truth is understood more profoundly because the black woman is telling it herself and after all, like Valora Washington so matter-of-factly says, "Who can give a more accurate representation of the reality of the experience of black motherhood than black women themselves?" (Bosch 45). In these plays, we come to know of the experiences of black mothers through black women speakers. We get an understanding of the black mother who struggles with the uncertainty of her family's safety. It is through the violation or the destroying of the home space that this new voice of self-representation is created and heard.

The third characteristic becomes what Stephens calls an "alternative medium." (Stephens10). It is manifested through music, poetry, or prayer. This medium can take the shape of background church music, spirituals or verses/prayers incorporated in the dialogue. The inclusion of Christianity via prayer, songs, or revival meetings creates a

juxtaposition that exposes the hypocrisy in white Christian communities and highlights the unyielding faith in black communities.

The value of music, poetry and prayer cannot be underestimated, since it is used to "help to express the rage, irony, and profundity of Black American life in tonalities and colorations absent from conventional western speech" (Wilkerson 62). The separation from traditional western speech adds another layer to the homeplace that is already black woman dominated. The audience not only learns of the lynching from the woman, who is in her own home, but the prayer she says or the music she sings comes through her. The playwrights give the black woman the opportunity to share her story, in her own language; the impact is a true sense of what black motherhood was like in the early 1900s.

Georgia Douglas Johnson uses all three elements to convey the black mother's relationship to lynching. While the plays are similar in this fashion, they differ in their conclusions. Johnson is careful to portray various outcomes so that it is understood that all black mothers didn't share the same, exact experience. In providing scenarios where some black women can save while others are unable to, she shows that black women are intricately linked because of a shared experience, not because they are identical. In the first play *A Sunday Morning in the South* (1925) Johnson tells the story of a grandmother who cannot prevent her grandson, Tom, from being lynched. Sue Jones, a seventy-year-old grandmother, whose lifetime spans from slavery to freedom, is first seen in her home preparing breakfast. She sings verses from a spiritual as she waits for her grandsons, Tom and Bossie, to awaken. Immediately, we are to assess that Sue's home is spiritually based. The hymns from the nearby church can be heard in the home and Sue's singing

solidifies our perception that she is a Christian woman. When the play opens, Sue is found singing this verse: “Jes look at the morning star... We’ll all git home bye and bye” (31, 32). The reference to the morning star is biblically based; Revelation 22:16 states that Jesus is the “bright morning star.”<sup>1</sup> Sue utilizes the spiritual as a coping mechanism. Her singing of the “morning star” serves as a steady reminder of her faith in God and His promise to her. She believes that despite her experience on Earth with racism, in time she will be welcomed into Heaven.

Sue Jones’ belief that black peoples’ protection will come “bye and bye” falls in line with her ancestors who sang spirituals about their life in Heaven. Their ability to focus on a better life to come is an example of how a “religious consciousness” can have a transformative effect (Davis 7). As a result of this mindset, legal slavery could not become spiritual slavery (Levine 80). In the case of Sue Jones, her singing about reaching Heaven, even if only momentarily, took her out of the earthly experience and softened the brunt of subordination. Her understanding that God’s protection will come “bye and bye” demonstrates how racism did not negatively alter her spirituality.

In addition to this reading, “bye and bye” also refers to life on earth. While Sue Jones knows inherently that she will attain a better life after death, she does have the desire to be safe while alive. Johnson was concerned more about the living reality of African-Americans, not their religious salvation. The naming and protest of lynching through these dramas was one way in which Johnson advocated for a different experience for African-Americans. Her intention was not to imagine a greater life that could only

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<sup>1</sup> The concept of the “bright and morning star” is discussed in Richard Wright’s Uncle tom’s Children (New York: Harper Perennial, 1993). In the chapter “Bright and Morning Star” Wright introduces the “morning star” as Jesus Christ but the symbolism fluctuates. The new star becomes Communism, the only true form of hope and freedom for black men.

happen after death, but instead to make immediate changes that would enhance life on Earth.

The incorporation of music grounds Sue Jones in Jesus Christ. However, her home is not only spiritually-centered, it is also a place of comfort. The family eats, neighbor Liza joins them, and there is discussion about the happenings of the day. This small community talks about the frequency with which black men are blamed for crimes (particularly rape) that they did not commit. Their conversation was created with the intention of showing that despite the fact that blacks are not shown justice, they have a true sense of what it is because they have been denied it. For example, Sue believes that the guilty should be punished by the law (33). However, the community is aware that the law does not work on the side of black people. Instead, supposed law abiding citizens participate in the framing and killing of blacks. In the juxtaposition of Sue, Liza, and Tom with these supposed law-abiding citizens, Johnson not only questions the integrity of whites who commit these crimes, but also illuminates their false sense of justice. Tom, knowing the inequities that exist within the legal system, believes that education can help and protect his community.

Tom Jones is more radical than the other literary tom, Uncle Tom. Stowe's Tom learned to be "content" in whatever station he found himself (Stowe 278). Tom Jones, on the other hand, feels an impulse for change. In fact, it is his dream to help change the laws and "make em strong" (33). Tom is hopeful that with education he can make a difference. However, because he is never able to bring his dreams to fruition, the community is thwarted. Tom never reaches his potential as a leader and is subsequently unable to make necessary changes.

Sue is confident that despite the deaths of innocent black men, her grandson will not have to worry about being falsely accused, and ultimately, lynched. Sue's confidence in her ability to protect her grandson, coupled with Tom's dreams for a better legal system, acts as a kind of foreshadowing. It is the perfect opportunity for Johnson not only to show the power of white men, but also the result of it: Sue Jones' homeplace is permanently altered and she is unable to carry out her role of protector.

Johnson establishes the black mother in her home to show how white men can penetrate this atmosphere of protection. Their breaking in is strikingly similar to rape; their unwanted entry is both a psychological and physical violation. What remains then is a homeplace that only exudes the illusion of protection. In reality, Johnson asserts that the black mother's home is an environment filled with contradictions, since protection cannot really be offered. Once the officers barge in without consent, Sue's inability to protect is furthermore underscored by the men who've predetermined Tom's fate without just investigation. The officers bring with them the victim who was allegedly raped by Tom. She is uncertain that Tom is the rapist, but the white men force her to accuse him. Their involvement changes Tom's life forever. The woman's "I-I'm not sure" means to the officers "he fits your description perfect" (34). It does not matter whether Tom is guilty or not. They have already made up their minds that he will die. Flimsy evidence that points to any black man is enough for a lynching.

In addition to showing that there is no protection from the law for blacks, Johnson also illuminates the subordinate position of all women. Sue cannot prevent the men from entering her home. She cannot even interject without being told "shut up, your word's nothing," nor can the white woman give her testimony (34). Although Sue is silenced in

this instance, Johnson is not. Sue's silencing is an opportunity for Johnson to portray the power relations that virtually stripped from the black woman the right to defend herself and family against white male authority. The fact that she is able to make this argument shows her ability, in her own life, to transcend sexist ideology – your words are nothing - - that worked to keep black women in their daily lives voiceless. Her words are major tools in the protest against lynching; with her literacy, Johnson destroys the concept that women cannot use their words powerfully.

While Johnson could attack lynching through the written word, mothers unfortunately could do little to prevent it. Johnson uses this fact to heighten the emotional intensity of the play as Tom is being taken from his home. The homeplace has immediately been converted from a spiritual sanctuary to an atmosphere of terror and helplessness. As Johnson has Sue think about how she can help to prevent the lynching, we have a chance to study the ironies that are a part of her role as former Mammy. After Tom is pulled away by the officers Sue wonders what she can do to help save him. With no men present, the women are in charge of finding a solution to save Tom. Liza suggests that Sue rely on the “good white folks” she has worked for. Believing Liza's solution to be a good one, Sue decides to ask Miss Vilet, a white woman whom she nursed as a baby, to help. In her mind, Vilet, the daughter of a judge, is the potential lifeline that could save Tom. However, what we know to be true about the power relations of this time is that the white woman's place was in the home, not where the lynching was. So, it makes perfect sense that Johnson does not focus on a conversation between Vilet and Matilda, who was sent to bring word about Tom's circumstances. There was no place for the white woman to prevent the lynching much less a place for a black and white woman to converse and

support each other in finding a way to save black men. It is made clear that Sue's role as mammy and her relationship with Vilet has no significant bearing when it comes down to protection. Where Johnson points out that black and white women alike do not have the power to prevent lynching, it still remains ironic that Sue, who was once able to protect and nourish white children as mammy and wet nurse, cannot protect her own at this time.

In *A Sunday Morning in the South* Johnson captures the black woman who served in roles that allowed her consistently to protect white children while simultaneously forfeiting the opportunity to do the same for her own. Johnson's *Blue-Eyed Black Boy* (1930), like *A Sunday Morning in the South*, addresses the issue of protection, but her conclusion is different. Although the mother in this play is able to save her child, Johnson still conveys the uncertainty and angst that comes with being a mother of a son during a time when lynching was rampant. As in the first play, the action occurs in the home, the black women are the main speakers, and the alternative medium is prayer. The play begins with a kind of simultaneous domesticity. While household chores are being performed, the sharing of information on womanhood is being passed on from mother to daughter. Mrs. Waters and daughter Rebecca are in their kitchen, where food is warming in the stove. Rebecca prepares for her new role as wife and potential mother as she puts the finishing touches on her wedding dress. While this is taking place, we are given insight into the family's morals. Both women talk about the community Baptist Church looking up to their family (47). The Waters are an esteemed family for several reasons. Young Rebecca's impending marriage to Dr. Thomas Grey increases the family's social status in the community because he is a physician, a middle class professional. Another reason is the deceased Mr. Waters, who when living was a very proud man who was put

on a "pinnacle" (47). The Waters women speak about their pride as well. Mrs. Waters says, "I ain't carried myself straight all these years for nothing" (47). And Rebecca responds similarly with, "Well, I sure have tried to walk straight all my life" (47).

The concept of walking straight is significant in black women's history. In this context, "walking straight" is multi-layered. Since the women were just commenting on being looked up to in their church community, their remarks connote being religious and maintaining a Christian lifestyle. However, on another level Johnson is reminding her audience that although black women were stereotyped as lascivious, they had sexual morals. Because of race and class, black women had different circumstances that made it more difficult for them to walk straight.

Historically, black women were put in precarious situations that made the conventional concept of purity nearly unattainable. During and after slavery, black women were at the mercy of white men. A good example of how the black woman was made victim of rape is seen in Harriet Jacobs's slave narrative, Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl. Jacobs's narrative is helpful in providing a context for what "walking straight" meant in the black community, and how it could not always be applied. By detailing the constant threat she was under due to Dr. Flint's consistent efforts to dominate her mentally and sexually, she corrects the stereotype of the licentious slave woman. His making her "prematurely knowing" made him abnormal and inappropriate, not her (28). She wanted to be virtuous, and his constant efforts to force her to submit to his sexual desires made him unclean, not her. In his attempts to conquer Linda, Dr. Flint showed that he was far from virtuous, but his being forty years her senior shows how unprincipled and criminal he was, not her. She argues that the intersection of race, class,

and gender put black women in a situation where they could be seen as loose and simultaneously allowed white masters to hide behind this incorrect stereotype. Black women could be preyed upon and were seen negatively, but white men went unscathed. In her illumination of Dr. Flint's behavior, she forces the audience to shift any criticism of black slave women to the true criminals, the white masters.

Like Jacobs, Johnson argues in *Blue-Eyed Black Boy* that black women find pride and honor in being able to "walk straight." However, there is some ambiguity in the play around rape. The play title implies that there was interracial sex between Mrs. Waters and a white man but strangely, Rebecca doesn't draw any conclusions about miscegenation. Instead, she marvels to her mother about Jack's eyes. Given the frequency of interracial rape, it would be unrealistic for Rebecca not to understand how her brother got blue eyes. Mrs. Waters' silence indicates that her family didn't speak of how miscegenation actually affected them. However, when Jack is arrested for attacking a white woman, Mrs. Waters' past is slowly revealed for the audience to make some conclusions about her relationship with a white man.

The unraveling begins when Hester enters the Waters' home and tells the family that Jack was beaten and dragged to jail by the police because he was accused of attacking a white woman. The news of Jack's arrest is followed by the fact that his lynching is being planned. Rebecca's fiancé, Dr. Grey, offers to drive over to get the judge. The name "grey," which means in between black and white, or indeterminate, symbolizes his being in between, not quite having the perspective on race relations that other blacks do. His solution to get the judge involved shows how unaware he is of the way the law works to benefit whites. It also betrays his appeal to white male patriarchy.

The women, however, do not have allegiance to or faith in America's judicial system.

They are aware of the judge's history: he does not penalize men who lynch. In Hester's opinion, his not doing anything to prevent lynching makes him a lyncher as well.

Although Hester feels it is not worthwhile to go to the judge's house, Dr. Grey's leaving is important in the creation of the woman's space.

As in *A Sunday Morning*, the solution to save the family from a lynching rests in the lap of the mother. Mrs. Waters sends Rebecca to the room to locate the little tin box hidden on the left side of her trunk. Inside the tin box is a ring. We know that the ring has a great significance, but she does not explain its worth. Once Rebecca retrieves the box and Mrs. Waters sorts through it and finds a small ring, Dr. Tom Grey is sent to the governor's house with these instructions: "...fly over to Governor Tinkhem's house and don't let nobody -- nobody stop you. Just give him the ring and say, Pauline sent this, she says they going to lynch her son born 21 years ago, mind you say twenty one years ago -- then say -- listen close -- look in his eyes -- and you'll save him" (50). Although, Dr. Grey, Hester, and Rebecca are unsure of how this ring can prevent a lynching, Mrs. Waters is confident that she can save Jack. She does not disclose what her relationship is to the governor nor what the ring symbolizes. Traditionally, the ring stands as a symbol of perfection, eternity, and fidelity. It connotes a commitment that the governor should honor. What is ironic is that the commitment between a white man and black woman has the potential to save a child, but the pending commitment between Rebecca and Dr. Grey may not offer the same kind of protection against lynching. Because of power relations, white men can intervene and protect, but black husbands and fathers are often powerless when trying to protect their wives from rape and their sons or brothers from lynching.

As the women wait and hope that Dr. Grey will reach the governor's house in time they watch from the window the men on horses with rifles move toward the jail. Although Johnson goes into little detail about the impending brutality, a picture is painted. Her focus is generally on presenting the emotional/psychological affects of lynching, not the physical. Johnson was not alone in her choice to make the physical less significant. The absence of the actual physical lynching in black women's anti-lynching plays allows the playwright to center the drama on how lynching affects the hearth, home, and mind instead of the body (Harris 30). After seeing the men with their guns, Hester calls out loud to the Lord, asking Him to "Help us this night" while Mrs. Waters turns from the window and prays silently (50). Mrs. Waters remains confident that Jack will be saved because of her faith. Faith in God is a usual characteristic of black women's plays of this period. What is uncommon is Pauline Waters' faith in a white man. In fact, the implication that Johnson makes is even larger when Pauline says "Trust in God, daughter—I've got faith in him, faith in—in the Governor—he won't fail" (50). Johnson equates the power of the governor with the power of God to imply that, in the 1900s, white men were like God, they controlled all things. This parallel also hints at a positive ending. If the governor has God-like power and God can do all things, then the assumption is that Jack will be saved.

This unusual allegiance that Mrs. Waters has to the governor stands in stark contrast to the historical relationship Brent outlines in her narrative. The slave narrative shows that black women were physically, sexually, and psychologically threatened by their masters beginning at an early age. This continual sexual abuse perpetuates the exploitation and victimization of women, thus becoming what Angela Davis calls in

Women, Race, and Class an “institutionalized pattern of rape” (Davis 23). For Johnson's character to have a special, secret relationship with a white male given this history is shocking. Even if Mrs. Waters is simply appealing to the governor's privileged power to save her son, it is still controversial that Johnson portrays a relationship between a white man and black woman that speaks of true commitment and protection.

In order to sustain the secret significance of the ring and how it can save Jack, Johnson has Mrs. Waters disclose a little more of her past through prayer. Praying aloud this time, Mrs. Waters exclaims, "Lord Jesus, I know I've sinned against your holy law, but you did forgive me and let me hold up my head again. Help me again dear Jesus--help me to save my innocent child...Let his father" (51). She sees herself as guilty but forgiven. The child, however, is innocent. The stage directions indicate that "she stops and looks around at the two women, then cautious" she continues with "you understand all, I mean sweet Jesus--come down and rise with this wild mob tonight--pour your love into their wicked hearts" (51). Johnson's deliberate word choice forces us to ask questions about what she leaves unanswered. For example, what does “understand” really refer to? Is it that God understands her shame? We know for certain that Mrs. Waters feels shame around Jack's birth. The shame and sin she speaks about during her prayer could be in reference to her having Jack out of wedlock. The evocation of the prayer however, still leaves the nature of the relationship between Mrs. Waters and Governor Tinkhem ambiguous. Did she and the governor have a loving relationship as the ring could imply? It could be that the ring was given to Mrs. Waters as a token of affection. Since interracial marriages were forbidden, the governor could not marry Mrs. Waters. The ring, instead of the man, would have to serve as the stand in. Jack could

have been conceived from a rape and even worse, there could have been a rape and a ring: That is, the ring could be considered a kind of payment, or symbol of the hypocrisy of the separation of races.

Regardless of the ambiguity, Johnson creates a character that is able to save her son from a lynching. Whatever the significance of the ring, it is what saves Jack. It is essential to note that a white man's influence is what allowed the lynching to be prevented. However, it is intended for the reader to see Mrs. Waters' strength as well. The majority of the play centers on her secret weapon, a symbol of eternity, which ultimately saves her son's life. Because of this savvy and her foresight in keeping the ring, she is able to prevent the lynching.

Where Johnson arrives at two different conclusions in the plays *A Sunday Morning in the South* and *Blue-Eyed Black Boy*, both plays underscore the uncertainty of a mother's protection. In both situations there is desperation and frenzy as the family and neighbors try to come to a solution to prevent lynching. More angst builds as they wait to see if their solution will actually save the life of their family member. Although spirituals are not used as a backdrop in *Blue-Eyed Black Boy*, prayer is a shared trait of the plays. Both Sue Jones and Pauline Waters call on God. While these women recognize God as their strength, they also see their relationships with whites as a possible source of hope and help. The different endings demonstrate that for black mothers during the 1900s protection was not guaranteed; white male power often affected how much a mother could do to protect her family. Some mothers were lucky enough to protect and to save. Others were not. For those who could not, like Sue Jones, some comfort lay in their

understanding that uninterrupted or continual safety would come once the child entered Heaven.

Another perspective on lynching and what black mothers will do to protect their children is shown in Johnson's play *Safe* (1929). As in the two previous plays, the action occurs in the home with the black woman speaker as the main character. The alternative medium, prayer, is not used explicitly as it is in *A Sunday Morning in the South* or *Blue-Eyed Black Boy*, but there is a belief in God. The dramatic action in this play differs from the other two. This play's angle revolves around the birth and protection of a newborn son rather than a mother protecting a grown son. *Safe* opens with Liza Pettigrew finishing up some last minute sewing for her due-any-minute-now baby. She is encouraging her mother, Mandy Grimes, to rest instead of doing the dishes. John, Liza's husband, is also in the room reading the paper. While John reads he discovers that Sam Hosea has been caught, arrested, and jailed. Sam isn't accused of attacking a white woman like Tom or Jack. His crime: self-defense, or to use Liza's terminology, "trying to be a man and stan[ding] up for hissef" (29). Sam defends himself after being slapped by his boss in a dispute over wages. Mandy, aware of the danger that comes from this type of retaliation says, "that's mighty unhealthy sounding business for this part of the country. Hittin' a white man, he better hadder made tracks far away from here I'm er thinking" (27). Sam, however, is lynched before he ever has a chance to escape.

Johnson's staging of the lynching of Sam Hosea is a deliberate reference to Sam Hose, who was lynched April 23, 1899. He was not only accused of killing his landlord, Mr. Crawford, in a dispute over crops, but he was also charged with raping Mrs. Crawford. Sam Hose, like the staged Sam, was taken from jail, tortured and lynched.

Because his lynching was so brutal, it became known as the “crucifixion of Hose” (Gaines 128). Johnson only parallels the story in the similar name and in his being taken from jail. She leaves out the particulars of the lynching, like his being “stripped naked, chained to a tree, and surrounded with kerosene soaked wood,” not to undermine it, but instead as an opportunity to stage the psychological effects of this particular lynching on Sam Hose’s community (Gaines 128). Liza Pettigrew is her vehicle to explore and imagine how Sam’s lynching affected his mother.

As in *A Sunday Morning* and *Blue-Eyed Black Boy*, the news of the impending lynching is brought by a black woman. John leaves after he hears from Hannah that a mob is forming. Because of his absence the Pettigrew home is transformed into a woman's space similar to Sue Jones' and Mrs. Waters' home. Liza, Mandy, and Hannah are left alone to discuss the impact of lynching and to figure out how Sam can be saved.

In John's absence, Liza's distress about Sam's lynching heightens. Mandy and Hannah question whether she can withstand this kind of emotional devastation with the baby's impending arrival. As the noise increases and the horses and footsteps draw nearer, the impact of what can happen to Sam becomes more real to Liza. While pacing the floor, she asks the other women whether or not they think Sam will be hanged. Mandy encourages Liza to move away from the window, but the distance does not shelter Liza from what she hears next. Sam is heard offstage shouting, "Don't hang me, don't hang me! I don't want to die! Mother! Mother!" (29) Sam is brought into the action of the play directly. Unlike Tom or Jack, Sam is not just referred to, but he is heard on stage. Sam's urgent pleas not only heighten the horror of what will happen to him, but they are also used to illuminate the relationship between child and mother. In this

scenario we see clearly a child's reliance on the mother for protection. Simultaneously, we are shown the dismantling of this relationship due to external circumstances. Johnson has him call on his mother purposely – to drive home the fact that in this instance a black mother is not always able to respond to the call that will save her son's life. This emotional intensity, along with the fact that black men are unable to live and defend themselves in a racist environment, shapes how Liza feels about being a parent, especially a parent of a male child. Liza is so adamant about never having sons that she questions their purpose: "What's little nigger boys born for anyhow? I sho hopes mine will be a girl. I don't want no boy baby to be hounded down and kicked 'round" (28). Johnson's use of the word "nigger" is significant as it highlights that race and color have everything to do with lynching. Through the portrayal of Liza's feelings, Johnson makes a racial and gender-based analysis: black males are the target for lynching. And black women are left to grapple with this troubling truth.

Liza's not wanting to have a son is understood in this context. Since Sam's mother is unable to protect or intervene, Liza symbolically becomes his mother who hears the calls but must deal with the psychological burden of not being able to prevent his impending death. The intensity of both his fate and hers as a mother who is unable to protect brings forth her own birth pains. She is now in the same category of other black mothers who are left to wonder about the fate of their children. Will she be able to protect or intervene? Will she have a son who will live and die like Sam? While she is waiting for the doctor, Sam's death weighs heavily on her mind. Unable to forget him, she asks her mother, "Did you hear him cry for his mother? Did you?" (30). Her mother encourages her to forget Sam and to concentrate on birthing a healthy baby. Before she

enters her room, she repeats her mother's instructions. "Born him safe! . . . Safe. . ." (30). In this moment it is as if Liza understands that the idea of "safety" is questionable for black families. In addition, it foreshadows her choice to protect her own child. After the doctor delivers him and his back is turned, she kills him. As she strangles the baby she says repeatedly, "Now he's safe--safe from the lynchers!" (32).

What Liza does to protect her child parallels the real life incident of fugitive Margaret Garner, who in the latter part of January 1856 killed her baby daughter to prevent her from enslavement. Liza's staunch resolve to protect her son echoes Garner's preference of death to slavery. After Garner killed her child, she pleaded for death and to be tried for murder. In fact, she saw death as the only option and was prepared to "go singing to the gallows rather than be returned to slavery" (Aptheker 11-12). Johnson does not directly make reference to the Garner incident, but her creation of a mother who kills her child to prevent lynching picks up on the historical memory. The result of this historical recall marks the crucial connection between slavery and "post slavery" experiences. Johnson shows that the demise of slavery did not stop the mental, physical or psychological abuse of black people. Lynching became a newer version of this type of oppression. Thus, we have an emphasis on the mother's choice: one made out of desperation in order to protect. Killing in this play becomes equated with protection. Her killing her son minimizes the length and the intensity of suffering that would be the definite result of a lynching death. It is the only answer that Liza has that will prevent an innocent boy from death too soon and that will prevent her from experiencing not being able to respond to his death calls at the hands of the mob.

Johnson's *A Sunday Morning in the South*, *Blue-Eyed Black Boy* and *Safe* all protest the lynching of black men. The three plays visit the theme of lynching from a black mother's perspective. From this we are able to assess the ways in which they coped and desperately sought to protect their children. All three women characters are different in their creation. Sue Jones tries to save Tom by relying on her good white people, but is unfortunately unable to save him from his death. Pauline Waters uses her relationship with the governor as her leverage to save her son Jack. And Liza Pettigrew makes the bitter choice to kill her newborn son to protect him. While all of the portrayals of the black women speakers are different, what remains the same is Johnson's blatant plea against lynching and the illumination of America's racism, particularly towards black men, in its perpetuation of mob violence.

Johnson's protest writing did not exist in a vacuum. Many of her black women contemporaries wrote about lynching using similar themes. This sharing of common themes portrays a united front against lynching. While the playwrights chose different angles, their perspective bonded them together. The commonality amongst them was that lynching reaped deep consequences for black mothers and the entire humanity. For example, in exploring the concept of self-defense both Johnson and Mary P. Burrill came to the same conclusion: black men who asserted themselves died at the hands of a lynch mob. In *Aftermath* (1919) Mam Sue's husband was "burnt down by the big gum tree" after retaliating against Mister Withrow, who believed that he was lying about his wages (65). In addition to detailing the consequences of self-defense, Burrill's play goes on to examine the contradictions that black men face in America. Mam Sue's son, John, who has just returned home from war in France for a brief reunion with his family, finds that

his fighting for freedom for others has no bearing on his life as a black man in America. Du Bois articulates this same sentiment in "Returning Soldiers" where he explores a grave contradiction – black men are considered free enough to go and fight in another country's war, but when they are on America's soil, they are not free. Instead, he points out that they are lynched, insulted, and disenfranchised (4). Du Bois argued that black male fighters, the true "Soldiers of Democracy," had to be prepared to "fight a sterner, longer, more unending battle against the forces of hell" in their own land (5). John realizes how meaningless his earned medals are in his own land and is determined to confront America's injustice by fighting on behalf of his murdered father and other black men. The play ends with his leaving his home armed to confront the war in his own town, not a war waged on another country.

Presenting these crucial contradictions that blacks faced during the early 1900s is a common trait amongst early playwrights. In the one-woman *A Black Woman Speaks* (1950) Beah Richards examines the effect of white womanhood on the black community. Although she does not write about the hypocrisy black soldiers faced, what links her to Burrill and Johnson is her ability to convey important contention in the lives of black women. Her words, described by Margaret B. Wilkerson as being "biting," poignantly describe the ironies and contradictions with which black women, like Sue, struggled (Wilkerson 27). What is clear in both plays is the fact that a black woman nursing a white child does not reap any significant rewards for the black woman. This nursing did not ensure a bond between mammy and child; it did not give the black woman any extra rights or privileges. So, when Sue needed help, she could not go to the child she nursed. Richards, like Johnson, pinpoints the fact that black women were considered

commodities. They were breast feeders, and because of the dynamics of power relations between whites and blacks, these white children might grow up to further oppress their own Mammies by despoiling her daughters and killing her sons (Wilkerson 38).

Richards shows that the role of caretaker was meaningless; it did not ensure black women any safety. She argues that black women worked to benefit whites, in particular white women, by raising their children. The slave mother was forced to make another woman's children a priority, not her own, and in the case of lynching, black mothers realized that the fate of their sons was tied up with white women (39). She refers to the death of Emmett Till, who was lynched for whistling at a white woman, to illustrate how black men were killed to keep the perception of white womanhood intact. In these two instances Richards is strikingly similar to Johnson as she reveals how the black mother is directly connected to white women. In both examples, Richards, like Johnson, illuminates the bitter consequences of this relationship that forced them to either place their child ancillary to white children or to lose them by lynching.

As a result of the devastating impact of lynching, black women playwrights have focused on the choices a mother will make to protect. May Miller, Angelina Grimke, and Shirley Graham are similar in their discussion of lynching as they create protagonists who have redefined the notion of protection. In *Nails and Thorns* (1933) playwright May Miller extends her discussion on lynching by centering her play on a white mother. She suggests that white women, too, may share some of the same sentiments as black mothers. In fact, the concept of preferring death for one's child over having him live in a racist world is not a foreign one for white mothers. Miller chooses to venture away from the black woman's home to the white woman's to argue that lynching can affect black

and white women alike. The major action of the play revolves around Gladys, who takes her infant to the mob in order to change their hearts, in order to prevent the lynching of Lem. She says to her servant Annabel, "I'll tell that mob how I feel...I'll show them my baby--he's this town's tomorrow" (183). Gladys believes that she and her family are representative of whites that have morals, and who know that lynching is wrong for the whole community. She believes that all children are born innocent. They are only shaped into being racist. She knows that as a parent she has the ability to mold him into a person who manifests human kindness, not hatred. Believing that her son's innocence "will show them the way," Gladys heads out to the mob only to get trampled over and, worse, for her baby to be killed (183). Once her husband Stewart, the town sheriff, returns unsuccessful at preventing the lynching, Gladys informs him that her son is dead. "He's dead, dead, I tell you, and I'm glad." She laughs hysterically and continues "He'll never have to see a lynching" (186). This statement of bittersweet joy is similar to Liza's saying that her son is "safe." Where Liza made a conscious choice *to kill* and Gladys' son *was killed*, both share a common belief that death is the only sure form of protection from mob behavior.

The fact that some women believed that killing one's child was better than living certainly gives weight to the intensity and pervasiveness of racism during this period. The choice to kill also illuminates the mother's despair that the problem will ever be solved. Angelina Grimke's *Rachel* (1916) adds to the body of plays on the theme of the mother's choice. Grimke addresses the racism existing in the 1900s and how it affects blacks, men and women, both boys and girls. Because of the rampant racism, Rachel makes two choices that are intertwined. She says to God, "Listen! I swear -- and may my soul be

damned to all eternity, if I do break this oath -- I swear -- that no child of mine shall ever lie upon my breast, for I will not have it rise up, in the terrible days that are to be -- and call me cursed" (157). Rachel considers herself and all black mothers to be cursed because society hinders their ability to protect their children.

Like *Rachel*, the poem "Motherhood," by Johnson brings to the forefront the mother's difficulty in protecting. Due to the socio-political times or what the speaker calls a world of "cruelty and sin," she, like Rachel, is certain that she cannot be a mother (Shadowed Dreams 64). This poem is relevant and useful as it demonstrates the proactive mindset of women during this time. They were conscious not only of the times in which they lived, but the power that they had to protect their children. This is understood when Johnson writes "I cannot bear the pain/Of turning deaf ears to your call,/Time and time again" (64). The "monster men" fuel this woman's choice to not have children. These "men" can be rapists, lynchers, or lawmakers who do not make the safety of black children a priority. Although Grimke does not use the same terminology as Johnson, the "monster men" in this play are the entire "white Christian nation" that "has deliberately set its curse upon the most beautiful--the most holy thing in life--motherhood!" (145) Rachel not only decides not to have children, but she also resolves never to get married. She knows that her beau, Mr. Strong, (whose name is the antithesis of what black men are allowed to be in a white male dominated society), would not be able to protect her. He would not be able to give her the things that would make her feel secure. She would need children who would never be harassed and who wouldn't feel cursed because of their color.

At this point in the play, Rachel is strikingly different from the woman introduced initially. At the beginning of the play, she is excited about the prospects of motherhood, as she believes it to be her destiny. The stark change in her outlook on mothering is due to three major events.

The first is the lynching of her half brother, George, and father, Mr. Loving. The name that Rachel's family carries is used to represent the goodness that is missing not only in the white mob but white America as well. Grimke points out the irony in the forced and calculated suffering of two men who were fighting for the humanity of African-Americans as her father and half-brother's good deeds are met with hatred. Rachel and her brother, Tom, are finally told of their father's and half brother's lynching on the anniversary of their death, ten years later. What incenses the mob to lynch is Mr. Loving's publication concerning mob behavior. Mr. Loving, who was considered by his wife to be "daring" and "utterly fearless," published in his self-owned Negro paper the "most terrific denunciation" of the mob that lynched a black man instead of the white man they knew to be guilty (143-144). His control over the written word allowed him entrance into the public sphere but this, however, was a violation of mob boundaries. His decision to ignore the anonymous letter instructing him to retract his words in a following issue combined with his publication of a second issue on mob behavior prompted the mob to visit his home. Mr. Loving was dragged out after shooting four men, as was seventeen-year-old George, who tried to rescue him. Although George was urged by his father not to get involved, he was proud to die fighting for African-Americans' freedom (144). Once taken from their home, they were lynched and hung from a tree so close to Mrs. Loving's house that she could hear its twig tapping against her window. As in the

song "Strange Fruit," this tree does not bear wholesome fruit or anything edible, but instead decayed bodies. The existence of this different kind of fruit speaks of white male power. "The faint rustle of leaves and the 'tap-tapping of the twig of a tree' against the window" serve as a taunting reminder to Mrs. Loving that she was powerless in preventing their death (144).

The second incident that shapes Rachel's choice is an encounter with Mrs. Lane's daughter, Ethel. Ethel's mother has just removed her from a racist school where she is forced to hang her coat and hat in an area far away from the other children's and where she is called "nigger" in front of the teacher. Her schoolmates have never gone to school with a black child. One girl wiped her hand crudely over Ethel's face and runs off after looking at the back of her hand screaming, "It won't come off! See!" (155). Her cruel curiosity piques the other children's and they follow suit. One boy says aloud, "I know what she is, she's a nigger!" (155). At the end of the day Ethel is followed home with the yells of "Nigger!" around her. Mrs. Lane tells Rachel more of her daughter's experiences and discloses that the racism that Ethel faced in school was also present in Sunday school. Mrs. Lane removes her daughter from Sunday school, after only one day, because of the Superintendent's comment that Ethel would be more comfortable in another setting. In this example, Grimke accuses Christian leaders of perpetuating racism.

The third instance culminates in Rachel's decision not to be a birth mother. Jimmy, the boy that she and her family are raising, is chased home and tormented with thrown stones and the words "Nigger! Nigger! Nigger!" (156) The lynchings, mock Christianity, and racial slurs are all threaded together by a belief system that is based on

hatred and white privilege. Grimke demonstrates the physical, spiritual, and psychological ramifications of internalizing racism. Rachel is so affected by the lynching of her father and George and the possibility that her children would share Ethel and Jimmy's fate, that she is unable to endure bearing children. Rachel goes against what she considers to be her calling as a woman, and chooses a life without marriage and motherhood to prevent any additional personal torment. Along with protecting herself from the psychological stress of not being able to save, she prevents her unborn children from experiencing racism and lynching.

Rachel's not heeding her desire to have children illuminates the choices mothers made to protect themselves and the children born into a racist environment. Shirley Graham adds to the body of plays on the decisions women are forced to make in order to protect. *It's Morning* (1940) is very similar to *Safe* in that the main character, like Liza Pettigrew, kills her child. The differences lie in the theme. *It's Morning* isn't a lynching play, nor is a male child killed. It opens with a slave community discussing the ramifications of the impending slave auction. Cissie, the mother of two children, makes the decision to kill her daughter Millie so that she will not be raped and abused, common experiences for a slave woman. As a child, Cissie was a victim of the master's sexual and physical abuse. When the slave women discuss Cissie as a child they remember her pride and how "she nevah walk, jes' prance an' run about da place" (215). After she was raped, fear replaced her spirit of pride.

Cissie intends to prevent Millie from experiencing this kind of abuse. She makes the choice to kill Millie when she hears a knock on the cabin door. Expecting the person to be the master or the new slave owner, she exits quietly and then returns with slain

Millie in her arms. It is more important to Cissie that Millie's "teahs will nevah choke huh song nor will huh limbs grow hebby wid dispair" (223). Cissie considers death to be more humane than to have her daughter's pride, youth, and innocence stamped out of her. Cissie, like Liza, has made a bittersweet choice. She kills her child to protect her, to prevent her from experiencing being broken, raped, and sold. There is a difference, however, between the two plays. Both women make the choice to kill, but as soon as Cissie has ended her child's life, she learns from the white man, who is a soldier and not a slave master, that they are no longer slaves. Cissie has unknowingly killed her child on the dawn of freedom. There is more dramatic tension at the end of this play than in *Safe*. Not only is the audience faced with the uneasy choices a mother makes to protect her child, but what makes it more unsettling is that if the officer had come sooner the death could have been prevented. Through the irony, Graham makes an ethical argument. She forces us to imagine a life that was not haunted by the effects of slavery. She suggests that if there was never an institution called slavery, some women may not have made these choices out of their desperation to protect.

Graham's focus in *It's Morning* is to bring to the forefront the women who did kill. Certainly, mother's coped differently; all mothers did not kill. However, there is something revolutionary in Graham's capturing of the experience of Cissie. Like Johnson does in *Safe*, Graham breaks convention and exposes a different coping mechanism, one unexpected, one difficult to grapple with. In their detailing this particular choice, they bring attention to women who are often unspoken of. Women who choose to endure are celebrated for great strength. But in the focus on women who chose to kill, both Johnson and Graham suggest that their stories need to be studied and

considered when examining the experiences of black women in America. When presented with the stories of Liza and Cissie, which parallel the real life experiences of Margaret Garner, the audience is forced to look at the circumstances in society that made this a realistic possibility.

Whether a mother chose to kill or not, the difficulty of being a mother during slavery or in the early 1900s was understood. Playwrights have created characters who did not kill, but whose consciousness was informed by the possibility. Killing did not have to happen, but its being a thought in a mother's mind demonstrates how brutal racism was, how absolutely awful it must have been to choose between the breath and death of your child. As argued earlier, Gladys from *Nails and Thorns* did not kill her son, but she saw how his being killed saved him from the consequences of living in a racist society. Rachel from Grimke's play did not physically kill, but she had an understanding of its worth. She and Mrs. Lane understood the concept of protection in the same ways that Cissie, Liza and actual slave women did. In Grimke's play, Rachel says, "...it would be more merciful--to strangle the little things at birth" instead of them enduring lynching and racism. Mrs. Lane is of the same accord when she says to Rachel "dryly" that if she had another child she would kill it. The reasoning: "It's kinder" (155). The fact that the protagonists are aware of killing as an option does not mean that the playwrights encouraged this choice. In their portrait of women who could conceive of infanticide, they illuminate a very bitter and uncomfortable thought process. In these plays, the notion of a mother's instinct becomes more complex. Protection does not necessarily take the shape and form of breastfeeding and lullabies. It also comes to mean death at the hands of the mother who is ensuring the child a safer existence in Heaven.

Where all of the women are linked in their thoughts of death versus living, race would be the major difference in the lifestyle of the newborn son, Millie, and Junior, Gladys' son. Because Liza's son is black and a male, and because Cissie's daughter was black and female, their race made them vulnerable to circumstances from which whites were protected. Although whites wouldn't face the same kind of racist brutality because of their skin, Miller suggests that racism affects the whole of the American people, not just those who are lynched. The concept of lynching is broadened when Gladys tells her husband that her son was lynched along with Lem (186). There are two lynchings, the actual lynching of Lem and the symbolic lynching of Gladys' son Junior. Lem is lynched because of his race. Junior's lynching is symbolic. He is not killed because of his race, but his death is symbolic of the killing of America's morals and supposed democracy. It is representative of America's spinning downward, of America burning out the prospect that racism can be ended with new generations of whites who believe in equality.

Throughout this chapter I have included the plays of Johnson's contemporaries to establish a broader context in which to understand anti-lynching plays. Angelina Weld Grimke's, *Rachel*, and May Miller's *Nails and Thorns* add to the genre of anti-lynching plays written in the early 1900s. *Rachel* and *Nails and Thorns* both discuss lynching from the same perspective as Johnson, through the lens of a mother. In Mary P. Burrill's *Aftermath*, lynching serves as an important backdrop. It is a reminder that even though black men are fighting for justice in other countries, the injustice of lynching and mob brutality still exists in America. What binds these plays together is their examination of lynching from an individual's or family's perspective.

*Climbing Jacob's Ladder* (1930) by Regina M. Anderson Andrews, however, uses a different angle: a community's. The setting is a black church. Prayer and music are incorporated to add to the authenticity of the setting. Andrews includes references to the Bible in some of the characters' names. The victim's last name is Thomas and there is a Reverend Sampson as well. She does not use the Biblical names with the intention of paralleling the experiences of Thomas and Sampson to the characters, but as another form of validating the church environment. The males are the main speakers. The only time that we hear the voice of the black mother is after her son, Wash Thomas, has been lynched. The play's action centers on the mass meeting initiated to raise the three hundred dollars to cover Wash Thomas' defense. In her presenting two churches vying for control of the money at a point where time is crucial, Andrews forces the audience to think about how church procedures can get in the way of important work.

Another important issue that she raises is the community's faith in God. Andrews centers the main action of the play on this faith and, while doing so, questions whether or not it gets in the way of protection. This comes to a head when one of the members of the church slips out, witnesses the killing of Wash Thomas and then returns "staring wildly" to a rejoicing congregation who are five dollars short of their goal. Sammy explains that he watched the lynching while hidden in a tree. In this instance the tree carries double meaning. It is a place for safety, as Sammy is able to watch the treatment of Wash unnoticed. However, it is simultaneously representative of the white male's dominion over nature. They controlled which "fruit" died on what tree. It is through the voice of Sammy, not the black woman, that we learn the details. He says:

Dey had him tied to a car naked, full of blood an sweat. Dey dragged him about a mile or so, me sneakin behin. Den, I saw em doublin' back

--I climb up a tree, dey stopped across de road almost infront of me, and cut his body loose. God, he stood up somehow! An all de time dos white folks was jumpin roun . . . building a fire an cuttin switches, an yellin' and screamin. Dey made him stan, and Wash, he stood dere somehow wif his head up, wild 'n' proud. Dey all beat him, yelling, 'Say dat you did it nigger, say dat you did it,' even de wimmen and chillun... He held de head back somehow, threw it back and laughed, jest laughed, jes like, --oh, sort of proud like ah'll allus hear him... Dey whipped out dat rope, n' put it round his neck, shoutin', 'Las chance nigger.' An Wash laughed again, long an loud (131).

This clear, physical description of lynching as a communal ritual is an unusual trait for black women playwrights of this period. This kind of exacting detail was not a common characteristic in the early plays by African-American women. Perhaps, this is the reason Sammy tells of the lynching and not the black woman. She isn't associated with the telling of the physical lynching. Portraying the emotional and psychological consequences of lynching was the aim, not presenting the brutality in all of its physical ghastliness. Additionally, there could have been unwritten but understood restrictions against women writing about the physical body in such detailed and gruesome portrayals. Perhaps this uncharacteristic trait was too explicit and too different from what other black women playwrights were doing.

The stage directions that we are given right before the story are useful in our drawing conclusions about Andrews' motives. Right before Sammy tells the story it says that he "falls heavily against the table... the dollars and the pennies clink unnoticed, falling to the floor" (131). Here, Andrews suggests that raising money would never have been the solution to saving Wash. Sammy tells the community that they spent too much time raising money, "doin' what de *white folks* telled yo to do" that they were not able to intervene (131). After the telling of the story, the debate over faith versus physical response is raised. There are cries of "Lawd is yah dere? Is yah still sittin in Hebben?"

and then simultaneously members with drawn knives and razors suggest a revolution: "Let's get em folks...Let's organize now and fight!" (131) Before the members can leave to fight, Reverend Lumpkin tells them that bloodshed will not bring Wash back. Still convinced that fighting back will avenge his death, they proceed out while some remain to pray. Hearing the thunder and seeing the lightning cause them to re-enter the church.

Andrews uses natural phenomena to symbolize God, reminding his people about the importance of passive and prayerful resistance. Reverend Sampson now intervenes and says after jumping up on a bench, "Dat's de hand ob God flashin across de Hebbens warnin you not to sin no mo" (132). He then asks the people to remember that prayer is what brought them through slavery, fieldwork, and war. The repetition of rhetorical questions is used to intensify the dramatic action as well as to conjure the feeling of a church service. For example: "Did knives ever hep Niggahs? What heped yo when dey beat yo in de cotton field and picked black babies from dere muddahs' breasts? Prayah! What heped cha when black boys was herded like dumb dribben cattle from de cotton fields to be cannon foddah in de white man's war? Git down on yo knees brudders 'n sisters 'n pray" (132). Reverend Sampson mirrors the Biblical Samson. In the Bible, Samson pulls down the pagan temple and delivers the Israelites from bondage to freedom by bringing them back to the faith of their fathers. In this instance, the pagan temple is manifested in the mindset of those who want to physically fight. He does not encourage this form of retaliation and instead reminds the people, like Samson, of their ancestors' faith and staunch reliance on prayer, which according to him, was their most successful coping mechanism. The play ends with Sammy, who is torn between the physical and passive protest, looking dumbfounded. He finally succumbs to praying with the others,

making him very similar to Reverend Sampson, and the Biblical Samson. Hence, the name similarity: Sammy-Sam(pson). Through the character Sampson, Andrews fashions a communal response to lynching that focuses on faith as a form of true resistance.

Although her play is not rendered from the perspective of black mothers like those of Sue Jones, Pauline Waters, and Liza Pettigrew, *Climbing Jacob's Ladder* adds to the body of anti-lynching plays. Andrews uses her play like the other playwrights discussed, as a form of propaganda, as a means to rally against the unfairness of lynching. But, additionally, she asks her audience to think about their religiosity. By including the debate, she forces the black community to think about their faith and to question whether or not it impedes their rally against lynching. Her conclusion, however, is indicative of her belief that religion has had a place in the black community, since slavery and prayer has been and still remains a coping strength and mechanism for survival. She shows that there are two options, fighting back physically and fighting back spiritually, but the ending of the play expresses her sentiment that the spiritual fight is the most worthwhile. It is what will eventually get its believers home. Out of the three plays discussed, Johnson's *A Sunday Morning in the South* draws the closest resemblance to *Climbing Jacob's Ladder*. Jones' humming "we will all get home bye and bye" at the beginning of the play is indicative of the same kind of religious belief advocated by Reverend Sampson. If protection from lynching will not be offered to blacks in their physical life, it will surely be reached later, in the safest home, Heaven.

While I have included plays by other black women playwrights to build a greater context in which to assess anti-lynching plays, it has also been useful for me to examine how white women discussed this theme and what conclusions they drew. The major

difference between black and white women playwrights is the presentation of their subject matter. White women playwrights were not in the same position as their black women colleagues who had the ability to stage an actual lynching or to focus on the real, not imagined, psychological consequences of the lynching. They could have chosen either because lynching affected them personally. The lives of their husbands and sons were literally at stake. Perhaps, there was no reason to evoke the actual image – they knew it well. But what could be added was the staging of the aftermath of lynching. What was its impact on families, communities, and in particular mothers? Black women playwrights protested against lynching strategically by appealing to the sympathy of white women, who were also mothers. As mothers, they shared a similar experience, one which black women playwrights hoped would propel white women to rally for the end of lynching.

For white women playwrights, the resurrection of the actual lynching, or the physical treatment that happens prior to it, was an important strategy. Because of their race and gender, they were prevented from being flooded with memories of the lynching of their family or community members. This allowed them to stage lynching with so much vivid imagery that the audience would be forced to confront it.

The theme of a mother's choice to kill crosses the color line. Corrie Crandall, author of *The Forfeit* (1925) and Anne Seymour Link, author of *Lawd, Does Yah Undahstan?* (1936) examine lynching from the perspective of a mother or grandmother who must decide how to save their children from impending lynching. *The Forfeit* is considered by editors Kathy Perkins and Judith Stephens to be "unique among lynching dramas by women because it shows a white woman's active participation in lynching"

(92). The best example of this is seen once Fanny finds out that her son, Buddy, has raped the schoolteacher. Fanny is frantically trying to save her son. There is an air of urgency as the bloodhounds are nearing her home. If she does not act immediately, she knows that Buddy will soon be implicated. Once Jeff, a black man who delivers the family's potatoes, knocks on her door, she has a solution. Buddy hides and Jeff becomes the scapegoat. After offering him food in the kitchen, she bolts the door behind him. The hounds lead Fanny's husband and the mob to her home where she tells them that "nigger Jeff" is the criminal (98). He is struck from the rear and dragged out despite his pleas of innocence (98). The ease with which a black man can be scapegoated illuminates a system that uses the stereotype of the black rapist to punish innocent men. Because Fanny knows that a black man is expected to die for this crime, whether he actually raped or not, her son is saved. Howell demonstrates, like the other women playwrights, the extremes a mother will go to protect her child. However, the major difference here is that Liza, Pauline Waters, Sue Jones and Gladys are the victims of the same white supremacist racist system that ultimately supports Fanny in the protection of her son and the lynching of an innocent man. Black women playwrights of this period have demonstrated what Howell enforces through her characters: that there is no concept of a black man's innocence in the minds of those who lynch.

*The Forfeit*, paralleled to Georgia Douglas Johnson's *Safe*, demonstrates that both black and white mothers will make extreme choices to protect their children. In looking at both plays, it is clear that the concept of killing as a form of protection is not just relegated to black mothers. White mothers kill, too. Although the mother in this play doesn't actually do the physical killing, her thought and plan brings the death of an

innocent black man. While the similarity between the two plays lies in the extreme choices a mother will make to protect, the major difference is that the audience does not empathize with the white mother. Her choice is not justified. In *Safe*, the mother witnesses a young man being led to his death. She understands the nature of power relations that punishes innocent black men. Her choice to kill is out of helplessness; she has every reason to believe that her innocent son may die similarly to Sam. In *The Forfeit*, however, the mother scapegoats an innocent man in order to hide her son's guilt. There is no way to equate the mothers' choices – one was to protect innocence and the other to prevent shame.

While Anne Seymour Link also examines the mother's choice to kill in order to save in *Lawd, Does You Undahstan?*, she tells the story from a black woman's perspective. It is from this perspective that we learn of a grandmother's form of protection. The choice that the grandmother makes in this play is very similar to the choice that Liza Pettigrew makes in *Safe*. Foreshadowing opens the play. The whippoorwill calls and Aunt Doady, grandmother of Jim says, "Listen to dat bird! Soun' lak he heart done broke in two" (192). Birds in this play are symbolic of an impending death. Hence, the whippoorwill is used to represent more than a bird in mourning. When broken down phonetically whippoorwill becomes: whip poor will. Here we not only see the explicit reference to whippings but also the beating of a person who is unable to defend himself. Hence, the word "poor." From this example of foreshadowing, we begin to expect the death of Jim. The whippoorwill is not the only example of foreshadowing. The screech owl, traditionally used as an evil omen representative of death, is another (192). Right before Jim, who is unusually late, returns home, the whippoorwill sounds

again, this time closer. Aunt Doady's response this time is, "Still grievin', is you? Body'd think you was mou'nin fo' de whole worl!" (196). As the play unfolds, it becomes clear that the screech owl is symbolic of Jim's death and the whippoorwill's mourning calls represent Aunt Doady's feelings after she kills Jim.

The action of the play is centered on Aunt Doady's decision to kill her grandson. Jim comes home followed by bloodhounds. He was spotted trying to help Mr. Watkins, a white man, who was lying on the side of the road. The white men set out after Jim because they assumed that he shot Mr. Watkins. While Jim explains the situation to Aunt Doady, the sounds of the bloodhounds become clearer. The sounds rivet her to a painful remembrance: the lynching of her son. To expose the brutality of lynching, Link provides the details of a young black man being dragged, hung, and shot. Through Aunt Doady's recollection of the lynching of her son, Jim begins to see a clearer image of his fate. He becomes more nervous and prepares to make it to the Louisiana border. She too is frightened that Jim will experience the same death as her son, so she launches her plan to kill and save him at the same time. She prepares Jim a cup of coffee as he gets the shotgun. She adds cyanide to his cup, the chemical he uses to preserve the butterflies he catches for Professor Brown. There is bitter symbolism in the killing of the butterflies and how it parallels to the pursuit and death of Jim. Jim catches and kills the butterflies. They are then preserved so that they can be studied. Jim will be caught and killed. And like the butterfly, there is an opportunity for study and spectacle once he is lynched and hung from a tree.

To give more context to Aunt Doady's decision, it is important to note that she is a Christian woman. Earlier in the play, three characters talk about Aunt Doady's

spirituality. Their discussion serves as an important backdrop for when we examine her choice to kill Jim. Lucy talks about how good Aunt Doady has been. Reely says, "I vow Aunt Doady's a good woman all right. I ain' nevah knowed her to do nothin' that wasn't right"(195). Epsie Lee follows with, "Sometime I think Aunt Doady ain' quite lak de res' of us. She's mo' lak a saint, dat's what!" (195) Aunt Doady doesn't consider herself a saint, but she takes her relationship with God seriously: "I ain' nevah stole, no' lied no mo' that I had to, nor killed nobody. I'se kept as right as I coldn. And now dat I'se almost ready to go, I feels kinda peaceful lak--without nothin' to worry about" (195). She gives up this peace willingly for a better death for her grandson. Right before she gives the poison to Jim, she thinks about her losing the opportunity to go to heaven. However, her salvation becomes secondary to her protection of Jim.

There is a similarity in the mindset of Aunt Doady, Liza Pettigrew, and Cissie. In making the solution for protection the black woman's responsibility, the playwrights are attempting to stage the bitter emotions that come with the decision to kill one's child. Making this theme even more complex, the playwrights simultaneously explore the notion of sinning to save. What happens is that they present characters who all the while know that murder is a sin but know that killing is the only way that they can move from the stage of helplessness. For these women, saving becomes redefined in terms that are applicable in the moment. They do not wait for their children to be lynched and then find solace that they will reach salvation when they enter heaven. They are unlike Sue in *A Sunday Morning in the South*. They twist the concept of salvation around: they murder and feel that they have saved. Making this notion of salvation even more complex and bitter is the irony that Cissie and Aunt Doady face after the killings take place. Once

Cissie kills Millie, she finds that they have become free; after Jim is dead, Aunt Doady learns Mr. Watkins' shooter turns himself in. Both women are left to mourn not only their child's death, but their hand in it. In the creation of women who decide the fate of their children, the playwrights place blame on the society that propels women to think of killing or to actually kill. The women are not at fault, but instead the lynch mob and the law that intentionally remains blind to this form of genocide are blamed.

While Crandall and Link address the many choices a mother or mother-figure will make to save their family, playwright Evelyn Keller Caldwell adds to the body of lynching dramas by focusing on Keith Jamison, a white lawyer, who is determined to bring charges against the mob. In *Voice in the Wilderness, A Radio Drama* (1944) the white man, most often the villain in anti-lynching plays, is the instrument of hope. Keith Jamison believes that lynching is a crime deserving of a charge of first-degree murder. Keith's perspective, that he was "elected to protect the citizens of this county and to enforce its laws...not *part* of the citizens, nor *part* of the laws, but *all* of them," does not win him any support (214). However, he continues with the trial, risking his career as a district attorney. The way that he talks about his job not only makes him the spokesperson of true justice, but it brings to the forefront the hypocrisy of those who are supposed to uphold the law. The trial is interrupted as he is accused of bribing one of the jurors. His two options offered to him by the Sheriff are to leave town within 24 hours or be prosecuted for bribery. The ultimatum Keith is given is indicative of America's animosity towards witnessing lynching as a crime. From Caldwell's perspective, we see the injustices of a system that allows men who murder to be free from punitive measures. The men who orchestrate Jackson's death are not afraid of consequences. During the

lynching, they don't wear masks; they wear handkerchiefs that allow people to see who they are. Community members that are considered to be "normally good" and "law abiding" like Mr. Colby, the druggist, and Joe Racini, the shoemaker, participate in the killing. Georgia Douglas Johnson's *Blue-Eyed Black Boy* highlights this hypocrisy as well. In this play, the judge cannot be considered an ally for family's whose members are lynched as he participates in the mob activity himself.

Where the subject matter differs from her contemporaries, the similarity Caldwell shares with Crandall and Link is the physical description of the lynching. Sandy, a white woman, who has seen the lynching of Lee Jackson, gives a quick, clear description to her Jamison, her friend and boss: "They stripped him. They stood him on a barrel and tied the rope. Then they kicked the barrel out from under him" (212). It's her retelling that prompts Jamison's activism. In this example, Caldwell suggests that the visceral response, as a result of the seeing and the telling is a crucial link in ending lynching.

Caldwell not only recreates a lynching, but she also details with historical accuracy how the mob made lynching a public activity. This public display of hatred, or what Leon Litwack terms a "public theater" or "a participatory ritual of torture and death," was fueled by the participants' and the white crowd's emotional appetite for this type of mob activity (Litwack 13). Sandy, perhaps a spokesperson for Caldwell, says that what was most atrocious about the lynching was that blacks in the community were forced to watch Washington's death carried out: "They were tied, they couldn't get away or do anything for Jackson. They just stood there as though they were hypnotized, and watched him sob and beg for help" (213). Washington's death served as a blatant reminder to blacks that whites were in control of how they lived and died.

Annie Nathan Meyer and Lillian Smith, like Crandall, Link, and Caldwell examine the injustices of lynching in the plays *Black Souls* (1932) and *Strange Fruit* (1945) respectively. However, both of their plots revolve around lynching as a result of interracial relationships. In *Black Souls* Meyer hints at a romantic relationship between Luella, daughter of State Senator Verne, and David, a black man, that developed while they were in school in Paris. When the Senator's visit to the colored school where David teaches reunites them once again, Luella is interested in spending some private time with him. He knows that a continued relationship is no longer possible in the South, but Luella presses her interest despite these questions: "How can I make you understand? Do you realize if you and I should go into town together in a motor as we did in France, the mob would drag me from my seat?" (151) David eventually gives in to her desire to see the cabin in the woods where he gets his inspiration for poetry. This is the cause of his death. The environment where David gets his inspiration is also the place of his death. Once they make it to the cabin, David is anxious to leave. He tells her that they would be safer on school grounds. Luella's creation as a naïve white woman is instrumental in highlighting the politics of interracial relationships in the South. She mistakes his determination to get back onto school grounds as his treating her like a child. He explains more that they are no longer in "tolerant" France but instead in the South, where friendship between black men and white women is not negotiable (158). She continues to neglect his urgings to leave and he once again is swayed into staying with her. Passion grows between them as they talk about poetry. How they feel about each other in this moment is expressed mainly through stage directions. Luella says while "stretching out her arms passionately" that she wants "to feel everything, to experience everything!"

(160). Soon after this statement, the stage directions say that David "struggles with his desire to take her into his arms" (160). Their passion is stunted immediately, however, as soon as David sees white men peering through the window.

In this moment Meyer shows that there is no opportunity for Luella to experience "everything" with David. Southern law did not permit it. After being so concerned about his death, he is now focused on Luella's safety and reputation. He is now interested in what he can do to save her and would prefer to die of alleged rape than to have white men suspect her of having a relationship with a black man. Thus, he stages a rape. The ease with which David can become this image of the black male rapist coupled with the immediate assumption that the white men make that he is the rapist highlights how pervasive these stereotypes are. Meyer forcefully asserts that the "rapist" that David became was an image already lodged in the minds of Southern white men.

David's intentions to protect Luella by becoming the stereotypical black male rapist are not proven successful. After the lynching, the Senator, Andrew, the principal of the Magnolia School, and his wife Phyllis (sister to David) listen to Luella's story. She tells them that she is ashamed that she was unable to stand up to the men: "I hadn't the courage to say it was all my fault--it isn't so easy with a gun stuck in your face--but they knew all right--they called me 'Nigger Lover'" (172). Embarrassed and angered by his daughter's response, her father not only disowns her but threatens to kill her. But, after witnessing David whose "lips were bitten clear through in his agony," and whose hands and feet were cut off before he was burned alive, she is unsure that she would want to live (172). Meyer uses Luella as her tool in making lynching so vivid and tangible that the viewer would be incited to protest.

This play explores the theme of lynching while bringing to the forefront the taboo of interracial dating notwithstanding the hypocrisy of white men as they rape black women without looking at themselves as rapists. For example, Senator Verne disowns his daughter for her behavior, but does not hold himself accountable for his rape of David's sister at age sixteen or his current pursuit of her. Meyer further illuminates this hypocrisy by having Verne meet Phyllis again years later. Phyllis earned money for her education by working as a domestic for Verne. The passing of time does not change Verne's interests in Phyllis. In the short time he has alone with her he lets her know he intends to be sexual with her. In the position of the spokesperson for black woman's morality, she argues that black women value and respect their honor just as much as white women. Her argument, however, goes unnoticed as he continues to use his race and gender as the leverage to threaten and frighten her. Meyer shows that sexual pursuit by the white man continues to be a threat to the black woman's morality and ability to "walk straight," even after the abolition of slavery. Overall Meyer juxtaposes Verne's rape of Phyllis with his reaction to Luella's interest in David to show how society "exaggerated the likelihood of assaults on white females while ignoring the widespread prevalence of white male sexual assaults against black women" (James 47). As a result of this inversion of interracial sexual violence Meyer illuminates the true rapist.

In *Strange Fruit* by Lillian Smith, the lynching is not the direct result of an interracial relationship. But it is a black man's outrage about his sister's relationship with a white man that spurs the lynching. Nonnie Anderson, a college graduate, is in love with a white man, Tracy Deen. Ever since she was six and he twelve, she considered him to be her protector. Ed and Bessie Anderson, Nonnie's brother and sister, consider her

relationship with Tracy to be shameful and are outraged. In fact, Bessie considers her sister to be “ruined” once she is pregnant by Tracy (244). Tracy knows the impact that his relationship with a black woman would have on his family. Unwilling to sever his ties with his community, he keeps his relationship with Nonnie private and continues his public relationship with Dorothy, a white woman. His actions to save his public esteem are similar to the governor’s in Johnson’s *Blue-Eyed Black Boy*, who secretly cooperates with Mrs. Waters.

The main action of the play revolves around Tracy’s solution to his “lifelong conflict” of loving a black woman (267). He wants Nonnie to first abort the baby, marry Henry, the family servant, and be his wife in private. Nonnie’s brother, Ed, hears of this arrangement in the local restaurant, hits Henry in the jaw twice and then searches for Tracy. While Ed is looking for him, Tracy is at their house, giving Nonnie two hundred dollars to abort the baby. Despite his saying, “I can’t leave you like this,” he walks away leaving her standing dumbfounded at the gate. Before his plan has a chance to come to fruition, her brother Ed kills him. Nonnie in turn uses the money she is given to help Ed, who gets away safely. In order to protect Henry, who is suspected to be the killer, Tom Harris, a white man in the community considered to be a good white man by blacks and a “colored man’s friend,” initiates the plan to put Henry in jail in order to save his life. The jail, however, does not serve as a shelter for blacks. As *Climbing Jacob’s Ladder* shows, there is no safety for blacks in jail. As Wash Thomas was dragged out and lynched, so was Henry. A black man must die to avenge the death of Tracy Deen. Smith uses the conversation between Harris and Sam to bring to the forefront the beliefs of those who support lynching. It is clear from Harris’ comment that lynching is not justifiable if a

person is innocent, but if a rape has been committed it is fair punishment. Just as in Meyer's *Black Souls*, Smith shows that the idea of rape triggers a lynch mob mentality.

Black and white playwrights used the theme of lynching as a means to uncover and change this mentality. In their description of the effects of lynching they not only protested against it, but they also used their dramas to illuminate society's overall acceptance of it. While highlighting this nonchalance they portrayed the hypocrisy of America's doctrine. All people were not created equal; all bodies were not treated as equal. White women playwrights in particular focused on the body and how lynching specifically altered and killed it. More in depth portraits of the actual lynching and the public spectacle that it became was seen in plays like *Strange Fruit* and *Black Souls*. In the presentation of the lynch mob mentality both black and white playwrights examined the hypocrisy of white males who considered lynching fair punishment for alleged rape but who dismissed their own hand in the rape of black women.

Johnson uncovers the lynch mob mentality while focusing on the experience of the black mother. In her discussion of lynching and its affects on the "homeplace," she successfully shows how the black woman's home is filled with contradictions. The home in one instant could be the embodiment of protection and resistance. But, in another, with the forced entry of the white male authority, it changed into a place of uncertainty and terror. In *A Sunday Morning in the South*, *Blue-Eyed Black Boy* and *Safe*, the "woman's space" is used specifically so that the audience would see the black mother's experience in the 1900s in all of its contradictions. Through the black mothers' struggle to discover a way to save their children, we witness the angst that built when facing such a horrible circumstance and finally the extreme sense of pain when they were not able to

protect and save. White mothers did not have to worry about the lynching of their sons but they, too, were subordinate when it came to changing the minds of white men as their place was in the home. In this sense, the effects of lynching crossed racial lines for women. However, Johnson shows the double burden that black mothers carried. They could not do anything to protect their homes or children. White women, subordinate in their own homes, at least did not have to worry about it being entered and their children being taken away to be lynched.

The black mother's experience could not be shared completely by any other mother. She alone coped with the fact that there was no guarantee that her sons would live after a false accusation. She alone dealt with the pain of not being able to protect her child while she was hired to do this very thing for white children. Her innate role of being a mother was compromised by racism. And because of this she sometimes killed her children believing it to be her only recourse. Ultimately, she understood that real safety came after her sons were dead and buried, and in Heaven.

### CHAPTER III

#### COMING IN SECOND

Black women playwrights of the early 1900s who wrote propaganda plays mastered the skill of coupling racial concerns with women's issues. When Georgia Douglas Johnson wrote about lynching, she was portraying a concern that affected the entire race. However, when she honed in on the black mother's reaction to lynching and her coping mechanisms, she merged a racial issue with one more private, one black woman centered. Through her plays, and those of her contemporaries, a black mother's personal concerns became a legitimate theater subject. Johnson and other black women writers began a groundbreaking tradition that encouraged and supported women in writing about race and gender. Their work paved the way for latter generations that continued to explore the intersection between the personal and the political.

Alice Childress profited from this tradition of black women writing simultaneously about race and gender. Her career spanned four decades making her the "only black woman playwright in America whose plays have been written, produced, and published" over a period of forty years (Guillory 28). Throughout her career, she remained determined to tell the story of African-Americans that had not been told in "any moment" (76). However, writing about race did not come at the expense of black women. Almost four decades ago, she stated:

the Negro woman will attain her rightful place in American literature when those of us who care about truth, justice, and a better life tell her story, with the full knowledge and appreciation of her constant, unrelenting struggle against racism

and for human rights (79).

Childress uses the black woman's experience as the vehicle to write about race, class, and gender.

Childress' childhood prepared her to portray this intricate relationship. The time she spent with her grandmother, who raised her, became the catalyst for her writing about everyday people. She was encouraged to write after going to church services where she would see people giving their testimonies. Sunday church services helped in training her sense; one of her great successes as a playwright comes in her ability to capture the cadence, gestures, and the experiences of ordinary African-Americans. Growing up in a poor community became the backdrop of her writing about people "for whom the act of living is sheer heroism" (Guillory 97). She focused mainly on women characters who struggled to find their place in society; they were often "poor, dejected heroines who are morally strong, sometimes vulnerable, but resilient" (Guillory 99). The focal point of this study will be Childress' representation of women who, after a pivotal moment which forced them to rethink how they perceived themselves, shed societal expectations and replaced them with their own. Ultimately, after this transformation they have a stronger sense of self, which when rippled out to the larger community, will impact others.

The individual change that in the end prompts others' transformation is at the core of self-identity protection. In *Florence* (1950), *Trouble in Mind* (1955), and *Wine in the Wilderness* (1969), the main characters take a journey to selfhood and consequently, redefine themselves. The transformation equips the black women protagonists Mama, Wiletta, and Tomorrow Marie (Tommie) with the tools to separate from society's notions of black womanhood. This journey must happen first: it is the impetus for being able to

protect. They are not able to help other women fashion a new, more evolved and nontraditional place for themselves in society if they do not first understand who they are as black women. The emphasis that Childress places on the black woman's personal transformation makes her known for "leading African-Americans out of the wilderness of self-hatred and into the clearing of self-love and love for each other" (Guillory xiii). Essentially, self-identity protection is a result of the protagonist's self-awareness. Once this happens, she can be freed from societal expectations that prevent self and communal affirmation.

The importance of freedom is a major thread in Childress' work. She discusses its significance in a conversation with Toni Morrison where she makes note that her focus on freedom is not unusual:

I think that all Black writers, whether they intended to or not, have been writing about not being free. Always—from the beginning of America right up to now...At least it seems to me that in any Black book, no matter what it deals with or what the story line is, you realize that the people are not free. You know the conversation always starts off with 'the trouble with us is...' We've heard that millions of times. The trouble with us is that we're not free. We're not free. So I think the lack of freedom is the omnipresent theme in any Black writer's work today (Taylor-Guthrie 9).

The desire for freedom did not just stand as a storybook theme; it was a daily struggle for black people in America.

The quest for freedom looms large in *Florence*, *Trouble in Mind*, and *Wine in the Wilderness*. This lack is manifested specifically in the roles black women are forced into in society. For example, in *Florence* it's domesticity. In *Trouble in Mind* it is the stereotypical stock character role. And in *Wine in the Wilderness* it is the role of the unintelligent, poor black woman. Childress's response to this limited portrayal of black

women is the creation of protagonists who are transformed into self-identity protectors.

In this position, they learn to reject defined roles. This transformation is crucial because they become change agents not only for other characters but for the audience as well.

The journey to self-identity protection is first individually based. But it is also necessary so that the larger community can expand its perception of “place” for black women in society.

The protagonists in *Florence*, *Trouble in Mind*, and *Wine in the Wilderness* are similar in that they all go through a transformation. The other factor that links them together is that they are artists or connected to artists in some fashion. Mama is the mother of Florence, a young woman who flees the South in order to pursue an acting career. Wiletta is an actress who performs in Broadway shows. Tomorrow Marie is introduced to Bill, a painter, as a model for his triptych on black women. In this focus on the arts, Childress becomes a spokesperson for change in a specific venue. She illuminates the racism that prohibits Florence from attaining acting parts and that keeps Wiletta confined to specific derogatory roles. She illuminates Bill’s ingrained racism that manifests itself in his decision to portray black women negatively. In these three plays, Childress uses the arts as her major vehicle to speak out against America’s racist and limited mindset that keeps black women either absent from the stage or in negative roles. Within her critique, she points out that blacks, too have absorbed this mindset, and often perpetuate the cycle by articulating that black women have a set place.

*Florence* tells the story of Mama, who after an angering conversation with Mrs. Carter, a white woman, comes to terms with her internalization of society’s expectations for black women. After her transformation, she is able to support Florence’s endeavors

to become an actress. The play happens in the waiting room of a train station. The sweeping effects of racism are apparent immediately; the low railing creates two sections: colored men/colored women and white gentleman/white ladies. The colored/white division line is an indication of segregation and the racist attitudes that accompany it. For example, this is seen in a conversation that the Porter, a black man, has with Mama regarding the purchase of her ticket. While leaning against the railing he says to Mama that Mr. Daly, a white man who issues the tickets, is “real mean,” especially to black people, when he finds that they are going North (113). The Porter infers that Mr. Daly is angry because blacks feel empowered enough to leave the South seeking better opportunities. He leans on the rail while speaking of Mr. Daly to highlight the belief system it represents.

Another example of the racial climate is Childress’s play on “rest room.” Mama is denied access to the colored woman’s rest room because it is out of order. The bathroom is the physical thing that is out of order but this is also symbolic of Childress’s implication that society as a whole is nonfunctioning or out of order, particularly for African-Americans (Guillory 101). Unable to use the white ladies’ rest room due to Jim Crow law, Mama is forced to use the colored men’s rest room. The idea of the rest room takes on a greater meaning. Due to racism, black women do not have “room for rest” (Guillory 101). Childress points out that societal laws made it so that black women were always confronted with the truth that they existed without rights, that they were lesser than. At every turn she saw that she could not use the bathroom in privacy; she understood that her desire to go North, or to live better, was seen with contempt. The burden the black woman bears because of her race and gender made her in Hurston’s

eyes, “the mule of the world.” Childress uses this symbolism to mirror society in the 1950s and to highlight the consequences of racism. Society will remain nonfunctioning as long as there is a division line, as long as skin color determines how people are treated.

The racial division line is also illuminated in the social etiquette of greetings. Mrs. Carter calls the Porter “boy.” She is called “ma’m” by both Porter and Mama. Mrs. Carter thinks of herself as liberal; she says to Mama, “You can stop ‘ma’ming’ me. My name is Mrs. Carter. I’m not a southerner really” (114). Because of social programming, Mama has difficulty taking Mrs. Carter’s suggestion. In turn, Mrs. Carter is even more adamant about being called ma’m. Although Mrs. Carter considers herself to be a New Yorker, she still manifests racism. She keeps herself aligned with Southern social etiquette by having Mama call her “Mrs. Carter.” She does not give Mama the option to call her by her first name at all. Her supposed liberal attitude does not dismiss the fact that she is not respectful enough of Mama to ask what her name is. We only know her to be “Mrs. Whitney” because the Porter greets her in this respectful fashion. As a result of Mrs. Carter’s attitude, a power dynamic is created. This relationship of power, or what Jennings calls the “black woman-white woman segregated sisterhood dialectic,” places Mrs. Carter in the position of power (Jennings 43). Mrs. Carter’s reliance on race privilege instead of a common sisterhood based on a shared gender serves to “replicate the racist behavior and exclusionary practices of white patriarchy” (Jennings 45). Throughout the play, Mrs. Carter consistently participates in the hierarchy that keeps her in the position of power.

The power dynamic between the women is further exemplified when Mrs. Carter begins talking to Mama about her brother’s book, Lost My Lonely Way. As she talks to

Mama about Jeff's book, she leans on the rail and says, "it's about your people" (115). This statement, similar to her refusal of the title "ma'm," is another example of Mrs. Carter breeching formality. Her leaning on the rail shows her supposed comfort with black people. We are to believe from her mannerisms that she would be on the other side if the law would only permit. She wants Mama to believe that she does not practice Southern racism, but her comment shows her contradictions. She doesn't say that the book is about racism; she doesn't say the book is about a problem that America is dealing with; she doesn't say anything that makes her or whites responsible for their part in miscegenation. Instead, her saying "your people" creates a barrier where she is relieved from and set apart from any connection with racism.

Her liberal façade is illuminated even more when she tells Mama that the book, which she considers to be "profound" and "real," is about Zelma's "deep shame" (115). Mama tries to get a better understanding of this, but she is still confused when Mrs. Carter retorts, "It's obvious! This lovely creature...intelligent, ambitious, and well...she's a Negro" (115). For Mama being "Negro" isn't equated with "deep shame." She cannot fathom why Zelma constantly hates herself and, furthermore, she doesn't understand the reason for her suicide. She tries to imagine it; because she has so much difficulty, she even closes her eyes as she listens to Zelma's story unfold.

Childress' constant manipulation of Mrs. Carter's movement to and fro the color division line shows her true feelings toward race and the black woman's place. At this point, when Mrs. Carter tells the rest of the story, she is on the white side. This indicates that what she will say about Zelma's shame is a white interpretation. When Mrs. Carter describes the plot, she tells Mama that Zelma, who is standing on the bridge, looks at

herself and says while crying, “almost white...but I’m black! I’m a Negro!” (116). Then, she jumps. Mama does not agree with this portrait of the tragic mulatto. She tells Mrs. Carter, “That ain’t so! Not one bit” and begins to share personal testimonies of people she knows who are mixed, who have racial pride and who don’t commit suicide. Mama’s feelings build toward anger as Mrs. Carter tells her that Jeff’s story is true and that Mama’s stories are only exceptions to the rule. Once again, Mrs. Carter’s racism is revealed. She believes that her brother, a white man, knows more about the black experience than black people themselves. She even says to Mama, “he knows the Negro so well that sometimes our friends tease him and say he almost *seems* like...well you know” (117). Indirectly, in her insinuation that Jeff “seems” black she states that he is “more black” than Mama herself. She does not recognize that her efforts to authenticate Jeff’s story are racist. She completely denies Mama’s experience and places a fictionalized account above Mama’s truth. At the end of the conversation, Mama stands trembling in anger, and is miffed that Mrs. Carter has silenced her by placing Jeff’s interpretation above her daily experiences. When she looks up and sees the “white ladies room” sign, a symbol of segregation, she realizes that she is on the wrong side of the railing. The symbol stands as a reminder to Mama that the dismissive belief system that Mrs. Carter prescribes to stems from the same racism that promotes segregation. It is the same racism that required her to use the men’s rest room earlier in the play.

Mrs. Carter continues to shatter her liberal façade even after Mama has returned to her side of the station. While Mama reads, Mrs. Carter tries to lessen the tension by saying, “you know I try but it’s really difficult to understand you people. However...I keep trying”(117). She glorifies her vain attempts to befriend blacks by saying that she

eats with Negroes, gives money for their scholarships, and even works personally with a young Negro poet, Malcolm. Mama does not pay any attention to Mrs. Carter's efforts to build a new conversation. Her responding with "yes ma'm" or "thank you ma'm" is the only way she can silence Mrs. Carter, who wants to have a conversation that isn't based on what she calls earlier, "ma'ming." Mama uses social etiquette as a form of power. In her responses, she resurrects a barrier that keeps each woman in her set place, making it difficult for Mrs. Carter to breach formality. But, it isn't until she realizes that Mrs. Carter may be in a position to help Florence that she begins speaking with her again.

Childress makes it clear in this new conversation that having a common gender and experience through motherhood does not ensure a similar perspective. In fact, she proves that race gets in the way of the two women having an inoffensive conversation when once again, Mrs. Carter portrays her racism. For example, when Mama tells her that her daughter is trying to make a career on stage, Mrs. Carter assumes that Florence has aspirations of becoming a singer. Believing the stereotype that all black people can sing, she says to Mama, "You people have such a gift. I love spirituals... 'Steal Away,' 'Swing Low, Sweet Chariot'" (117). Here, Mrs. Carter not only thinks Florence will want to sing, but she thinks of blacks as singing in a particular genre: spirituals. In her response, she indicates that she believes blacks have a particular place on stage, that of the spiritual singer. It is no surprise that she is shocked that Florence wants to be an actress.

After finding out Florence's professional goals, Mrs. Carter reveals that she is also an actress. As a result of her hardship, she implores Mama to encourage Florence to leave the profession. Mrs. Carter has not gotten any jobs in the last six months and

implies that if there isn't a place for a white woman on the stage, there certainly is no room for Mama's black daughter. Mama, who considers this perspective, believes that if Mrs. Carter, with all of her connections, is having a difficult time, then Florence must be struggling doubly. Despite the history between the two women, Mama ignores Mrs. Carter's advice and instead appeals to her for help. Mrs. Carter, who previously advised Florence to abandon her acting desires, interestingly wants to do "her duty" to help (119). Her plan is to introduce Florence to Melba Rugby and when Mama learns that she is an actress, director, and writer, she is hopeful. Convinced that Melba Rugby will "make" a place for Florence, Mrs. Carter takes a piece of paper and pencil out of her bag and meets Mama at the railing to write down the contact information. As Mrs. Carter leans on the blatant signifier of racism, she reveals her stereotypical notions of black women as domestics by saying: "Her experience won't matter with Melba...I'll just tell her...no heavy washing or ironing...just light cleaning and a little cooking...does she cook?" (119) Mrs. Carter's suggestion that Florence be a domestic worker coincides with the racism that is symbolized in the racial divider line. Clearly, she believes that Florence has overstepped her boundaries. She uses her power as the good white beneficiary to put Florence back in her place. She supports the belief that black women are domestics, not actresses.

Childress' use of the railing does not end here. After Mama returns to the "Colored" side in shock, Mrs. Carter follows her and says, while touching her arm, that she would take Florence but she already has Binnie. At this moment Mama's escalating anger becomes the catalyst for her transformation. Mama responds by clutching Mrs.

Carter's arm so forcefully that she loses balance. Mama eventually releases her arm when she realizes that she has frightened and hurt Mrs. Carter.

Mama's anger is what initiates her journey to self-identity protection. Anger serves as a transforming agent; it is a "mechanism for black women to exorcise psychic hostilities that white racism, the unseen signifier, breeds between white and black, between non-colored women and women of color (Jennings 43). Anger is not just a feeling; it becomes a meaningful catalyst that encourages "growth, vision, voice, and change" (Jennings 45). Mama's epiphany reconnects her to the authority she has as Florence's mother. Up until this point, she was relying on Mrs. Carter to mother Florence by finding work opportunities that would change her life. But, when she calls Mrs. Carter "child" as she clutches her arm, she "places" Mrs. Carter. Mama's calling Mrs. Carter 'child' indicates that she is old enough to be the woman's mother, but most importantly it reinstates her into the position of mother of Florence and even of Mrs. Carter. The hierarchy is now reversed as Mama is the wiser woman due to age and Mrs. Carter is the child who does not have the correct information.

On two occasions at the end of the play Mama reveals her reclamation of her position as mother. Both instances demonstrate what Deborah E. McDowell considers to be Mama's "psychological journey" where she moves from "victimization to consciousness" (Jennings 45). Mama's first entrance to consciousness is portrayed immediately after Mrs. Carter exits to the ladies room. Mama sits quietly for a time and stares in front of her. She tears up the contact information she'd been given and takes out a new piece of paper and a pencil and scripts a letter to Florence. "Keep trying" stands for more than encouraging words (121). She is literally rewriting, in a sense, society's

perception of black womanhood, making a new place for black women, outside of the domestic sphere, in society.

The second occurrence is seen at the very end of the play when she goes to knock on the door of the “white ladies” bathroom. She rethinks the idea of sharing anything else about her daughter with Mrs. Carter. Mama completely reclaims the power she gave to her to decide for Florence. Mama is aware that Mrs. Carter is only able to offer solutions that will work to keep Florence, and other black women, in the role of domestic. Mama separates herself from Mrs. Carter, who is a reminder of what society expects for black women, she, and not Mrs. Carter, becomes Florence’s vessel of hope.

It takes the majority of the play for Mama to come to this conclusion. At the beginning of the play she fluctuates between going to New York to bring Florence home and sending her the money she needs to survive so that she can continue to pursue her dreams. It’s not until after the conversation with Mrs. Carter that she finds her own wings to help Florence to fly outside of what society has demarcated for her as a black woman. She understands that she may not be able to fix the racism on the stage, but she makes sure that Florence knows that she is supported and respected. Her encouragement gives Florence the opportunity to “transcend the perennial role of the black woman as domestic” (Harris 11). Mama’s change in attitude is not only beneficial to Florence, but her transformation will serve as the impetus to change her other daughter’s notions of the black woman’s place.

The conversation between Mama and Mrs. Carter isn’t the only opportunity where Childress pits women against each other to illuminate the fact that a shared gender is not always indicative of a similar perspective. With Mama and Mrs. Carter, Childress makes

a commentary on how racism prescribes certain roles for black women in society. In the conversation between Mama and Marge, her other daughter, Childress identifies the problem that arises when black women absorb society's definitions for them. Marge, like Mrs. Carter, believes that there is a particular place for black women. Essentially, she feels that Florence's behavior not only defies her "place," but it is also unrealistic and inappropriate.

According to Marge, Florence does three things that show that she has "notions a Negro woman don't need" (111). First, she applies for a position of a visible salesgirl in Strumley's, a department store that only hires whites. Marge considers this act a sign that Florence is trying to be white (111). Second, Marge does not agree with Florence's abandonment of her role as mother. Florence flees the South for new opportunities and to escape the memory of her husband's lynching, all viable reasons. Marge, however, is unsympathetic, and is in complete disagreement with Ted, Florence's son, being left behind. Marge believes that Florence should be at home mothering her son. And third, Marge does not support the career that Florence chooses. Marge does not believe that it makes sense for her sister to leave her son to pursue a career that will only allow her to work as a domestic or janitor offstage. Her understanding of racial dynamics is clear when she says to her mother that "them folks ain't gonna let her be no actress" (112). Marge understands the power relationship at play, but she misses the fact that Florence is struggling to pave the way for others. Marge has absorbed society's place for black women and propels her mother, who knows inherently that Florence is blazing the way for other black women, to do the same. Marge is the driving force behind Mama's initial decision to bring Florence home instead of sending her money.

It isn't until after the conversation with Mrs. Carter that Mama can re-examine her daughter's sentiments and the women's shared belief that there is no room for Florence in the artistic world. In this instance, she takes on Florence's "militant and implicitly feminist" stance that allowed her to throw away the domestic role in hopes to create another (Harris 11). Mama's transformation to self-identity protection reconnected her with her first instinct to support Florence. She was finally able to disassociate herself with the conventions of black motherhood that would have her groom Florence only to be a domestic worker. At the close of the play when she says "I'm gonna fret plenty!" she portrays her own sense of feminism. She is now prepared to renounce society's definition that has kept her and other black women in the domestic realm. Mama, now an agent for change, can help encourage her daughter while simultaneously serving as a role model. Her experiences will help others, in particular Marge, expand their notion of "place" for black women in society. Her "fretting" about society's perceived notions of place for black women will help others on their journey to self-identity protection.

Mama has become a self-identity protector as a result of her daughter's repeated attempts to break away from the types of jobs whites put aside for her. Florence had to fret first so that Mama could. Florence's treatment as an aspiring actress, combined with Mrs. Carter's response to it, catapulted Mama into the role of self-identity protector. Mama's transformation prepared her to be an advocate for change. Her transformation is similar to Wilett's in *Trouble in Mind*. However, what makes the journey different is that Mama's connection to the arts happens through her daughter; her relationship to the arts is not personal. Wilett's relationship to the arts, on the other hand, is more direct. She is the actress. Where Florence's stage presence was evoked through conversation

about her, Wiletta is present on the stage. Since Childress uses the play within a play technique, Wiletta is seen on the stage, in rehearsal as Ruby.

*Trouble in Mind*, Childress's first full-length play, was produced off-Broadway in 1955. Named after a blues song, *Trouble in Mind* tells the story of Wiletta, who like the singer in the blues song comes to feel blue but is certain that she won't feel blue always. The change is understood when the artist sings "You know the sun's gonna shine/and brighten my backdoor some day." The transformation happens for Wiletta, who has only been assigned stereotypical stock character roles, when she challenges the director, Will Manners, to change the script. She eventually reaches a point where she refuses to be a "namby-Mammy" for the sake of the play or for her director. However, before we see Wiletta in the role of activist, we see her more compliant. She is angry because of existing racism but she does not advocate for any change.

At the beginning of the play Wiletta demonstrates her awareness of the politics of race in her conversation with John, a young African-American male new to the theater. Wiletta makes herself available to the proud, naïve actor who intends to go straight to the top in theater, the "grandest place in the world" (296). When she realizes that he is planning to make a career out of acting instead of taking her suggestion to "make somethin' outta yourself," she begins to give him coping mechanisms for survival (296). Right from the beginning she reveals her attitude toward the theater. Later in the play it will become clear that race determines who can do honorable work or make something out of themselves and who can't.

In their initial conversation Wiletta acts more like a parent imparting wisdom to her son. In fact, Wiletta is so motherly intentionally. Both she and John come from the

same town of Newport News and Wiletta went to school with his parents. Her desire for John to avoid what she's "been through" stems not only from her experience with racism in the theater, but in addition, she acts as a surrogate mother due to the relationship that she's had with his family (296). Wiletta is in the position to teach John because she has more than twenty years of experience. As a result of two decades in the business, she's learned that the actual day to day work is considered more helpful than theater school, especially for African-Americans. When Wiletta says, "I can let you in on things that school never heard of . . . 'cause I know what's out here and they don't" she critiques theater educators in two ways (298). Acting as Childress' spokesperson, Wiletta's commentary holds theater teachers accountable for not providing African-Americans with information on the injustice that they will meet when they begin their careers. More importantly, when Wiletta says "they" she refers to white teachers. She illuminates the fact that whites are in power; they are the teachers. What's left unsaid, but understood, is that blacks are not in the position of educators so their experience is left out. The result of this is the graduation of naïve African-American actors, like John, who feel they can easily be successful in theater.

Although Wiletta teaches John lessons that appear what he calls "Tommish," she is certain that they will assure him work. One of the most essential lessons she teaches him is to know how to respond to the director. Her experience has taught her that the directors need to feel superior (297). According to Wiletta, laughter is the most certain way to do this. Although she teaches John to "laugh at everything they say," a skill that has attributed to her steady work, her eventual transformation into a self-identity protector forces her to completely disassociate herself from this behavior. In addition to

this lesson, Wiletta teaches John that there is no such thing as theater for African-Americans. It is only show business; she tells him that there isn't anything grand about the roles they are able to play. This is another coping strategy that, like the first one, carries a different significance at the end of the play.

Through the rehearsals of Chaos in Belleville Childress points out the difference in roles whites and blacks are expected to play. Whites are allowed to be in positions to make change and to really perform. Blacks instead are relegated to specific roles that bring shame. Both Wiletta and Millie, another black woman in the cast of Chaos in Belleville, provide a context in which to understand this dichotomy. By including Millie in this dialogue, Childress teaches the audience that Wiletta's experience does not exist in isolation. In fact, *Trouble in Mind* alludes to the frustration the entire black troupe faces as a result of performing in roles that have been written, produced, and directed by whites only.

At the heart of Wiletta and Millie's conversation is the stereotypical image of black womanhood that they are forced to perpetuate. While they can wear decent clothes offstage, in production, their costumes consist of cotton sacks and bandanas. In addition to their attire, they are always staged as highly religious. In her last show, Millie was so embarrassed to invite her family because she only said, "Lord, have mercy!" for nearly two hours (300). Another negative quality is their character's submissive nature; they are never seen in roles where they are revolutionary or fight back. In fact, in Chaos in Belleville, Wiletta is expected to respond happily and immediately to the director's instructions to pick up after him. In rehearsal, Manners crumples up a piece of paper and instructs Wiletta in front of the cast to get it. She steps out of her "submissive place"

shocking even herself and says, “Hell! I ain’t the damned janitor,” but her actual role on stage is one of complete compliance. Falling in line with the characterization of black women as submissive, her character does not protect her son from the lynch mob; instead she sends him directly to it. In addition to being assigned domestic or submissive roles, the women mention the way in which they are always named derogatorily. They are named after flowers – Gardenia, Magnolia, and Chrysanthemum. Or they are named after jewels – Crystal, Pearl, and Opal. Both Wiletta’s and Millie’s character fit into the stereotypical naming tradition as they are cast as Ruby and Petunia respectively.

Childress illuminates the public’s comfort with these portrayals of African-Americans. Once again, she uses Wiletta as her mouthpiece when she remarks on the longevity of plays like Chaos in Belleville and says, “things that aggravate me always *run* for a long time. . . cause what bugs me is what sends somebody else, if you know what I mean” (298). Known to “speechify,” or to put her own words into a “number of mouths,” Childress uses Wiletta to illuminate society’s psychological connection to the image of the stereotypical African-American (Abramson 53). It’s an image that brings comfort to whites; it assuages any guilt from past experiences, i.e. slavery, and therefore, writers and directors beckon to the public’s demand for this portrayal. Hence, the image of the stereotypical African-American is perpetuated on stage.

Childress counters these stereotypes by first creating both Wiletta and Millie with an understanding of the power relationship between whites and blacks. Their experience has taught them that black women can only fulfill certain roles on the stage. Wiletta offers a succinct but socially and racially informed argument regarding the black woman’s place. Clearly manifesting the distinct power relations at play, she says, “I

always say it's the man's play, the man's money and the man's theater, so what you gonna do?" (300) The correlation between race and gender is made in this statement as she addresses the black woman's position at the bottom of the totem pole.

Millie also makes a similar critique of the theater's racism, but her commentary is geared specifically to the outer image. Millie is characterized as a woman who has a high sense of fashion and expensive taste. She says, "I like ease, comfort, furs, cars, big, thick steaks" (312). She enters on the first day of rehearsal in a mink coat, a wool suit, and suede shoes. She wears a new black suit accompanied with a new watch in the second act. And she mentions that she and her husband have been looking for a new upright freezer. She is described in the playwright's notes as being "breathtaking" and "radiant" (323). Millie is not portrayed as a woman who lacks material possessions. In her personal life, she stands in direct opposition to the characters developed by whites. But, in her professional life, she is prohibited from wearing "decent" clothes on stage. Even though recognizes the way she dresses and her "flair for clothes," she is not allowed to appear this way while in character (304). When Millie overhears that Judy, the white actress, will wear a "beautiful dress" in the third act, she makes a response that belies her experience as a black woman on stage. Her asking, "you got one of those dresses for me" illuminates her awareness that black women are not able to step outside of the image defined for them.

Where Wiletta and Millie do not see themselves in the position to take the power away from white males in order to redefine their image on the stage, they do something extremely crucial. They voice their dissatisfaction and also validate their experiences. In their conversation they rebuke the celebration of silence, a characteristic that feminist

Barbara Christian later writes about. Arguing for black women to use their voices as self-definitive tools Christian says, “If black women don’t say who they are, other people will and say it badly for them...if other black women don’t answer back, who will? When we speak and answer back we validate our experiences. We say we *are* important, if only to ourselves” (Christian xii). Through Wiletta’s and Millie’s conversation, Childress is not only attacking white power, which has created and perpetuated a particular image of the black woman on the stage. But, in their dialogue we see them answering back, sharing common experiences as a result of their race and gender.

Ultimately, Wiletta moves from discussing the theater’s racism and stereotyping with Millie to demanding that the director create a more accurate representation of blacks. Through Wiletta, Childress discloses the importance of rescuing the “invalid” and “other-imposed images” of African-Americans in order to recreate their image inside and outside the theater (Jennings 6). When Wiletta confronts the director about the implausibility of her character’s decision to willingly send her son into the hands of the lynch mob, she begins to transform. She is no longer addressing racism; she is saying how she truly feels about the play, something she instructs John never to do. As she struggles to make sense of her character’s choice, she is told by Manners not to think about it. This isn’t completely foreign to her, as she has made a living performing in plays that did not depict African-Americans accurately. However, at this point the act of thinking becomes revolutionary. Although earlier on in the play she talks about how much she doesn’t like to think because it makes her “fightin’ mad;” her anger towards the whites’ untruthful and insensible imaging forces her out of a complacent coping mechanism (317). As she reclaims control over her mind, the things that are troubling to

her actually become what she needs to “fight” and to revoke the pattern of “passive acceptance” (Jennings 30). Ultimately, as she moves from passive acceptance to active resistance, she can no longer participate in the perpetuation of false images of African-Americans.

Wiletta attacks the playwright’s characterization of African-Americans in Chaos in Belleville. She stands in complete antithesis to her initial “tommish” statement that the writer, Ted Bronson, really “knows art” (304). Similar to her depictions in *Florence*, Childress once again creates a white character that assumes that he knows the black experience better than the people who truly live it. In *Florence* Mama had to contend with an invalid interpretation of a black woman’s shame due to having mixed blood. Not only was the story a white interpretation of the “tragic mulatto,” but Mama had to face Mrs. Carter’s persistent denial of her own experience. *Trouble in Mind* portrays this same circumstance as the director fully supports Bronson’s story. Wiletta completely opposes the portrayal of Ruby and as a result, seeks the consultation of a black woman artist to confirm what she knows to be true about the inaccuracy of the script.

Manners dismisses the expertise of Miss Green, a director and church choir conductor. Thus, he keeps his position as the sole authority by forcing Wiletta to be submissive to his interpretation. His response is that she is the problem, not the script. His major criticism is that Wiletta is pretending to act and that she performs without integrity when she thinks too much about the script. By telling her not to think, and in fact instructing her to make him a “solemn promise” to not think while she is in the role of Ruby, he takes away her power to see how she is being scripted on stage and in the world at large. She moves from being solely angry at her role in the perpetuation of this image

into a position of power where she “reclaims control of characterizing the black female in order to re-create her in her own true image (Jennings 32). Wiletta is no longer susceptible to his silencing and responds to his criticism by saying that her integrity is what won’t allow her to participate in this fashion.

Instead of talking about her dissatisfaction with the theater to another black woman, Wiletta attempts several times to speak with the director about his implicit racism. She questions the troubling scenario of Job’s arrival and her reaction. He enters the home, barely escaping the men who intend to lynch him as a result of his voting. His mother, played by Wiletta, is ironing. Petunia is looking out the window, and the father is whittling a stick. They are all participating in what Doris Abramson calls, “stock actions for characters in a play about Negro life in the South” (Abramson 197). These depictions bother Wiletta, but what causes the most anger is her sending him out to the mob while singing a spiritual. Manners and Wiletta disagree on how she responds as a mother. Wiletta argues for authenticity. She wants the mother to say, “run for it, Job” or “Son, you right! I don’t want to send you outta here but I don’t know what to do” (336). She is turned away and “placed” as Manners tells her that she does not do the writing, only the acting. There is no blurred line. Childress points out the power whites have in crafting the image; black actors, however, have none as they are to step into their roles without making any demands.

Childress not only highlights Manners’ refusal to allow Wiletta to overstep the boundary of white director-black actress, she also portrays the black cast members’ resistance to Wiletta’s rebellion. Sheldon continuously tried to prevent Wiletta from arguing with Manners. The inaccuracy of the script does not hold the same kind of

significance for Sheldon, who is focused mostly on maintaining a livelihood. His ability to balance his knowledge of the untruthful image with the reality of making a living is understood when he says to Wiletta that she must “swallow what you mind. What you mind won’t buy beans. I mean you gotta take what you mind to survive . . . to eat, to breathe” (317). Millie, also in agreement with Sheldon, says that she understands Wiletta’s dismay but she cannot sacrifice employment for what is right (344). Neither Sheldon nor Millie is willing to stop participating in the whites’ objectification of African-Americans.

Wiletta’s journey to self-identity protection prevents her from placing employment over the correct portrayal of herself, and her community. The play within the play portrays her undying struggle to find truth in Bronson’s interpretation, but finally her frustration forces her to take control of the scene. After Job runs in, she is supposed to pray that fear and hatred be taken out of his soul (339). In essence, she is holding him responsible for wanting to exercise his right as a human being. This untruth is so unbearable that despite Manners’ request not to pull Job off of his knees during prayer, she says while trying to raise him, “Aw, get up off the floor, wallowin’ around like that” (339). The cast is shocked that she would intentionally defy white authority. She continues to step outside of her “place” and continues to articulate her dissent from this grave untruth. Knowing that a mother would not willingly send her son to the “teeth” of the lynch mob, she questions why his family would be involved in killing him (339). She makes the distinction between instances when men were dragged out of their homes versus a mother sending her son out. In one case, the mother has no control, but in this situation, she becomes the dragger; she, in fact, becomes the killer. She not only says

that the play is a lie, but she truly manifests her awareness that whites want to be seen as powerful and good when she says, “The writer wants the damn white man to be the hero—and I’m the villain” (340). Manners tries to exert his power again by telling her that she does not know more than the author; however, she does not allow him to take away what she knows to be true. She finally holds him accountable and names him: “you are a prejudiced man, a prejudiced racist” (341). Wiletta’s naming of Manners marks her complete transformation into a self-identity protector. Her proclamation, “I ain’t laughin,’” demonstrates her refusal to be compliant. She not only understands her role in the perpetuation of stock characters, but she has “outed” white racism.

Her journey to self-identity protection not only allowed her to speak her truth as a black woman, but also to help other actors. Wiletta’s transformation is essential for John, who throughout rehearsals has mastered “bowin’ and scrapin’ and tommin’” (337). John became so adept at masatering how to survive in theater that he shuns her when she talks to him about how problematic the play is. His responses to her ape those of Manners, who does not understand why she is having trouble with the script. It isn’t until the final confrontation that Wiletta has with Manners that she is able to help John. The director’s response is what completely changes John’s outlook and initiates his journey. In response to Wiletta’s asking whether or not he would send his own son to be murdered, Manners responds blatantly that John cannot be compared to his son. He speaks directly to John and says that the major difference is that John has three strikes against him, while his son has none. John, who began to believe that pretending to be like Manners would win him success, realizes that the director has been untruthful. Throughout the play rehearsals John absorbed Manners’ sentiment that people, not race, mattered. Wiletta’s

repeated attempts to change the script provoked Manners to tell his truth: that race does matter and in fact because of race, his son is better off.

Wiletta had to become a self-identity protector in order to help John. She had to recognize that her initial means of survival—not telling the truth—aided in the objectification of African-Americans. It wasn't enough for her to talk about her dissatisfaction with Millie. Instead, she had to confront the problem. In doing so, she not only provided John with the impetus for his own journey, but she found liberation. At the end of the play, most likely her last day as a paid actor in Chaos in Belleville, she shows the shift in her thinking about African-Americans in theater. She says, "I've always wanted to do somethin' real grand...in the theater...to stand forth at my best...to stand up here and do anything I want" (346). Responding in the spirit of the blues singer who is certain that the "sun's gonna shine and brighten my backdoor someday," Wiletta envisions a different place for herself on the stage.

She no longer feels that her place is in show business as a stock character. Her relinquishing the pent-up frustrations that had been troubling allowed her to take control of her mind. Her transition into the role of self-identity protector provided her with a new way to think about her "place." She refuses to let whites place her in roles that are untruthful and derogatory; instead she is revolutionary in her thinking. She places herself right on the stage, performing with integrity. For a moment, when she is on the empty stage after the cast has been dismissed, she is unsure of what grand thing she could perform. Henry, an elderly Irish man who serves as the director's help and janitor, suggests that she recite the 23<sup>rd</sup> Psalm, one of the most popular that attests to God's

unfailing mercy and presence despite the enemies' onslaught. Wiletta, however, chooses to read the 133<sup>rd</sup> Psalm:

Behold how good and how pleasant it is for brethren to dwell together in unity. It is like the precious ointment upon the head, that ran down upon the beard, even Aaron's beard; that went down to the skirts of his garment; as the dew of Hermon, and as the dew that descended upon the mountains of Zion; for there the Lord commanded the blessing, even life forevermore (346).

One reading of this decision is that she is refusing to take instructions from another man, a white man. But, the recitation of this particular verse, "Behold how good and how pleasant it is for brethren to dwell together in unity" demonstrates Childress' greater vision. It is not just about Wiletta's asserting her own choice. Since Wiletta has been transformed, the mission is now greater; it is no longer individual. Childress is now describing what needs to be done in order to have a greater change. For unity to exist within this new "grand" theater, racism must not only be named, but it must be dismantled. Through Wiletta, Childress ultimately argues that genuine concessions need to be made to account for African-Americans, ones that not only recognize race and the manifestations of racism, but the combination of a racialized and gendered experience.

In both *Florence* (1949) and *Trouble in Mind* (1955) Childress uses black-white confrontation as the impetus for her black women protagonists to reach self-identity protection. In *Florence* Mama, through conversation with Mrs. Carter, learns the futility of relying on whites for equality. Ultimately, she reclaims full responsibility in the raising of her daughter, Florence. *Trouble in Mind* focuses on Wiletta's participation in the perpetuation of stereotypical black images. Eventually, she revolts against the theater's racism and advocates the end of blacks' relationship to their own self-victimization. By the time Childress published *Wine in the Wilderness* in 1969, she had

abandoned the black-white plot and focused instead on “problems created by blacks that only blacks [could] exorcise and solve” (Jennings 57). In this play, Childress couples “intraracial classism and sexism” with the “social dysfunction that white acculturation and class conditioning cause when bourgeois blacks fail to respect poorer black men and women as their social and political equals” (Jennings 11). Unlike in the prior plays where the protagonists’ journey to self-identity protection happens through white racists, in *Wine in the Wilderness*, Tommy must confront blacks’ racist and classist beliefs. Once she is transformed, she too, like Mama and Wiletta, can help others move toward a higher level of black consciousness and self-identity protection.

The setting of *Wine in the Wilderness* is the home of Bill Jameson, a 33-year-old painter. He is waiting out the tail end of the Harlem riot in 1964. The painter is finishing up a triptych on black womanhood and awaits the arrival of the final model. His friends Sonny-man, a writer, and Sonny-man’s wife, Cynthia, a social worker, believe that they have the perfect woman to represent the final portrait. From the very beginning Bill is intended to be seen as an intellectual, as someone who is in the position to teach other blacks about being righteous or conscious. His higher status is made known through a conversation that he has with a homeless friend, known as Oldtimer, who has stopped by Bill’s apartment to hide the money he has stolen in the looting. The social hierarchy is evidenced when Oldtimer responds to Bill’s resentment towards the looting and stealing. He places Bill higher than himself intellectually and socially when he says, “I don’t blame you for bein’ fed up with us...fella like you oughta be fed up with your people sometime” (755). Oldtimer unfortunately does not see himself as intelligent and makes a large distinction between someone “like Bill” and the masses of African-Americans.

Through *Oldtimer Childress* exposes the myth that the African-American bourgeoisie are the only ones in the position to help their community. In fact, through the characters Bill, Sonny-man, and Cynthia, symbols of the black bourgeoisie, she critiques their unawareness and apathy towards the concerns of everyday African-Americans.

Immediately, the mindset of the black bourgeoisie is illuminated as Bill reveals to Oldtimer the rationale behind his visual series on black womanhood. The first of the three paintings is "Black Girlhood," which represents youth and innocence. The second, "Wine in the Wilderness," is perfect "black womanhood in her noblest form" (755). He jokingly equates this "regal" woman to Jesus as he says to Oldtimer that this woman is the "bread" and the "wine" (755). Not only does she represent the body and blood of Christ she is the missing link in the creation of Heaven on earth. In his opinion, "paradise" could be created as long as a man had this woman (she also has a melodious voice), a loaf of bread and wine. The "wine in the wilderness" woman stands in stark contrast to the final representation. The "lost chick" or the "nothin'" black woman of the third portrait is only fit to be passed by (756). Both men laugh at the expense of this woman who is described as "unfeminine," "coarse," "rude," "vulgar," and "ignorant" (756). They are in agreement that she is so far detached from the "African" woman in portrait two and so un-together that she should be stomped to death (756).

Through the characterization of Bill, Childress puts herself in the position to repeatedly "speechify" or critique this limiting and demeaning perspective on black womanhood. The first portrait is the only one of the three that remains unproblematic. The second woman is considered to be the epitome of black womanhood; all women are to strive to be like her. However, while he wants her to have an African base, Bill

glamorizes Africa by linking her to the continent in trivial ways. She is represented as “the Sudan, the Congo River, the Egyptian Pyramids” (756). In this type of correlation she becomes a geographic landmark adorned with head wraps and colorful materials instead of a woman who has a connection to African women because of similar strengths, coping mechanisms, or intellectual pursuits. Through this type of petty glorification, Childress attacks the superficial creation of perfect black womanhood, one that has little to do with blackness or African-ness but instead with white standards of beauty. She is created to be the new “Vogue” woman, only in “blackface” (Jennings 69). What is remiss in the depiction of this woman, who is held up on a pedestal, is the reality of the contemporary African-American woman. In his trite attempt to illuminate this noble African queen woman, Bill not only misrepresents African women, but he also leaves out the woman living in America. He doesn’t talk about her as the African-American woman. He refers to her solely as the “African” queen. Bill has no current or tangible truth, only a surface image.

The third portrait is even more devastating. In his discussion with Oldtimer he reveals that this painting will portray “what the society has made of our women” (756). In addition, he illuminates the position of black women in America when he says: “she’s had her butt kicked until it’s numb” (756). These statements, combined with his saying that she is close to the bottom of the totem pole, reveals his awareness of society’s role in black women’s oppression. However, whatever he knows about the socio-political climate gets buried in his rhetoric about the poor, dumb, hopeless black chick. Essentially, he argues that she has no place in the world, and this is confirmed in his response to a drunken, raucous Oldtimer who wishes to stomp her to death. Bill doesn’t

disagree or expose society's hand in the treatment of black women. Instead, he revels in selfishness; he's going to paint her picture so that he can offer the world a statement. He intends to win a prize for this triptych which will teach "messed-up chicks in the neighborhood...what a woman oughta be" (757). Bill has the impetus to make change; however, instead of making a difference he becomes the embodiment of misplaced genius.

In both *Florence* and *Trouble in Mind* Childress critiques whites who consider themselves the authority on blackness. In this play, she inverts the model and critiques Bill, a black man, who is so detached from his blackness that he paints black womanhood in a racist and stereotypical fashion. So now, instead of the white person being the expert, we have a black man who creates a visual of racist fiction. He creates his art to help but instead it will cause more damage by stratifying black women based on class and supposed Afrocentricity. However, once Tommy is introduced, it becomes clear that she, not Bill, is the "true Africentrist" (Jennings 65). Her sense of self-worth emanates from her racial pride, whereas Bill's separatist view makes him self-hating and critical of blacks who are poor and uneducated.

Once Tommy arrives she begins to unravel her new associates' class bias. She is the complete antithesis of the pretentious bunch of middle class friends who "equate Blackness with such superficial trappings as rhetoric, use of the Black idiom, and African *objets d'art*, but who, in reality, are empty and artificial" (Miller 284). In two separate meetings, with Cynthia and Bill respectively, Tommy exposes their self-imposed class stratification and encourages them to re-think their identities.

At the backdrop of Tommy's conversation with Cynthia is Childress' attack of the belief system that berates black women for being independent and assertive, as reiterated by Daniel Patrick Moynihan in 1965.<sup>1</sup> A central argument of the Moynihan report, which focused on eradicating poverty, was that black family stability could be achieved if black women allowed their men to "strut." If black women worked or made a living independently of men they were, according to Moynihan, prohibiting black men from "strutting."

Cynthia's perspective that the black woman be less independent and more submissive stringently parallels Moynihan's belief system. Not only is Tommy told that black women become "hard" from doing too much, but Cynthia also suggests that Tommy talk less, or not at all (761). Instead of asserting her own opinion, Tommy, according to Cynthia should "learn to listen" and ask, "what do *you* think Bill?" (761) Through Tommy's responses, the invalidity of this report is made evident. Tommy succinctly argues against the major premises of this perspective. She debunks the notion that there is a matriarchal society, as Cynthia argues, because she recognizes that in order for this hypothesis to be true black women must have power. When she says, "we didn't have nothin' to rule over, not a pot nor a window" she exemplifies her mother's inability to provide for herself and family (760). Tommy earned money as a personal vow; she refused to revisit a past that was made up of a mother who couldn't afford garters for her stockings, let alone food for her daughter when she returned from school.

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<sup>1</sup> The 1965 Report on The Negro Family addressed what Moynihan considered to be the root of family disorganization. He argues that issues black migrants faced like Jim Crow, unemployment, and high fertility not only weakened the family structure but displaced the male as the head of the household. This reversal of traditional roles manifested in the black male's self-hatred and bitterness towards society. He concluded that one sure way to end the 'pathology' was for black men to reclaim their position as head of household in order for the entire race to excel. The Negro Family: The Case for National Action, Issued by the Department of Labor, March 1965.

Although Tommy is not educated, and does not know the terminology “black matriarchy,” her experiences confirm the absurdity of the Moynihan argument. In fact, she shows how far removed logic like Cynthia’s is from her life when she says, “Cynthia, I can’t wait for anybody to open the door or look out for me and all that kinda crap you talk” (768). She understands that working had nothing to do with taking away black manhood and everything to do with survival. Her experiences prevent her from getting caught in sexist and/or mythical trappings, i.e. matriarchy. As she tells Cynthia that she didn’t have the time to “study” being poor because she was “*in it*,” she points out the danger in intellectualizing poverty (768). She attacks a perspective that would place a worrisome debate over a man’s manhood, which he is in full control of, over her own survival. Through quipped responses, Childress via Tommy cautions against the absorption of a false perspective. It is one that is not steeped in reality, but instead in imagined academic rhetoric. Cynthia, who criticizes Tommy and other black women in her position, is not fully aware of these types of experiences. As a social worker, she becomes an expert sans empathy, who really knows nothing about surviving poverty.

While Tommy does not heed Cynthia’s advice, she has not fully made the personal transformation to protector. Her interest in Bill, who she knows has “Black, uppity, high-handed ways,” stunts the process (760). Her pursuit of Bill, or what she calls “aimin’ too high,” comes to a halt when she realizes Bill’s original intent of meeting her. This climax marks her entrance into her position as self-identity protector.

While Bill prepares to paint Tommy, he reaffirms the initial hierarchy that Oldtimer places him in early on in the play. Bill, this time, however, places himself in the position of authority in his conversation with Tommy. As she looks around his

apartment she learns, in some cases for the first time, about major figures in Black history. She is eager to learn more from Bill; but he, like Manners, dismisses her interest in thinking by relegating her to the domestic sphere. Her desire to learn becomes a “problem” that black women have. Confident in his education and consciousness, he says to Tommy, “it would take me all my life to straighten you” out (763). The notion of being straightened out is similar to Johnson’s discussion of walking straight. In *Blue-Eyed Black Boy* Pauline and Rebecca talk about white men who use their power to demoralize black women. In this instance, the ‘straightening’ that Bill wants to do has everything to do with asserting power. He is similar to the men the Waters’ discuss in that what he thinks is appropriate will take precedence. As a result, Tommy becomes silenced and has no say. In fact, this dichotomy is revealed when he says that men are the “great brains” (763). In essence, men think and women, particularly poor women, don’t. Furthermore, she is completely objectified when he asserts that the greatest thing she can do to help blacks in America is to be “put down on canvas” (763). At this point, Tommy, who is still eager to develop a relationship with him, puts his sexist perspective aside and allows him to decide what her place is in the world.

At this point in the play, Tommy is seen as ambiguous. With Cynthia, she dismisses the sexist perspective of placing men before her own survival needs. However, with Bill, her desire for marriage outweighs her ability to name his sexism and classism. The conflicting portrait of Tommy begins to dissolve, however, as she spends more time with Bill. Their differing opinions on what she should wear propels her out of a state of ambiguity into certainty.

Bill, interested only in painting Tommy as a “poor, dumb chick,” wants her to pose just the way she is. Carrying a brown paper bag and dressed in a mis-matched skirt and sweater, bobby sox and sneakers, this wig-wearing Tommy is in perfect form for the last portrait. Tommy, manifesting a strong sense of self, tells Bill that she doesn’t feel proud of herself in what she is wearing. Instead, she wants to wear her linen shoes, white dress, and orlon sweater. What she wants for herself stands in complete contradiction to the woman he wants to represent. In order to present the image he feels is appropriate, he silences her desires with another sexist comment: “oh, stop fightin’ me! Another thing. . . our women don’t know a damn thing bout bein’ feminine. *Give* in sometime. It won’t kill you....You too damn opinionated” (764). Bill’s exposition on the problems with black women continues until Tommy accidentally spills her drink and has to exit to change clothes.

As she changes into the African cloth he’s given her, she overhears Bill’s phone conversation. When she hears him describe the “finest Black woman in the world,” Tommy thinks that Bill is referring to her. The conversation that Tommy overhears is important not just because she finally feels liked and accepted by Bill. But the phone conversation becomes symbolic of her acceptance of her whole self. His comment becomes an opportunity for her to reaffirm her beauty. Thus, an extra-confident Tommy wrapped in cloth sans wig emerges. At this point, she is not concerned with presenting herself in a certain way to impress Bill. She knows that she is enough. She doesn’t have to wear a straightened wig to feel beautiful.

Tommy’s rejection of the wig marks her coming to terms with the dangers of what Sonia Sanchez calls “secondary consciousness.” Described by Sanchez as the

looking at Black people through the eyes of the oppressor, secondary consciousness prevents blacks from seeing their features, including hair, as beautiful.<sup>1</sup> Sanchez's definition echoes DuBois' notion of double consciousness. In The Souls of Black Folk DuBois illuminates the struggle of "two-ness" or seeing oneself in the eyes of others (DuBois 3). Sanchez's refusal to be shaped by what the world thinks of her prevents the concept of two-ness in her life. Childress ends the internal warring that comes as a result of the conflicting self-image by Tommy's rejection of the wig. At the beginning of the play, she shows her self-confidence by voicing what she wants to be painted in. The overheard conversation at the end of the play, however, stands as her final lesson in becoming self-accepting. At this point, she is no longer ambiguous. When she finally emerges without the wig, she reveals herself to be a woman who knows her worth.

Bill is taken by her presence and confidence and is unable to paint. Since she will not put the wig back on, he is left to remember the initial image on his own.

Unsuccessful, he finally relinquishes the painting and they talk. In this conversation about her family, Tommy teaches Bill about the history of the Elks, Masons, and Eastern Stars. Bill is impressed with Tommy's historical and familial knowledge as she teaches him about the development of the A.M.E. church and traces her family tree back a few generations. Her confidence combined with her familial and racial pride propels Bill to proclaim, "I'm glad you're here. Black *is* beautiful, you're beautiful" (766). Tommy is

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<sup>1</sup> In an interview with Zala Chandler, Sonia Sanchez describes the self-hating effects of secondary consciousness: "I will never again see myself, see other Black women, see Black men, and Black children secondarily, through the eyes of the oppressor...the slave master. I will never again see my kinky hair, my big nose, or my big lips as something horrible. I don't want the bluest eyes. I don't want the long, straight blonde hair. I maintain that I will never in my life walk secondarily again—or even appear to have secondary views." Wild Women in the Whirlwind: Afro-American Culture and the Contemporary Literary Renaissance. Eds. Braxton, Joanne M. and Andree Nicola McLaughlin. (New Jersey: Rutgers University Press, 1990) p. 356.

responsible for Bill's budding consciousness; his emphasis on "is" reveals a prior commitment to blackness based on rhetoric. At this point he truly believes all of what he espouses earlier to Old Timer about African beauty and ancestry. His learning from the person he thought least able to make a difference in the black community is essential as it dismantles the notion that one has to be educated and of a certain class to be of service.

Tommy's role in changing the misconception of poor black women is seen even more clearly the next morning when OldTimer returns and accidentally reveals Bill's initial motive. It is when Tommy learns that she was intended to be "the lost woman," that she fully steps into the role of self-identity protector. After an evening of self-discovery and acceptance, she is prepared to expose the way in which black people further oppress each other. Childress uses Tommy as her vehicle to debunk the myth that the educated are the best suited to teach. Tommy admits her absorption of this untruth when she says, "I was your fool, thinkin' writers and painters know moren' me, that maybe a little bit of you would rub off on me" (768). This recurring theme is reiterated once again to not only expose the hierarchy that is introduced at the beginning of the play but to dismantle it. When Tommy eventually says, "there's something inside-a me that says I ain' suppose to let *nobody* play me cheap. Don't care how much they know!" she puts an end to the notion that the black bourgeoisie must teach the uneducated (768). She reaffirms her own self-worth and intelligence.

Childress uses Tommy as a vehicle to debunk DuBois' "talented tenth" notion which suggested that the race would be saved by its "trained men" (DuBois 271). The difference between DuBois and Childress lies in their perspective on education. For DuBois the culmination of education was being "trained for life" (DuBois 271). This

could only happen as a result of a thorough college experience. Childress, however, exposes the classist dichotomy within this thought process and instead calls for a change of thought. Through Tommy, her interest in recognizing the potential in all of the community members, regardless of education, is apparent. Tommy doesn't have to be college educated in order to reaffirm herself, teach others, or help Bill to become a better leader.

The idea of needing to be "trained for life" in order to be a "leader of thought" is eradicated as Childress creates an uneducated character who is intelligent, perceptive, and observant enough to illuminate the holes in the groups' supposed Afrocentric rhetoric (DuBois 271). For example, she first demonstrates the separatism that is manifested in their language when Sonny-man repeatedly refers to her as "'the' sister" (769). She points out that terminology like "'the' Afro-American," and "'the' black man," only serve to stratify. Through Tommy, who says to the group, "there's no we-ness in you," Childress examines the illusion of community and clearly drives home the point that the rhetoric only serves as a stand-in for unity (769). It is this separatism that makes people like Bill, Sonny-man, and Cynthia feel as if they are in the position to teach the uneducated community of blacks. Tommy once again reveals their classism when she says, "There he go again. 'The' masses. Tryin' to make out like we pitiful and you got it made. You the masses your damn self and don't even know it" (769). Childress once again inverts the hierarchy where the uneducated must learn from the educated and places Tommy in the position to teach the others of their own oppression.

Tommy is unrelenting in her illumination of the group's contradictions: they are able to intellectualize the black experience only from afar because in reality, to use

Tommy's words, "you hate us, that's what! *You hate Black me!*" (768) Very pointedly, Childress points out the danger in the oppressed becoming the oppressors of their very own community. Ultimately, Tommy understands that behind the rhetoric of sisterhood, brotherhood, and unity lays separatism and elitism. As she prepares to return to the "nitty-gritty crowd, where the talk is we-ness and us-ness," Tommy points out that their criticism is misplaced (768). Instead, of pontificating on "how we ain' never together," Tommy argues for more of an emphasis on the lack of genuine unity stemming from the middle class.

What began as Bill's great plan to revamp the lower class community ends as a commentary on the misdoing of middle class blacks. Tommy is no longer in the position of an unspoken object that stands as a false representation of black womanhood. She will not let Bill make an untruthful statement on black womanhood; instead she uses her own voice, and makes herself a primary subject. She redefines his notion of "wine in the wilderness," in her own language. She tells them that it has nothing to do with African wraps, exceptional beauty, and silence. Instead, it has everything to do with being real and speaking truth.

Tommy's "emergence" and/or rebuke of secondary consciousness catapulted her into the position of self-identity protector. This personal transformation, similar to Childress' other female protagonists, i.e. Mama and Wileta, is the impetus for her to teach others. As a result, Tommy "rises to serve as a healer to her wounded community whose psyche is in need of re-Africanization" (Brown-Guillory 108). In essence, Childress inverts the traditional teacher-student hierarchy and places the poor,

uneducated black woman in the position to teach the formally educated but yet apathetic bourgeoisie.

Before she is able to leave, Bill tells her that he was “painting in the dark, all head and no heart” (770). He is finally prepared to paint a triptych that encompasses the black experience. In the revamped portrait, there are no idealized images. He does not glamorize innocence or Africa. Instead, he shows the longevity of the black man through Oldtimer, who despite unfair education and job opportunities still exists. He also includes Sonny-man and Cynthia as an example of the collective work of a black couple. And most importantly, he paints Tommy as she is so that the world will recognize a woman who has survived slavery, a proud woman that children will see as familiar, as “somebody they know” (770).

Bill is only transformed because Tommy was transformed. His new visual statement is important not only because it shows the black woman as realistic, but also because it shows Bill’s connection to people. Previously, he was so disconnected from the people around him that he didn’t even know Oldtimer’s first name. Tommy was pivotal in his being connected to “flesh and blood” people, not blacks who are only represented in books. His new triptych shows his reunion with the black community, or in Tommy’s words, the “nitty-gritty” crowd; it is not based on relationships strung together by rhetoric and elitism. Through Tommy, he creates a statement that is free from his prior class bias. His inclusion of a homeless man, a middle class couple, and a blue-collar worker, makes a more realistic statement on the world in which he lives.

The common thread amongst *Florence*, *Trouble in Mind*, and *Wine in the Wilderness* is the protagonist’s eventual ability to help others in their journey to self-

identity protection. It is only after Mama, Willetta, and Tommy are able to separate themselves from racist, and in the latter, sexist, labeling that they rise to the position of protector. In each case Childress was successful at not only creating black woman leads who as Brown-Guillory says “name themselves” and “express their totality,” but she simultaneously brought to the forefront “recognizable images of women” (Brown-Guillory 108). Childress’ understanding of the need for the “recognizable” is reiterated especially in *Wine in the Wilderness* as Bill eventually sees the importance of portraying the “familiar” woman.

Childress’s contemporaries examined the journey to self-identity protection as well. The fact that other black women playwrights were writing about the protagonist’s journey to self-identity protection shows that Childress did not exist in a vacuum. When explored by Sonia Sanchez, Lorraine Hansberry, and Alexis DeVeaux, however, the notion of self-identity protection takes a different shape. Their conclusions are not always as straightforward. Comparatively, in the just examined plays by Childress, there are three steps. Each major woman character is first faced with a dilemma that threatens her sense of self-worth. They then separate themselves from racist or sexist expectations for black womanhood. And finally, as a result of their transformation, they next help others to take steps toward their own journey. In essence, Childress provides the success story with a complete blueprint on how to rebuke the racist, classist, and sexist trappings.

In the work of her contemporaries, however, the journey is more varied. In some cases it is similar but in most, it is less clear-cut and dried. Sonia Sanchez’s *Sister Sonji* follows most closely to the plays by Childress in that the protagonist is in the position to be a change agent at the end of the play. The difference, however, is that this protagonist

directly involves the audience to participate in changing their lives and ultimately the future. The audience does not merely take a spectator role, viewing the journey; instead what is reflected is a journey more physical and participatory.

Two of Childress's other colleagues chose more difficult conclusions in their portrait of self-identity protection. *A Raisin in the Sun* and *The Tapestry*, by Hansberry and DeVaux respectively, show the protagonist still struggling to complete her journey. Instead of illuminating the three-step process to self-identity protection, these playwrights focus intently on the reasons that make the journey difficult. While they share the aim in portraying the importance of the journey, they differ in their not placing the protagonist as the change agent for others.

Despite varying approaches, it's worth examining these four playwrights together. Firstly, they share a common belief that the transformation into a protector is important. Secondly, the various ways in which the theme can be addressed tells the audience that there is no single experience for black women. A mixture of approaches affirms Harry J. Elam's claim that the "'black experience' can no longer be viewed as a monolith, but must be understood for its variety, its multiple permutations and contradictions" (Elam 1). Not every black woman protagonist will be scripted the same, thus allowing for a well-rounded, yet truthful imagery of the African-American woman's experience on the stage.

Generally, self-identity protection is seen as a psychological journey. The audience witnesses the protagonist's frustration as she copes with the threat to her identity. Sonia Sanchez uses a combination of the psychological with the physical just as Childress stages Tommy's physical transformation when she removes the wig. In *Sister*

*Son/ji* (1969) Sanchez incorporates a staged physical transformation to illuminate the psychological or the “sweet/astringent” steps her protagonist makes to self-identity protection. Sister Son/ji’s journey to self-identity protection marks her transformation from silent to spoken, from passive to rebellious. The typography that Sanchez uses underscores Sister Son/ji’s staged transformation. Sanchez’s use of lower case, slashes, and changed spellings demonstrates that she is not restrained by what is expected or by the traditional Western way of writing. She is much like her protagonist, who learns to reject the expected role for the black woman as submissive, quiet, and inferior to men and whites.

The play happens in a series of remembrances. We know from the very beginning of the play that Sister Son/ji has been transformed in her lifetime. When she talks about the memories that she wants to engage in, she questions, “shall they be deeper than the sounds of my blk/today or shall they be louder than the sounds of my white/yesterdays” (156). Immediately, we know that she has gone through a process that culminated in the celebration of blackness. As she moves through different phases in her life, the transition from “white/yesterdays” to “blk/today” is given context. Sister Son/ji is first transformed from a gray haired woman in her fifties into a young woman of 18 or 19 with a long straightened wig. In this first remembrance the invisibility of black women in predominately white colleges is addressed.

Sister Son/ji and the three other black female students must face their professor’s intentional lapse in remembering their names. Angered by the professor’s lumping the women into “three/big/blk/masses of blk/womanhood,” Sister Son/ji walks out determined not to return (158). The urgency to have her humanity recognized is

dismissed as well by her lover, who considered her walking out of class “foolish” (158). As she is defending her decision, which ultimately marks her transformation from invisible to visible, she is abruptly interrupted by his conversation about his new car. Thus far, she is silenced in the classroom by the white professor and also in her personal relationship by her lover.

Merging the political with the personal continues to be a theme in another important phase in Sister Son/ji’s life. She emerges sans straightened wig and espouses the philosophies of Malcolm X. The removal of the wig indicates her separation from things that are assimilationist, like relaxed hair. When she names her transformation this time, the notion of “blk/today” is clarified. In her talking about Malcolm X, her politics on the celebration of blackness is evident:

did u hear those blk/words of that beautiful/blk/warrior/prince—Did u see his flashing eyes and did u hear his dagger/words. Cuz if u did then u will know as i have come to know. u will change—u will pick up yr/roots and become yr/self again—u will come home to blk/ness” (159).

While her political transformation is illuminated, there is an additional emphasis on the revamping of the black community. Similarly to Childress, the protagonist is essential in transforming others. The belief here is that the individual transformation is not enough. What one person learns must ripple out into the community.

The focus on the black community is crucial for Sister Son/ji because it also becomes a major source of contention. In her own personal relationship she recognizes that what is preached regarding black men and women working together and respecting each other as the “core/basis” of survival in “white/america” is only rhetoric. When she questions her lover, a major figure in the movement who fails to practice what is preached on podiums, she is left unanswered.

In this instance, Sanchez uses the protagonist to “speechify” on what is necessary for the survival of the African-American community. Sister Son/ji has moved from being silenced in the classroom and in an early relationship to a position of healer for others. Although she struggles to make the “doings...match the words” in her own relationship, she is not silenced here. She does name the behavior of black men who abandon their families as inappropriate and detrimental to the survival of future generations. Instead of a focus on drinking and drugs, she advocates that communication be in place. She argues through Sister Son/ji that both women and children need the presence of healthy black men in the home. Essentially, Sister Son/ji becomes the mouthpiece for Sanchez to discuss what is lacking in the homes of black families. In addition, she illuminates the rhetoric of the movement and questions its total worth if men only become empty voice boxes who lack the ability to perform what is spoken.

By the time the play ends, Sister Son/ji has given birth to a child alone and also later loses him to the fight for equal rights and opportunities for blacks. As she talks of his death, she makes it evident that her politics are for segregation, not integration. Her argument is that black children must have their own land, their own communities in order to “explode with the sheer joy of living” (162). At the close of the play Sister Son/ji has cycled back to the gray haired woman in her fifties. Once again she combines the personal with the larger, political, communal transformation as she says: “we dared to pick up the day and shake its tail until it became evening. a time for us. blk/ness. blk/people” (162). Here it is clear that her efforts did not happen in isolation; the use of “we” connotes a group effort, a communal one. In her language, Sanchez demonstrates the importance of communal change.

Sanchez hones in even more on the community in her invitation to the audience to be participants. In her final statements, she asks a crucial question: “anybody can grab the day and make it stop. can u my friends? or may be it’s better if i ask: will you?” (162) She encourages the audience to carry on the legacy of black activists who worked to make freedom possible. Ultimately, she implies that the audience must be held accountable. The community must be involved in the creation of a new day.

Through a series of physical transformations Sister Son/ji’s journey to self-identity protection is illuminated. Silenced initially, like Tommy, she eventually emerges as a woman who has voice. No longer silenced, she “speechifies” on what is necessary for a unified black community. Similarly to *Wine in the Wilderness*, *Sister Son/ji* demonstrates the connection between the individual and the community. Both playwrights argue that there is a direct correlation between the protagonist’s journey and the community’s survival. Once Tommy is no longer silent, she is in the position to break down class barriers. Sister Son/ji makes a commentary on an existing ailment in the black community as well: absent black male figures. In her interest to disconnect the cycle of black men who are taught that it is all right to leave, she provides a solution for the strengthening of black families. Ultimately, Sanchez, like Childress, shows the far-reaching effects of a woman’s transformation into a self-identity protector. As a result of the one journey, the community can be helped.

Although Hansberry and DeVaux do not focus on the completed journey, one that ends in the protagonist’s position as change agent, they are similar to Childress and Sanchez in that there is an impetus for self-identity protection. Their aim, however, is to show that one’s awareness of oppression and societal expectations is not always

manifested in a completed journey to self-identity protection. Both Hansberry and DeVeaux show that these outside forces elongate the process to becoming a protector.

Lorraine Hansberry's *A Raisin in the Sun* (1959) tells the story of black family life. All five of the Youngers, Mama, her children Walter Lee and Beneatha, her grandson Travis, and daughter in law, Ruth, live in a small roach infested apartment on Chicago's poverty stricken Southside. The plot revolves around the Younger family, which awaits the insurance money of the late Mr. Younger. The women are most interested in buying a home and putting money away for Beneatha's medical school expenses. The tension builds as Walter Lee Younger continues to press his family to support his efforts to buy a liquor store. Underlying the major argument between Mama, who initially refuses to give money to her son for a non-religious business venture, and Walter Lee, who accuses his family of keeping him disenfranchised, lays a sexist and conservative philosophy that keeps Beneatha fighting to be heard.

Beneatha is misunderstood. Both her mother and Ruth cannot understand why she changes her hobbies so frequently. Her interest in, and yet a lack of commitment to, a range of activities whether they be horseback riding, play acting, or guitar lessons is her way of indulging in what she calls "new forms of expression" (115). To the other women it's considered "flitting" (115). She is laughed at when she says that she changes frequently because she is trying to express herself; disappointed she responds "don't worry—I don't expect you to understand" (115). Hansberry intentionally creates a dichotomy where the women are pitted against each other. Beneatha is symbolic of a new woman, one who is trying to be assertive and self-explorative in ways Mama and Ruth weren't, and perhaps couldn't be. Interestingly enough, the family's pooled

resources that are funneled to Beneatha becomes part of what separates them. Beneatha is given the opportunity to explore and step outside of the role of provider and nurturer. Her awareness of new things, and her desire to find her place within all that she is learning, ultimately tugs at the relationship that she has with the conservative women.

The rift between the women lays not only in their difference in opinion regarding her activities, but also in respect to her relationships with men. This is an area again where Beneatha's logic is questioned, predominately by Ruth. For example, Ruth cannot understand why Beneatha is only lukewarm to the handsome, wealthy George Murchison. For Ruth, George's wealth represents access to opportunities, and most importantly, a home with light, space, a private bathroom; these are things that she desperately wants. Beneatha, on the other hand, is not focused on things, even if they would end her having to share a bedroom with her mother and a bathroom with several other tenants.

Her response, however, to George has to do with what would eventually destroy her personal dreams. She refuses to marry a man who doesn't respect her choice to become a doctor and who prefers her not to think. She, like Willetta in *Trouble in Mind*, receives the brunt of his sexist, condescending thinking. George Murchison is very similar to Manners in that both men feel empowered to place women in subordinate positions. Murchison's sexism is revealed when he suggests after a date that Beneatha should use the fact that she is nice looking to her advantage instead of pursuing a career. His belief that a woman's sexuality is what matters most is clear when he says, while still trying to make her interested in his advances, "I want a nice—(*groping*)—simple—(*thoughtfully*)—sophisticated girl . . . not a poet—O.K.?" (130). As in *Wine in the*

*Wilderness* George, like Bill prescribes to a sexist ideology. Both playwrights clearly portray the woman's position as lesser than, however, Hansberry further indicates this power dynamic in the names she gives Beneatha. Her name signifies the position she is in with George and Walter Lee: she is beneath or subordinate to them. Hansberry uses Beneatha not only to make an argument about one woman's struggle to be heard and considered as an equal by the men in her life, but also to illuminate the position of black women in society.

Where George is sexist in his thought process, the women as well believe that a woman has a responsibility; her duty is to marry. Due to their lack of understanding, the women are not able to support Beneatha in her quest to place her dreams first. For example, Beneatha's explanation of George's sexism falls on deaf ears; Ruth still considers Beneatha to be "odd" (116). When Beneatha says that she won't marry George and may not marry at all, Ruth consoles Mama by insinuating that she is going through a phase.

Ruth's behavior conjures the Biblical story of Ruth and Naomi. Ruth, the devoted daughter-in-law refused to leave Naomi's side. Instead of returning home after the death of her husband, as she is encouraged to do by Naomi, Ruth accompanies her mother-in-law into the land of Judah, a land foreign to her. Similarly, in *A Raisin in the Sun*, Ruth shows her loyalty to Mama in their shared perspective on a woman's role in society. In her consolation to Mama that Beneatha will eventually marry, she shows her mother-in-law that she is not alone. Both she and Mama are linked in their efforts to understand the young woman who has strayed from traditional womanhood. Another similarity the Biblical Ruth has to Hansberry's is their survival and work ethic. Once in

Judah, Naomi gleanes the fields in order to provide food for herself and Naomi. She chose humiliating work – following behind harvesters in order to pick up any remnant of food or grain left behind – in order to survive. Ruth, too, works an undesired job as a maid to take care of her family and extended kin.

Ruth and Mama's shared perspective on a woman's role links them together while simultaneously isolating Beneatha. They don't provide her with gentle reminders that she deserves a man who treats her as an equal. This type of conversation, which could be hard to come by from Ruth, since her husband is sexist himself, could be the stimulus Beneatha needs to move her completely into the role of self-identity protector. Without this support from the women, she is left with only an awareness of sexism, and how it impinges on the dreams of women. Unfortunately, her acuity isn't enough to help her to move beyond it.

Beneatha not only faces the pressure to conform to society's expectations for her gender by the two important women in her life, but she is also bombarded by her brother's sexism. Walter Lee is oppressive to Beneatha in two ways. First, he insults her decision to be a doctor by saying that if she had a place in the medical field at all, it would be as a nurse "like other women" (112). He links women to the field of nursing, and implies that only men are doctors. Even if Walter Lee makes an accurate assessment of society's social dynamics, his sexism lays in his attitude that she must follow what has been set out for her. It is in his questioning, "who the hell told you you had to be a doctor?" that he makes it clear that she has stepped out of place (112). Walter's limited outlook does not end there; it is worsened when he says in the same breath that she can do what other women do: be a nurse, marry and "be quiet" (112). Walter's point of view

is echoed by his literary twin, Bill, in *Wine in the Wilderness* argues that women should be silent and rear children. Clearly, Beneatha is not to step out of place by pursuing a career intended for men; and she certainly must not have a voice.

In order for Beneatha to become a self-identity protector she has to be able to rid herself of the sexist trappings that exist within her own family. She names her desire with determination when she says, “I am going to be a doctor and everybody around here better understand that!” (116). She intends for her family to know that she is going to step outside of her prescribed place, but this naming isn’t enough. Hansberry shows the difficulty in a young woman’s desire to be a self-identity protector in a family that consists of a sexist male and two conservative women. Beneatha, for the most part, is alone in her quest to become a self-identity protector. Mama, however, tries to be helpful on two occasions. After Beneatha proclaims her life’s work, the stage directions say Mama responds “kindly” that she will be a doctor. Mama meets her daughter’s staunch claim with an appeasing, lukewarm response. The second time occurs when Mama overhears Beneatha saying aloud that George is a fool. Mama, anxious to understand her daughter, stops, and says “Well—I guess you better not waste your time with no fools” (131). Beneatha is encouraged that her mother listens to her this one time.

In both instances, Mama takes steps to help her daughter remove herself from what is expected of her, but Beneatha doesn’t get the full support that Childress’s character, Florence, eventually receives from her mother. It’s important to note that Florence’s mother was not able to be fully supportive until her daughter completely stepped away. This aided in the mother’s journey. What’s missing here is Beneatha’s

ability to rid herself from society's expectations. Without this crucial step, she can not help others begin their own journey.

While Mama takes steps in support of Beneatha, Walter Lee, at the end of the play, in a dictatorial fashion says that she should marry a man with money. Being with a man who respects her intelligence and mission to heal through medicine is considered a "silly idea" (146). The play ends in a very cyclical fashion as Beneatha is still misunderstood. She tells her mother that she wants to go to Africa with her suitor Asagai, another blatant proclamation that is out of the ordinary for a woman. This desire is similar to her initial statement that she isn't interested in marriage. As in the beginning of the play, she is met with opposition. She is considered to be too young by her mother, and filled with silly ideas by her brother. She is still left with the same question she asked in the first scene of the play, "Why can't I say what I want to around here, like everybody else?" (116) She ultimately remains silenced and misunderstood.

Unfortunately, where there is an impetus for Beneatha to completely rid herself of the ideologies that plague her family, the difficulty is that she still lives with them. She loves them and is reliant on them for her livelihood. In a realistic fashion, Hansberry shows that family life can be prohibitive in the journey to self-identity protection. Similarly in *The Tapestry* (1975) by Alexis DeVeaux, the protagonist, Jet, faces opposition from two important people in her life. The philosophies of Axis, Jet's boyfriend, and Lavender, her good friend, are diametrically opposed to her belief system on work, and her place in society as a woman. Ultimately, their differing worldviews hinder and delay her journey to the role of self-identity protector.

The actions of Jet, a 23 year-old woman, correspond to the definition of her name which means “to move quickly, to dart” (*American Heritage Dictionary of English Language*). Throughout the play, she is busy at the expense of herself preparing for a law career. She’s eager to reshape America’s policies that keep African-Americans without property, struggling for justice, or in her words, “vulnerable folks” (150). Like Beneatha who says determinedly that she will be a doctor, Jet, too names that she will “hand them a new set of rules” (150). Instantly, her determination to be a change agent is challenged by Axis and Lavender. Axis’s “don’t count on it baby” and Lavender’s “youll be fighting something with a built in anti-change factor/rich folks honey/big money” both fall short of encouragement (150). Where their responses may be shaped by their awareness of power dynamics, they do not champion her cause.

Jet’s staunch desire to “make *life* count” is continuously challenged by an educational system that expects her to fail and a justice system that works to punish people who have to make choices like stealing in order to survive (162-3). Jet’s reaction to her feeling of powerlessness is immersion in her studies. The combination of an intense study schedule combined with a lack of support is the manifestation of a strange chimerical dreamscape that reveals her state of mind. In one case she spontaneously puts on boots while talking with Axis and Lavender. She tells them the disgust she feels when the mud slithers through her toes like black worms (152). Her friends owe her hallucination to the over the counter medication she takes to stay awake, but her sudden regression to Savannah mud is representative of familial and self-imposed pressure. She is not only the first one to leave home, but she left with the philosophy of her father, “save the race,” ingrained in her head (152). His dreams have become intertwined with

hers and the pressure to make changes in a system that isn't supportive feels overwhelming. The Savannah mud dream is indicative not only of the family pressure and the struggle to change the justice system, but it exemplifies her struggle to maneuver and find her own self-defined plan. She is expected by her family to succeed and to fail by society. The pressure to prove her family right and society wrong is weighty and difficult. She has to be prepared with the right armor in order to struggle through. It's important that she puts on her own boots in the dream as it foreshadows her ability to choose a coping mechanism to meet the pressure of the expectations.

Jet's fear of not being able to "save the race" is manifested again as her home is transformed into an office space where several people are waiting anxiously for help. Jet isn't able to help because she isn't a lawyer at this point, only a typist. Unable to provide the clients with what they need, she is told that she is just "taking up space" (165). Jet does not want to enter a career where she will be unhelpful. She does not want to become what she sees, lawyers who are apathetic, who are not influenced at all by the "aches" of people (166). She is determined to be different. The consequence of her determination is seen in another dreamscape where she participates in an oral examination. In her recitation she reveals what she knows to be true about the law: "the law is based on the intents of the *few* who know the nuances of the language" (182). Unfortunately, she is told that there is no interest in her reinterpretation of the law. Clearly, Jet's frustration is that she will not be able to help people who do not know the language if what she knows to be true is silenced and dismissed.

The desire to be a change agent comes at a great emotional cost for Jet who has yet to become a self-identity protector. Where she has the impetus to be helpful on a

grand scale, she is unable to help herself. So bombarded by her family's expectations and the overwhelming feeling of being the only African-American woman in her law preparation class, Jet is unable to give herself the personal attention she needs to take care of herself. The suffering plant that she talks about in a dreamscape is symbolic of the lack of care she gives herself. The plant isn't given any attention as a result of the way she prioritizes preparation class. Similarly, Jet, who neither eats healthily nor sleeps, fails to give herself personal attention. The plant is only in bad physical shape but Jet is physically and emotionally in jeopardy. In order for Jet to be a helpful change agent, she must first be able to help herself. The position of change agent happens only as a result of the journey to self-identity protection.

The pressure that Jet feels as a result of her desire to make a difference in the world isn't her sole source of contention. She not only deals with finding her place in the law profession but equally she struggles to assert herself amongst her lover and friend who have a different perception of her place as a black woman. As in *A Raisin in the Sun*, Jet, like Beneatha, must cope with a level of sexism that is perpetuated by both genders. Jet's lover, Axis, is very similar to Bill in *Wine in the Wilderness* and Walter Lee in *A Raisin in the Sun*. Essentially, he comes to represent the "Cosmic Axis" that is "the supreme support of all things; that round which all things revolve; the norm" (Cooper 16). Axis's behavior bespeaks his belief that Jet should revolve around him, and not her studies. Although DeVaux names the male as the "support" and the "norm" she is simultaneously critical of his sexism. She represents the male as he is positioned in society but she attacks "the norm" by making Jet atypical; she is different from the traditional woman as is Beneatha in *A Raisin in the Sun*. Jet's serious commitment to

studying first interferes with what Axis considers a woman's duty in keeping a man. He refuses to admire her "sweet nappy brains;" his focus isn't on Jet's person as a whole, but instead on her sexuality (186). He reveals a sexist dichotomy when he discusses the "two roles in this universe" that are "male and female in that order" (160). He places men only in the position of power.

Axis is not only limited in perspective and sexist as he places men above women but he is equally as demeaning in his calling Jet "little girl" (161). Jet, who refers to his philosophy on women as being "pretty narrow," responds differently to his belittling her intelligence and humanity (160). In an ambiguous fashion, similar to Tommy in *Wine in the Wilderness*, she says to Axis, who has called her "little girl" again, "stop calling me little girl/I think" (161). Jet is then taken with his machismo; Axis says "shut up, don't think, feel" and immediately they are intimate (161). Jet doesn't refute his claim nor does she argue against his belief that women should be respected as thinkers. She is silent, like Tommy who was so awestruck by Bill that she let him demean her. The difference however, is that Tommy eventually moves from a state of enamored ambiguity with Bill and calls him on his sexist philosophy. Jet does not do this important naming.

At the end of the play, during their break up, Jet calls Axis on his unfaithfulness but she does not name his limited thought process. His sexist belief system is not called into question. Where she makes statements about his pretending with women, she again does not refute him when he, for the third time, relegates her to the status of child. This time it is worsened as he not only calls her a "goddam kid" but he says that she is not even a woman (188). Her silence on this issue prohibits her from separating herself fully

from sexist ideology. Her ability to directly name his sexism, something that threatens her sense of self-worth must happen if she is to become a protector.

The detriment of silence is not only portrayed in these two instances with Jet and Axis, but it is brought to the surface in another fashion. It is no coincidence that she responds to Axis' "you been so boxed up" with a description of a dream where she only sees boxes at the end of a long hallway (162). The boxes bear a striking resemblance to coffin-like images. This imagery is to mirror how she feels in the pursuit of her dream as well as in her personal relationship. As Jet walks down the long hallway, which is representative of her journey to becoming a lawyer, and most importantly, a self-identity protector, she is faced with obstacles that threaten to keep her boxed up or deadened professionally and personally. Additionally, it is important to note that Axis is responsible for triggering the remembrance of her dream just as he is key in her feeling trapped by the expectation to be a sexual being only, and not an intellectual. Deveau's connecting Axis directly to the terminology "box" is intentional as she demonstrates the severe consequences of sexism. Jet's inability to name his sexism and completely disassociate herself from his labeling her a child, works only to keep her boxed.

While Axis's sexism threatens to overpower Jet, he is not her sole nemesis. Lavender's philosophy on womanhood also is deeply disturbing to Jet whose desire is to make a mark on the world. Where Jet refuses to be relegated to domesticity or "making babies and not changes," Lavender is more interested in finding her happiness through intimacy. In a big sisterly fashion Lavender attempts to teach Jet major lessons that women should master: "if you don't give it to him when he *wants* it and as *much as he wants* he's going to get it from somewhere honey/ that's a mans nature" (171). In

Lavender's instruction, she distorts a woman's potential, by limiting her solely to sexual object. Her philosophy is no different from Axis's as it places the man's interests above the woman's.

Jet, who receives only sexist advice, winds up like Beneatha, isolated. Neither Jet, nor Beneatha are surrounded by people who can give them information that will help them on their journey to self-identity protection. Beneatha's choices are considered to be "odd" and "silly" as she struggles to be respected as a thinking person. Likewise, Jet's "textbook theories" which stray from teachings that enforce traditional values and roles are belittled by both Axis and Lavender who feel that her priorities are out of place (174). For them such emphasis on school and career is unnecessary for a woman. Sexuality and intimacy should take precedence.

While Jet certainly has the desire to be a change agent, she does not take the first step in becoming the self-identity protector. She is unable to name the sexism that directly hinders her journey. Additionally, in her professional life she is afraid that she will not be able to name the untruths that exist and make a difference. With the incorporation of the dreamlike scenarios DeVaux masterfully stages Jet and her subconscious as she struggles to separate herself from familial and personal expectations.

Unlike at the end of Childress' plays where Mama, Willetta, and Tommy have completed their journeys to self-identity protection and are passing on their lessons, Jet is just beginning at the close of *The Tapestry*. Her saying "somebody's inside/growing/pulling out/everything I thought was true" marks a crucial moment (194). While it isn't certain that Jet will become a protector, it is clear that she recognizes the heavy weight of familial, personal, and societal expectations. Although the witnessing of

her separation of these things isn't shown, and Jet isn't portrayed as a victor, DeVeaux demonstrates the struggle of a woman who has implanted within a budding seed for self-identity protection. The intent here isn't to see the completed journey, but instead to see a woman, who instead, is at the point of cognizance. She is aware of her fears on success, her inability to balance self-care with professional ambition, and the detriments of society's labeling of women. The fact that we don't find Jet in the position of self-identity protector at the end of the play doesn't make her experiences less significant. However, the fact that she isn't a protector forces the audience to look at all that is necessary to be transformed. From Jet's lack of success, the intensity of the struggle to become a self-identity protector is illuminated.

All four playwrights illuminate the difficulty in naming issues that pose a threat to one's identity. But in *A Raisin in the Sun* and *The Tapestry*, Hansberry and Deveau hone in even more so on what it takes to complete the journey. By creating women who aren't yet successful, the challenges that arise are understood even more.

Whether the end result is a blueprint on how to extract one's self from society's expectations or a more complicated portrait on the difficulties in completing the journey, the playwrights have shown that self-identity protection requires awareness. Mama realizes that Mrs. Carter cannot be held responsible for providing her with information to better Florence's chances at becoming an actress. Not only does she learn that a white woman is not going to be helpful, but she learns that the nature of help varies. For Mrs. Carter, helping is equated with keeping Florence in a domestic position. For Mama, helping means supporting her daughter, emotionally and financially, in creating a new space for black women, one not based on domesticity. Similarly, Wiletta becomes

cognizant of her hand in the perpetuation of stereotypical staged African-Americans. Her doing something “grand” ultimately means a severance from directors who rely on stereotypical imagery. Likewise, Tommy understands that class bias and sexism keeps the African-American community divided. Sister Son/ji speechifies on rhetoric that sounds good but that falls short when it comes to actual, practical work. Beneatha and Jet can see how the important people in their lives have absorbed a high level of sexism that prevents their ability to be seen.

These women are linked in their understanding of the world around them. Mama, Willetta, Tommy, and Sister Son/ji use their acuity to catapult them into the position of self-identity protector. Their ability to name how they are being oppressed helps them to pass on lessons to those around them. Ultimately, they become change agents. This is the differentiating factor between Mama, Willetta, Tommy, Sister Son/ji and the latter two. Where Beneatha and Jet are acute, they fall short in complete severance. The varying outcomes give more meaning and complexity to the notion of self-identity protection.

Childress, along with her contemporaries, shows the importance of being able to rid oneself of expectations. Additionally, where she shows that oppressive circumstances are difficult to combat, she shows the need to see triumphant women on the stage. In *Florence*, *Trouble in Mind*, and *Wine in the Wilderness* she creates black women protagonists who are eventually ready to make life changing choices. Mama chooses to support Florence although she knows she will be at odds with her other daughter. Willetta walks away from a longtime career in the theater. Tommy names the sexism and classism of a newfound group of friends and is prepared to walk away from the man she

is especially fond of. From Childress's valuable work comes a greater understanding of the choices black women will make in order to be free of expectations that are imposed by others. She shows that these choices are essential if women are to be free, in charge of their livelihood, and ultimately self-identity protectors. Her motive to see victorious women who name oppressive forces, and then who are in the position to use what they have learned to help others, resulted in dramas that still add to the ongoing discussion of the expectations of women in the world.

## CHAPTER IV

### EYE TOWARD SURVIVAL

Black women playwrights, beginning in the 1900s, mastered the skill of merging racial and personal concerns. Georgia Douglas Johnson, and contemporaries like May Miller, Shirley Graham, and Angelina Grimke were at the forefront of a theater movement aimed at creating meaningful theater. The mission to create a theater for and by black people continued well into the 1900s. Like Georgia Douglas Johnson, Alice Childress, a major contributor to African-American theater, championed for this new theater while paying attention to the concerns of black women. These playwrights laid the foundation for contemporary black women playwrights, like Pearl Cleage, who approach theater through a racial and gendered perspective. Like many black women playwrights of the 1900s, her perspective is influenced by the combination of simultaneous oppressions: being black and being a woman.

Her major reason for writing is to “inform, amaze and delight them (black women) in the process of giving them information that will *save their lives* (Bosch 138). Her decision to write for black women, her primary audience, makes her different from Childress and Johnson. Where all three playwrights have in common creating authentic black women protagonists, the difference lay in their intended audience. Johnson’s focus on the black mother brought a woman’s experience to the stage, but her aim in the creation of anti-lynching plays was to rally all people to end lynching. When Childress began writing, her initial purpose was to expose white America to the racism that was being perpetuated on the stage. Towards the end of her career, her focus became

portraying the combination of racism, classism, and sexism within the black community. Although the intended audience varies amongst the playwrights, they similarly place black women at the forefront of their mission, whether it was in ending lynching, revealing how black actors were consistently expected to play stereotypical roles or in expressing the need for black women to be accountable for one another.

The combination of Cleage's passing on "life saving" information with the outing of domestic abuse, a prominent theme in her work, often wins her the title "man hater," a term given to other feminist writers such as Alice Walker, and Ntozoke Shange. Cleage has responded to this misrepresented criticism by simultaneously pointing the finger and embracing men who fight against the oppression of women: "I am not a man hater. I hate bad men who beat us. Good men can be on my side" (Bosch 137). Her ability to name while at the same time beckoning men to join her in ending not only domestic abuse, but the oppression of women in general, speaks to her awareness that men have a great role in attacking a culture that gives them the privilege to dominate women. Even though her politics clearly show that she is not anti-man, but anti-abusive/oppressive man, she is still fiercely criticized. However, this type of feedback does not prevent her from writing. In fact, it is this type of response that she says black women writers should use as an impetus to write. In an interview, she spoke of this type of sexist labeling and says:

it's so critical that we not be intimidated by what black men say about the work that we do in the same way that we should never be intimidated by what white people say about the things that we do. We know because of racism and sexism that it's in their interest to tell us what to say because they always want us to make them look good. The oppressor always wants the oppressed person to make them look good and if you don't do it then they are going to get angry. But I think that means you are doing something right (Interview).

The “right” that Cleage refers to is exactly what Childress meant when she said, “I will not keep quiet, and I will not stop telling the truth” (Guillory 28). It is exactly what Ntozake Shange meant when she said “I refuse to be a part of this conspiracy of silence” (Tate 159). It is exactly what Danitra Vance meant when she articulated the artist’s responsibility to “tell the truth and not keep perpetuating a big lie on top of another big lie (Mahone 384). Cleage’s refusal to cloak the truth links her to several other contemporary black women playwrights and writers whose mission is not foreign to those playwrights like Georgia Douglas Johnson and Alice Childress.

Where the notion of truth can be very subjective, the various playwrights are united in their exposition of a common truth of what it means to be black and a woman. They come together to promote the necessity of black women talking about the intersection of race and gender, in their own language, so that it won’t be misrepresented. The necessity of black women playwrights to tell the truth and to create stories that are useful in helping the audience to understand their place in the world still looms large today.

Within Cleage’s philosophy lays the crux of feminism and feminist protection. Feminism means understanding that women as a group are oppressed by men as a group. Feminist protection is taking the awareness of feminism and then using it as a vehicle to help other women to become “free.” Feminist protection requires the completion of four steps: naming, contrariness, taking action, and freeing womanhood. Naming is the “presenting issues that pose a threat to the physical or psychological well being of the individual” (Davis 33). Contrariness is “a positive step taken by women as they refuse to tolerate physical and emotional abuse by the men in their lives (Christian 21). After the

steps of naming the issue and then deciding that it will not be tolerated comes the step of taking action. The first three steps must happen before “free womanhood” is achieved.

Cleage defines free women as:

being self-sufficient, so that they can take care of themselves, so that they don't have to be dependent on white folks or black men to take care of them, so that they can be strong enough and resourceful enough to create environments where they're safe and where their children are safe. Freedom for the women I am writing about always is tied to physical safety and to economic independence which I think is true in real life, too (Interview).

These four actions are the precursors to feminist protection. A consequence of the journey to “free womanhood” is the development of an “oppositional world view” (hooks 112). This way of life or “aesthetic of being,” as hooks phrases it, is the result of women coming to terms with and then changing society's expectations. In *Late Bus to Mecca*, *Flyin' West*, and *Hospice* Cleage explores the difficulties inherent in trying to become a feminist protector, but champions the ultimate value in achieving that goal.

In all three plays, Cleage stresses the importance of conversation between black women. It is through this conversation where women teach each other how to name. The special relationship that black women have and their responsibility to one another has spanned time. Jacqueline Jones remarks on black women during the Great Depression who, after work, got together in a basement kitchen as a form of group therapy. In this atmosphere where “personal integrity and group self-affirmation” was enforced, day workers were transformed into “poets” (Jones 230). They used their own language while telling of their experience. Although the main action in these three plays does not take place in what Marshall calls the “wordshop of the kitchen,” the impetus is the same

(Marshall 35). In *Late Bus to Mecca*, *Flyin' West*, and *Hospice*, women instruct each other to talk about their experience so that it can be used as a learning tool.

*Late Bus to Mecca* (1992) is the first play in a series of what Cleage calls morality plays. Modeled after the “everyman” plays where the characters are very clearly supposed to teach the audience something about their behavior, the morality plays were constructed to teach lessons. The primary lesson in *Late Bus*, an “everywoman” play is that women must be responsible for one another. Set in a Detroit, Michigan bus station in 1970, the play opens with Ava rushing in and anxiously looking for her friend, Sherri. She hopes that Sherri will be meeting her so that they can go to the Muhammed Ali fight in Atlanta, otherwise known as Mecca. The women have strategically planned their travel; they knew that Ali would be fighting for the first time after three years of exile due to religious beliefs. His fight with Jerry Quarry, a white man, would attract many people who were celebrating his success at facing down the American government in the midst of the Vietnam War (Cleage 299). The first part of the plan would be to benefit from the huge crowd and make a lot of money as prostitutes. The next part: to open a beauty parlor. Ava’s relationship begins with the other main character, ABW (A Black Woman), when she asks her if she has seen her friend. Realizing that the woman is in a catatonic, unspeaking state of being, Ava hurries out again to find Sherri on her own. Unsuccessful, she returns to the waiting room, sits next to ABW and tries to make conversation.

It is not clear that Ava is a prostitute right away. This is revealed as she talks to ABW about her experience with her partner Sherri, and pimp, Tony. It is extremely significant that Ava is a prostitute because it allows Cleage to make a commentary on

class. Ava becomes the rescuer or savior of a black woman who needs help, indicating that all women, despite class, have something to offer when it comes to protecting. She sends the message to middle class black women who often walk past prostitutes that there is enough “resilience and residual sisterhood in any and all of us” (Cleage 300). Through Ava’s characterization she encourages her audience to shed any class biases.

Combined with her argument on class is one based on the sexual expectations placed on women. Because Ava makes her living by having sex with men, she is perceived negatively. Robbie McCauley exposes the social trappings of sexism that perpetuates this type of negative perception:

Black women particularly struggle to deal with the image of the saint and the whore, or the church lady and the slut. It’s part of the puritanism of America, but it is also part of our own issue with sexism, how we are perceived as women. The issues are also economic as well as social. There are places in extreme, places in between, there are places all around, but we get stuck in the inside of sexual images and in the way we internalize what we’re supposed to do and what we’re not supposed to do (Mahone 216 ).

Cleage anticipates that her audience will respond to Ava based on how they were taught to perceive women. Ava is intentionally created to be a likeable character so that the audience will be eased into her lifestyle and develop an understanding for the choices she makes to change it. She completely disallows the audience to frown upon Ava and her responsibility to help change ABW’s circumstance. Ava is not excused because she is a prostitute. Consequently, Cleage’s belief system that a person’s circumstance should not get in the way of helping another is enforced when she says, “even if you are the prostitute in flight from the evil pimp, you’re still a black woman, this is still your sister. Do what you can. You know if you can take her to Atlanta with you, you got an extra

ticket, take her to Atlanta. If you can't do that, do what you can do" (Interview). In essence, all black women are held accountable for protecting other black women.

The journey that Ava takes to becoming a feminist protector is revealed through her conversation with ABW. Naming her limitations and creating a path of action is what ultimately makes her a feminist protector. As a result of her naming, she is able to help ABW. From the outset Ava announces that she has standards. At the beginning of the play she is irritated because of the attention a drunk man is giving her. She says that she has more "class" than to pick up drunk men because they are way out of her league. The best example that describes Ava's self-imposed limitations is seen when she is asked to partake in Tony's latest scheme to make more money. Her standards will allow her to do "about anything a regular human being can think up to ask me if they paying cash money, but animals is different (311-12). Through Ava's staunch decision to not "do animals" comes Cleage's argument that "we have to have limits" (Interview). Ava becomes exemplary of a person on the brink of making a choice that would defy her whole sense of self-worth. Cleage uses this instance to model self-reflection. Her audience should be aware of their limitations and understand that "whatever situation you are in, you do have a moment where you say I can't cross this one because if I cross this one I'm going to be sitting in the bus station catatonic" (Interview). Although ABW is in the bus station catatonic, she is in the place that represents mobility. Despite her emotional and psychological state, where she indicates her desire to say "no" to her current situation and to move from this circumstance to another. Ava's saying "no" has the same significance as Ali who said "no" to the government. Both Ava and Ali refused to compromise their beliefs, and ultimately triumphed. In Ava's refusal, she names that she

is a woman with standards and limitations. These limitations prompt her to make a change.

Ava's saying "no" to Tony had to come from her own personal resolve. She is aware that Tony helped her to move from working in a cheap dance club, where she was preyed on sexually by men who thought they had the right. She realizes that he gave her a place to stay but simultaneously she is clear that his supposed "protection" did not save her from him. When she talks to ABW about this new proposition, she says "I know I owe him, but I don't owe anybody everything!" (317) She cannot repay Tony in a manner that will completely diminish how she thinks of herself. She didn't have any help from Sherri, the other major black woman in her circle. Sherri was not able to save or protect Ava. In fact, Sherri is interested in the new deal and tries to encourage Ava's participation by saying, "Look, little bit, this ain't nothing new. It's just like when we do each other. We don't really have to enjoy it. We have to pretend that we do" (318). At this moment Ava realizes that Sherri did not perceive their intimacy similarly. Sherri thought of it as money earning potential, something they did together while men watched. Ava thought of it as more; she loved Sherri. Ava learns that all of Sherri's relationships were based on sex and money. This is the big divider between the two. Despite her environment, Ava is able to still have "real human relationships" but Sherri is not (Interview). At the heart of her capability to transcend her lifestyle lays her desire to be a free woman.

Several times throughout the play Ava talks about the necessity of having a plan. She says, "When it's time to make a move, make a move" (307); "I needed a plan quick" (309); "We need to make plans" (312). These three examples show Ava's progression.

She goes from “move,” to “I need a plan,” to “we need a plan.” Her first statement doesn’t contain a pronoun. The next is said in first person singular and the last, first person plural. This is important as it not only shows her need to have a plan but it shows her growth. Initially she is somewhat detached from the plan. She knows to move, but when she says, “I need a plan,” her desire to make a change is clear; she is personally invested. Eventually, her desire to make a change ripples out into the community, as she becomes concerned with helping ABW. An individual change is not enough though; she must help others to recognize how they can change as well.

Ava’s life changing plan becomes an opportunity for Cleage to force the audience to face the uncomfortable choices this woman makes in order to save herself: “It would have been easier to say, she’s managed to save a little money and she’s going. Then we wouldn’t have to deal with the nastiness of what she has to do because now she has got money, she’s going to be a Madame Walker. No, she’s going down there to be a prostitute and is ready to do that” (Interview). Ava is at a point where she is doing what she knows how to do in hopes to change her life, in hopes to be free. The ends for Ava justify the means as she is on the cusp of making a change. When she sits down next to ABW she is preparing for her change, but she isn’t aware that she will be the stimulus for another woman’s journey to free womanhood.

Ava is the complete antithesis of ABW. She wears tight clothing, uses bold language and manifests comfortable sexual frankness. ABW, on the other hand, is wearing worn clothing and beat-up sneakers. She does not speak at all. Her strong, stage presence provokes empathy from the audience. Her silence, which is not unlike the many protagonists studied earlier, is “representative of every physically battered, spirit-

bruised black woman whose words have been ignored or used against her so often they seem beside the point” (Cleage 300). Ava’s interest in making the silent woman speak begins with surface conversation. Eventually, it becomes motivated by concern. The change in her interest acts to reverse the silencing that has led to ABW’s current mental health.

Ava’s providing a vehicle for ABW to “name” is essential in restoring her connection to “Nommo.” The Bantu work, Nommo, is the “vital force that gave life to everything through the power of the word” (Jahn 121). The magnitude of Nommo is so great because no other life force of Kintu, either in animals, plants, stones, etc. can be freed without the power of the word (Jahn 121). In *Late Bus to Mecca*, Ava is given dominion over another life force. Her role is important. Cleage suggests that ABW’s situation would be harsher without Ava whose Nommo is finally intact. As a result of Ava’s ability to conjure the word, ABW is reconnected to the power of naming.

Ava’s worry for ABW’s health is seen in the range of questions she asks. She moves from “Hey! Are you sleep or what?” to questions like “is somebody after you” and “you look really bad, honey. Are you on something?” (304, 308). The woman does not tell if she has been beaten up nor does she take Ava’s suggestion to fix herself up. Ava becomes frustrated by not knowing what the problem is. After being unsuccessful at getting the woman to simply nod if she understands, she finally tries to get her to communicate through blinking. Still skeptical if this new system will work, Ava changes the rules as she watches ABW’s lack of response. Her instructions are similar to a caretaker of a sick or dying patient in a hospital: “Blink real hard *two* times, if you can hear me. Or *once*, just do it once, but do it hard so I’ll know it wasn’t just a *regular*

blink, you know?” (309) Ava remains unconvinced that they are communicating, but she chooses to believe that the woman’s closing her eyes is a deliberate blink.

Cleage’s philosophy to “save lives” is embodied in Ava’s continued efforts to help ABW. In order to help her, and ultimately save her, she must develop a way to communicate with her. Her questions, intermittent with a layin’ on of hands, models a mother-child relationship. She wipes her face, combs her hair and wraps a scarf around her neck in hopes to fix her up. The first sure sign of response is ABW’s eating a cheese sandwich that Ava buys for her. While Ava continues to show ABW warmth, it is clear that she is straddling conflicting feelings. She feels it is her responsibility to not give up on ABW. After all, she calls herself the “A-number-one girl for helping out” (310). However, she remains irritated that ABW does not have a plan to make a move and make herself well.

ABW’s inability to communicate what has happened to her is necessary if Ava is to assume her responsibility to help another black woman. Cleage argues that the woman’s identity and her inability to speak should not get in the way of Ava getting involved anyway she can. She holds all black women responsible for the survival of each other: “If you are the black woman who sees her then you are supposed to help her. It doesn’t matter what it is that’s wrong, you still have to help her” (Interview). An example of Ava’s coming to terms with this responsibility happens while she ABW is in the restroom. She looks in ABW’s purse to find any helpful information. After she finds the hospital medication, she helps ABW to reexamine any information that she learned from doctors about her condition. She asks her, “they didn’t make you think you were

crazy, did they?" (320) Essentially, she is helping her to name, even if in thought, the fact that she is not crazy.

What Ava is aware of is that those in power, in this case doctors, will use their authority to keep women in the victim role. Ava's awareness of power dynamics is evident when she says that doctors will of course make you feel like you are crazy because "what else are they gonna tell you? 'It's niggas driving you crazy. Cut them loose. Close your legs and open your eyes and make a move!' They not gonna tell you no helpful shit like that. They'd be out of a job in a minute!" (Cleage 320) Ava reveals that white male doctors won't help a woman in this fashion, but another woman can offer help that would be useful. In this instance Ava acts as the spokesperson for Cleage who believes that this country encourages women to act oppressed (Bosch 137). Completely disagreeing with this premise, she says, "I don't believe people have to act that way. They can change" (Bosch 137). Ava realizes, after her exposition of power dynamics, that ABW is trying to make a move. Despite her lack of language, she is in the bus station. She is aiming to go somewhere. Ultimately, Ava understands this and says, "At least you got nerve enough to be out here trying, right? The only time it's really over is when you stop trying, right?" (Cleage 320) Through Ava's constant coaxing and care, and her decision to take ABW with her to Atlanta, we see Cleage inventing a new reality for a silenced, traumatized woman. Her final analysis is hopeful: circumstances can be changed when black women take responsibility for each other.

The play ends with Ava taking ABW with her. Initially, she plans to leave Sherri's ticket on the counter and board the bus by herself. But, her discomfort of leaving the woman forces her to make another decision. Before she boards she tries to convince

herself that leaving is all right. She asks ABW “You gonna be okay?” and then answers “Sure you are. You got this far, didn’t you? Right? You just gotta work on your plan a little. You know, starting from now” (321). Leaving the woman and telling her to look her up if she ever makes it to Atlanta is no longer enough for Ava. She has come to be protective of her and has learned that she is responsible for her safety. She can not leave her to make crucial life-changing decisions in isolation, as Sherri did to her. Instead, she takes her on because she finally understands her responsibility. As they walk toward the bus she says, “First thing we gotta do is names. I’ll write down some names and you point when I get to yours. Or point to one you like. You can pick a new one! I won’t know the difference” (322). In this instance, she is helping ABW to rename herself, literally and figuratively. Ava teaches ABW crucial lessons about having a plan, knowing at her core that she can not be labeled by the oppressor, and naming herself/experiences. She is only able to teach her these lessons because she has done this herself. Through her recount of her relationship with Tony and Sherri, Ava names her standards and her new course of action. Due to her new oppositional worldview, one different from Tony and Sherry’s, she is left without a community. However, in her taking care of ABW, she begins to build a new one.

Ultimately, Cleage argues that black women need to be accountable for each other: “At the heart of what I believe to be true is that black women have to be able to depend on each other in whatever circumstances we are in. We have to be able to know that there is a way for us to contact each other and to help each other” (Interview). In *Late Bus to Mecca* Cleage shows two different aspects of the black women’s community. Black women will be in tune with their responsibility or, they will prey on each other, as

Sherri did with Ava. The ending of the play demonstrates the outcome that Cleage supports and feels is important if black women are to survive.

The necessity of a black women's community is emphasized as well in *Flyin' West*. In this case, however, Cleage combines a major historical event in Black history with a specific black women's perspective. Inspired by Ida B. Wells-Barnett's Memphis newspaper journals, *Free Speech*, which encouraged blacks to leave their homes in that city and move West in search of freedom, *Flyin' West* is a story of a group of women who resemble the Exodusters. The setting is 1898 just outside of Nicodemus, Kansas, an actual all-black town named for an African-born slave who bought his independence. The community was developed by the Exodusters who "flew" West to avoid what was familiar--racism and oppression—in order to seek personal freedom and new opportunities. Believing that history can be more "useful" if made "personal," Cleage uses everyday black characters instead of actual historical figures (Cleage, "My American Herstory" 155). There is only one mention of a major figure, Pap Singleton, who once claimed, "I am the whole cause of the Kansas migration" (Cleage, "My American Herstory" 155).

The name Nicodemus not only conjures historical significance but it also has Biblical meaning. Nicodemus, an educated Jew and leader of the Pharisees visits Jesus in the night in order to find out how he could get to the kingdom of Heave. Eventually, after time spent with Jesus, he becomes spiritually awakened. His actions bespeak his understanding of the word of God; he works to make sure that Jesus is not crucified unjustly and finally, anoints His body. In Cleage's play, Nicodemus stands as the symbol of awakening. The Biblical Nicodemus is awakened and attains the kingdom. In *Flyin'*

*West* More than a play that recounts the history of African-American homesteaders, *Flyin' West*, the town Nicodemus represents an opportunity for African-Americans to leave the familiar, like Nicodemus with the Pharisees, in efforts to achieve freedom. The characters in *Flyin' West* leave for opportunities unachievable in the South and work to create a self-sufficient community with a post office, school, general store, etc. *Flyin' West* is more than a play that recounts the history of African-American homesteaders, it simultaneously examines current feminist issues that deal with the intersection of race and gender.

“Flyin’” in the title foreshadows the movement, not just West, but of Minnie who eventually frees herself from a dangerous situation. This word choice coupled with Minnie’s ability to leave an oppressive situation parallels the popular Afro-American folktale of the flying African. Slaves often told stories of the flying Africans who were said to fly back to Africa to escape slavery (Hamilton 172-173). In her title, Cleage makes reference to this powerful folktale to highlight the impact of a peoples’ mindset. This myth became a coping mechanism that allowed the slave to transcend his current situation. His physical body was chained, not his spirit. It was still free. All of the women in the play come to have a similar mindset that eventually helps Minnie to fly away from her abusive marriage.

The community of women consists of Miss Leah, Sophie, Fannie and Minnie Dove. Miss Leah, age 73 was born into slavery, and after the death of her husband migrated to Nicodemus. Sophie Washington, aged 36, also born into slavery becomes a sister to Fannie, 32 and Minnie, 21 after their parents die of the fever. Cleage foreshadows the role that each of these women will play in the names she chooses. Miss

Leah mirrors the Biblical Leah who stands as a symbol of perseverance. Given to Jacob who'd worked specifically for her sister, Rachel, Leah was married to a man who did not want her. Cleage's Leah discusses being given to James, not because they chose or loved one another but because she was "big and strong" (162). In each situation, the woman's power is usurped by men who chose their livelihood. Her being the first to migrate to Nicodemus out of the community of women is important as she comes to represent the importance of choice. Unlike the Biblical Leah, she is finally able to choose new opportunities after years of being denied choice. Sophie, whose name is a shortened version of "sophism" eventually proposes a "specious but fallacious argument" in order to save her sister (Webster's Desk Dictionary). Fannie, whose name means "buttocks" is thought by Sophie to be naïve and unprepared. And Minnie, whose name means 'mini' or small is the abused sister who needs protecting from her abusive husband Frank. His name, too, which means blunt or having an abrupt manner, is synonymous with his character as he often beats his wife severely. The women's relationship begins when Sophie first enters their house inquiring about doing their laundry for pay. It moves from a relationship initially based on money and becomes personal. Eventually, she becomes their protector and the major motivator for their move West.

The play's initial action revolves around the return of Minnie, married to Frank, a fair-skinned black man who manifests a great deal of self-hatred. Frank, who expects an inheritance from his white father, is devastated when he learns that paternity is denied. Frank's realization that his quality of life will be greatly diminished with the halting of money from his father's estate happens simultaneously with Minnie's birthday party. The women are celebrating Minnie's coming of age and her entrance into land ownership.

Now twenty-one, Minnie is given the deed to her portion of the family's land worth more than fifty thousand dollars. Frank devises a plan that will give him and his wife passage back to London. Determined not to be stuck with "common, ordinary niggers" in "Niggerdemus," Frank beats his pregnant wife almost dead, then forces her to sign over her portion of the land so that he can sell it to interested white speculators (70).

The idea that domestic abuse is unacceptable is evident in the play, mostly through Sophie. The "naming" of a staunch disallowance of domestic abuse is important so that the women understand their responsibility as protectors. The women have a sense that Minnie is abused by Frank when the black eye she hides underneath her new hat is revealed. The fact that Frank beats Minnie is confirmed after he returns from a night of gambling with the "white gentlemen" he met on the train (67). He tells Minnie that his luck changed when they kept inquiring who the "nigger woman" was that kept following him around the train (70). He does not admit to her that he was passing but instead says that he let them draw their own conclusions. In order to keep rank with the white men, he tells them that she was a black whore he won in a card game (70). Frank exhibits his hatred for being only partially white, and being married to a black woman, when he says seconds before he throws her to the floor, "You're too black to bring me any good luck. All you got to give is misery. Pure D misery and little black pickaninnies just like you" (67). When Minnie hits the floor, her sisters awaken, and Sophie, armed with her shotgun aims it at his head. Frank receives a slight reprieve when Minnie tells her sister not to kill him because of her pregnancy. Sophie, acting as protector, kicks Frank out but stands in the window or sits on the porch paroling him, always with the shot gun at her side.

Sophie is the embodiment of Ida B. Wells-Barnett who believed in blacks' ability to defend themselves. Her philosophy on self-defense is evident when she says in a *Free Speech* editorial, "A Winchester rifle should have a place of honor in every home. When the White man knows he runs a great risk of biting the dust every time his victim does, he will have a greater respect for Afro American life" (Giddings 20). An armed Sophie stands as a symbol of what Wells-Barnett believed. In this particular instance, however, her stance is against black men who prey on black women. Cleage's mission to make history more useful and personal is successful as she presents an issue, domestic abuse, which is relevant to her audience.

In Sophie's intention to kill, she manifests the trait of "contrariness" (Christian 21). Sophie refuses to tolerate physical or emotional abuse. Her actions exemplify her responsibility to her sister and most importantly, it is a clear indicator of her naming that domestic abuse will not be tolerated. Both Fannie and Minnie learn from her unyielding attitude toward domestic abuse and her belief that Frank should be held accountable. In essence, Sophie's already established feminist protector traits are necessary if the other women are to become protectors.

In addition to Sophie's being reminiscent of activist Wells-Barnett, she also embodies Cleage's philosophy on domestic abuse. In her article "Mad at Miles," Cleage exposes Miles Davis' abuse of Cicely Tyson. Angry first because he beat a woman, and then even more miffed because of his open and candid acknowledgement, she argues that his audience should hold him accountable. The character Frank, also an artist, runs parallel to her writing on Davis. In both scenarios, she puts forth that both men are violent and as a result should not only be held accountable, but rejected. Violent acts

should reap violent repercussions. She questions the tolerance of domestic abuse by saying “how can they hit us and still be our leaders? Our husbands? Our lovers? Our geniuses? Our friends? (Mad at Miles 43). Her response is clear-cut: they can’t. She gives the audience a chance to engage in the debate by ending the article with a question “Can they?” She forces her reader to question how such an abnormal behavior that is clearly wrong is accepted on such a large scale. As in “Mad at Miles, she opens the debate in *Flyin’ West* particularly to Fannie and Minnie who are not so easily convinced that Frank should be held accountable.

Not yet manifesting the characteristic of “contrariness,” Fannie persuades her sister to forgive Frank. She reminds Minnie of the “forever or worse” in her wedding vows and tells her sister that their mother had to deal with their father’s bad temper. Fannie alludes to their mother’s cognizance of racism and how it affected black men. Believing in giving men “the benefit of the doubt” until they could get “white folks off our backs,” Mrs. Dove intended to “get colored men straightened out on a thing or two a little bit closer to home” when possible (68). Her mother’s strength lay, according to Fannie, in her awareness of racism and its wrongness but at the same time, in her patience. After Minnie learns of her mother’s way of handling abuse she still seems unsure that Frank can change. Her sister convinces her that she still loves her husband and Minnie wanting to believe that he can change, says that she will “really try” to work things out (69). Thus, she runs past Sophie on the porch into his arms again.

Fannie and Sophie are diametrically opposed on this issue. Fannie sends Minnie back and Sophie’s first instinct is to kill. Fannie is concerned that Sophie’s response to Frank will upset Minnie and disturb the pregnancy. Sophie believes that Minnie should

be upset because Frank's actions are not acceptable. And furthermore, she wonders why Fannie is not outraged. Sophie, like Ava in *Late Bus to Mecca*, is consciously aware of the "I=We" concept that says that there is no such thing as an individual experience, only a collective one. Just as Ava moved from the "I need" to "We need," Sophie questions their lack of concern: "Don't you think we all ought to be upset?" (67-68) She continues to question Fannie's not being "afraid of what he's already doing" even after the second instance when Minnie is again beaten in the home of her youth (74). Sophie, unwilling to let Frank's crime go without serious consequences, devises a plan to kill her brother-in-law. Fannie is afraid of Sophie's intention and still holds on to her belief in the sanctity of marriage. Here, Cleage makes a commentary on how relying on religion in this manner prevents women from seeking help. In fact, she implies that those who feel like Fannie, help to perpetuate the cycle of domestic abuse. Her argument is not that marriage is wrong. Instead, she advocates that women need to feel that they can be protected within this institution. Sophie's instinct to protect is something she feels she has to do if black women are to stay free people. Fannie, not persuaded by Sophie's determination to remain free in this manner, considers Sophie's choice to be savage. It isn't until Miss Leah gets involved that there is a change in Fannie.

Miss Leah is a reminder of the past, particularly African-American enslavement. Believing that the history of black people is important, she says that free blacks can't forget the plantation or "we have no last week" (54). Embedded in this statement is the importance of understanding that black people share a collective identity. Remembering slavery is important in the passing on of the numerous experiences that blacks shared. Miss Leah stands as a living testimony of the specific experiences black women slaves

had to endure, i.e. being mated, and birthing children who are stolen and sold. She is the family's griotte. Having experienced being mated at age thirteen with James, a slave man and subsequently birthing ten babies who were sold, she passes on first hand knowledge of what it was like to be a slave woman. Her survival is an example of strength and it is this difference, according to Miss Leah, that is missing in the younger generation of black women. She notes that the masses of women arriving in Nicodemus can not endure the winters of the West nor bring in a decent crop.

Although Sophie was born into slavery as well, it is through Miss Leah that we learn about the experiences of black women slaves. Her stories, which capture the slave woman's ability to name and retaliate, do not go unnoticed. Fannie is anxious to keep these stories in memory by recording them. The maintenance of these oral stories are important so that younger generations will know from whence they came, and know that they have a well of strength to draw upon. Miss Leah discusses the past's significance after the second beating of Minnie. It is this story that changes not only Sophie's plan "to watch him prance across this yard and then...step out on my front porch and blow his brains out" (74). It is also the impetus needed to bring Fannie into Sophie's plan. Cleage uses Miss Leah's recollection of the past to convey the significance of the elders; she suggest that the elders' wisdom is necessary in resolving contemporary problems.

Reminding the women that killing people involves the presence of white people, Miss Leah instructs the small community of women that "folks die all kinds of ways" (74). She tells the story of Ella, a plantation cook, who protected herself from the overseer who planned to rape her while the master was away. Ella anticipates his intentions and entices him into her kitchen with sweet smelling apple pie coupled with a

cold glass of milk. Ella not only defends herself by using her recipe for famous “poison” apple pie, but by passing it on she helped other women to protect themselves. Ella’s form of retaliation was not foreign to actual slave women. Easily disguised, poisoning was a weapon that cooks used during slavery as a form of resistance (Giddings 46).

Miss Leah’s intervention is important not only because she reminds Sophie that her plan to kill with a gun could reap consequences that would possibly end her freedom but also because it teaches Sophie an important lesson. Up until this point, Sophie was determined to save Minnie herself. She turns down friend of the family, Wil Parrish’s help to “take care of everything” by saying “the day I need somebody else to defend my land and my family is the day that somebody’s name will be on the deed” (74). Miss Leah’s wisdom is crucial because Sophie now understands that protecting is not an individual concept. She learns that there is not just one “protector.” In fact, protecting should happen communally.

Where Miss Leah teaches Sophie about the importance of communal action, Wil cannot kill Frank because it would inhibit the women from working together to find a solution. For Cleage, “the initial connection for that protection always comes when one of the women reaches out to another one” (Interview). When the women reach out, they hold each other responsible for ending the danger. Wil cannot be the rescuer that takes away Frank, the dangerous oppressor. Instead the women have to be empowered in their decision to take action and help each other. This community of women is similar to the ones portrayed by Johnson where the women were in charge of figuring out how to save the men from being lynched. Their empowerment came in the domestic space, absent of men, where they relied on each other for coping mechanisms, suggestions, and solutions.

Frank has to die in this play because he is in opposition to everything the women stand for. Domestic abuse is only one example. Another example is the ritual that the women participate in to remind themselves of their status as “free women.” The ritual requires the women to hold hands and name individually and collectively that their lives are their own and no one else’s (63). Minnie practically has to be escorted out of her own house to take part in a family tradition. He tries to prevent the women’s time together by saying that Minnie doesn’t fair well in the night air, but this is to no avail. Fannie’s “we’ll keep her warm” overrides Frank’s patriarchal actions. His watching the women from the window signifies his disagreement. In addition, the window serves as a boundary between him and their world. Although he can physically see it, he is not invited in. Through this staging, Cleage further demonstrates the necessity of a women’s community where protecting is instinctive. It is clear that even though the women have created a ritual, Frank is prepared to destroy. The point is clear: black women need to name but simultaneously be prepared to take action to protect each other if they are preyed upon.

It is the outcome of the ritual that Frank wants to prevent. The women declare that trust, strength, courage, and love will keep their “sacred bond” of sisterhood intact (63). Minnie is protected, and out of his control, when she is with her sisters. They remind her that she is an essential thread in their fabric of sisterhood. Besides the “free women” ritual, Minnie also participates in another ritual, this time with Miss Leah. One early morning, Minnie takes the traditional place, on the floor, in between Miss Leah’s legs, and prepares for the ritual of hair braiding. Minnie’s position—between Miss Leah’s legs—is symbolic of birthing. Although Miss Leah did not give birth to Minnie,

he young woman's position in between her legs suggests a mother-daughter relationship where wisdom is imparted. This is not just an opportunity to beautify Minnie with her favorite hairstyle, but it is also a time of "healing" (Jones 295). Through hair braiding Miss Leah reconnects with Minnie, especially around the issue of children. Pregnant Minnie wants her children to look just like Frank, and Miss Leah reminds her in the statement, "he ain't that pretty," that fair skin isn't what makes beauty. Miss Leah's statement is intended to check Minnie's absorption of Frank's self-hatred. As Minnie gets her hair braided, Miss Leah tells the expectant mother how slave women handled labor and seeing their children sold away. Miss Leah teaches Minnie about her past, and the strength of her ancestors. Frank's calling her a "pickaninny" shows his disapproval of her new hairstyle. But it is the statement that follows "we haven't been here for twenty four hours and look at you" that demonstrates his dislike of the time she spends with her family. In the circle with her sisters, or between the legs of Miss Leah, Minnie is transformed into a woman connected to black women of her past, her strength and power.

Eventually all three women become involved in the killing of Frank. Sophie sparks the initial plan and Miss Leah contributes the recipe that will kill him discretely. They decide that Wil will meet Frank in town and tell him that Fannie has forgiven him and wants to pay him for Minnie's portion of the deed. Upon his arrival, Fannie serves the pie and refuses to give Frank water after admitting that he feels a little strange (77). It's important that Fannie serves the pie because it marks her journey to naming. She has been taught an oppositional viewpoint in regards to marriage: traditional wedding vows should not make a woman susceptible to abuse. Women do not need to "bide their time" until racism is over to put an end to abuse, as her mother intended. Both Sophie and Miss

Leah give her another perspective. It is not told whether or not Fannie believes this form of retaliation is savage like. The point is that it doesn't matter what she initially believed. The women will not let her participate in Frank's cycle of abuse, and ultimately, the killing of the unborn child. Fannie's full involvement in the scheme shows her commitment to the plan. Additionally, it shows her journey to becoming a better protector.

The most crucial lesson she learns is that she cannot protect her sister by sending her into the arms of a domestic abuser who beats her. The audience is to believe that Fannie finally comes to understand what drove Sophie West: the need to go to a place that is safe, that you control. Fannie's journey to becoming co-protector of Minnie teaches her that even within this "safe" place, a woman's personal control can be relinquished with domestic abuse. She understands that what happens to Minnie is "a serious betrayal" for she was not even safe in her own home (Interview).

The women's collective action prepares Minnie for her journey to naming. After Frank's death, Minnie takes on the quality of contrariness. Her range of emotions after witnessing the dead body is exemplary of the "public, political act" she is taking to "become whole" (Richards 74). The stage directions explain Minnie's metamorphosis into a free woman:

Minnie...moves toward the body then stops, looking at Frank with a mixture of regret and relief. She approaches the body slowly; her anger and fear battling her bittersweet memories of the loves she once felt for Frank. She reaches out and touches him tentatively, realizing the enormity of what they have done. We see her move through a complex set of emotions, ending with her knowledge of the monster Frank had become. Her face shows her resolve and even her body seems to gain strength (76).

The fact that Minnie comes to name at the end of Frank's life shows Cleage's ability to craft a realistic and useful story. As she writes for a black women audience, she gives them information that will help to end abuse but simultaneously, she paints an unromanticized perspective. Not all women name immediately. The fact that it happens is the most important aspect. Since Minnie is able to name, she is now in the position, as the other women in the community, to protect herself, and other women.

What connects Minnie in *Flyin' West* to Ava in *Late Bus to Mecca* is that both women have to come to terms with how to be the best protector, how to be the most responsible for their sister. When the Greyhound bus pulled in, ready for Atlanta, Ava knew that she could not be the most responsible or the best protector by telling ABW that she would be all right. It wasn't enough to remind her to remember to create a plan. She had to do the best thing in that moment, which was to clean her up and help her to develop a plan by taking her to Atlanta. Ava had to rethink her actions in order for her to be fully initiated into self-identity protection. This is also the same for Sophie and Fannie. Sophie allowed others to get involved, including Wil Parrish, a well meaning black man. Fannie had to separate herself from the confines of traditional wedding vows. As a result of their personal transformations, Ava from *Late Bus*, and Sophie and Fannie from *Flyin' West*, took their positions as feminist protectors who taught each other to name. Equally important, they ultimately understood the importance of the most useful kind of black women's community: one that promoted and demanded "free" womanhood. And because of their lessons, ABW and Minnie benefited.

When looking at how the women learn to name from one another, it is clear that feminist protection does not happen in isolation. It happens within families, established

communities, or newly formed ones. In *Hospice*, Cleage illuminates the consequences of isolation, and how it deeply affects a daughter's journey to naming. *Hospice* is strikingly similar to *Late Bus* in that Ava is isolated like Jenny, but one major difference is that once Ava begins to develop a new community, she is ready to pass on information to ABW. *Hospice*, on the other hand, features Alice, a mother who resists passing on survival information. She resists teaching Jenny, her daughter to name in the practical way that Ava teaches ABW.

Alice is a forty seven-year-old woman who is dying of cancer. She has returned to her mother's home to die. Upon her arrival, she meets her pregnant thirty-year-old daughter whom she hasn't seen in twenty years. Cleage uses the mother-daughter relationship as the vehicle to talk about society's expectations of women. Alice discloses to her daughter that it was impossible for her to be an artist, wife and mother with the kind of limitations that her husband and society imposed. As a result, she left them to make a life for herself as an artist in Paris. The name of the husband is never mentioned; he is only referred to as "daddy" throughout the play. While he is not named or present, he still has a very significant role. "Daddy" is the symbol of patriarchy, therefore, there is no need for his having a name. He represents the oppressor who prohibited Alice from making her own career choices. As a result of his authority and control, Alice was prohibited from being an artist and publishing poetry.

Alice, who in the beginning of her marriage wrote "two or three serious love poems everyday", began to write less as time passed (65). When she told her husband that she wanted to publish one, he ate it, and said that they were just for him. His actions echo these of Supreme Greek God of Time, Cronus, who out of fear of being overthrown,

swallowed each of his children after they were born. Cronus controlled by devouring much like Alice's husband. The poem she writes is representative of her person. He devours and controls her being so that her avant-garde thinking would not threaten his conservative lifestyle. He wouldn't allow her to overthrow him, just as Cronus prevented his children from taking control. It was too much that she wanted to publish love poems while he was always fighting for "survival" (69). Alice eventually understood that being the wife of a minister and civil rights leader meant that her poetry would be shaped by what he thought was appropriate. The expectation for Alice to fulfill a specific role, that is to be what Cleage calls "an above reproach kind of woman" who sat still and looked prim in her pew, was stifling (Interview). Alice wanted to be in control of her own career; she did not want her art to be dwindled down to "dabbling in poetry" and being asked to only read political poems (68). Clearly refusing that role she says, "I just couldn't be that...The world inside my head is bigger than that" (68-69). She refused that role. She refused her husband shaping her art. Much like Jet in *Tapestry* who saw submission to societal and familial expectations as deadly and confining like coffins, Alice labeled her life with her husband a "tiny little black box" with "no air" (69). As a result, Alice further exemplifies the unwanted weight of being a mother when she tells her husband after she has left never to mention anything about Jenny in his letters to her. In both cases, Alice's actions show her readiness to dissolve any associations they have with her as wife and parent.

Although Alice flees to Paris in order to separate herself from the role of wife and mother, she is not able to attain the type of freedom she wanted. Instead, she finds that even in Paris black women are expected to fit a particular standard. She changed her

name to Simone in hopes to assume another identity. She tried to “name” another life for herself. However, she only became the exotic black woman who wrapped her hair in ribbons playing parts that were a cross between Josephine Baker and Anais Nin. In Paris, her sexuality was celebrated, not her art. She fit into the stereotype of the comic, sexualized black woman. Alice learned that leaving the United States was not synonymous with being freed from the expectations. In fact the stereotype of the comic, sexualized woman followed her there. She captures the lack a black woman artist’s place when she says, “I learned that my name is Alice and not Simone and that the Left Bank is not as far from the West Side of Detroit as I was hoping it would be” (66). After twenty years of being abroad, Alice returns disappointed that going to France and leaving her family did not win her freedom from expectations.

The choice that Alice makes to leave her family is similar to Ava’s choice in *Late Bus* in that it is uncomfortable for the audience. In both plays, Cleage creates women who make real life decisions in order to become “free” women. What may be troubling in this play is that Alice’s choice for freedom happens at the sacrifice of her family. When Alice heeds the screaming voice inside of her head that tells her to go despite her daughter, she completely severs her ties as mother and wife. In talking about Alice’s rejection of her marital and motherly role, Cleage says “It’s very scary. How can you leave your child? That’s why Alice was interesting to me. She felt like if she stayed to raise her daughter and be either this man’s wife or his ex-wife, she could never be the artist that she wanted to be. And that he would be a good man, he would be a responsible parent, but she still had to go” (Interview). Conceiving of the idea to leave, and then following through on it, makes Alice similar to some of the protagonists created by black

women playwrights of the early 1900s. Although Alice doesn't kill her child, like Liza or Cissie, she is linked to these women by a shared mindset. For all women, the unconventional choice to kill or to leave was the only way to avoid a tragic, inevitable consequence. The men would be lynched, the women raped, and Alice slowly murdered by her husband's unyielding control. In either case, the women were not able to control the actions of those in power, and as a result, they answered back by reclaiming control.

Alice's choice to leave may have been easier to handle if she was being abused like Minnie in *Flyin' West*. Where there was no physical abuse, Cleage suggests that Alice's inability to be an artist "meant death for her" (Interview). In both plays, the women are unable to be free due to the husband's power and as a result Alice and Minnie make extreme choices.

In comparing the outcome of Alice's lessons with Minnie's, it is evident that Cleage is arguing for a support network. When Minnie decided to participate in Frank's killing, she had the help of a community of women. She always had a community whereas Alice remained a black woman without one, without a place. In her creation of an isolated black woman, who learned that leaving isn't synonymous with freedom from expectations, Cleage puts forth the danger of being without a community. She is realistic in that she creates women characters that have to contend with societal expectations but she is hopeful, that within a community, black women will be able to help each other. In her realistic portrayals of societal expectations along with her inferences that black women need to be a part of a thriving community, she reveals her philosophy on how her writing can evoke change. Wedded to telling the truth, both to herself and to her audiences, Cleage believes that if the audience "can see the truth, it can change their

perceptions of the world and their places in it” (Bosch 214). In *Hospice* Cleage simultaneously writes about a woman whose situation threatened her free womanhood while presenting the need for a black women’s community.

Alice’s character is an opportunity for Cleage to critique the idea of the mythical, matriarchal strong black woman. Alice is determined not to be this and in her refusal she redefines Joanne M. Braxton’s concept of the “outraged mother.” Braxton concludes in “Ancestral Presence: The Outraged Mother Figure in Contemporary Afro-American Writing” that contemporary Black women writers have in common the black mother who is the epitome of nurturing and protectiveness. Always ready to defend her children and prevent any pain, especially deriving from racism, the “outraged mother embodies the values of sacrifice, nurturance, and personal courage” (Braxton 300). Due to her connection with her children, she feels any wrong done to them.

This definition, very similar to the stereotype of the strong black mother who does not have any pain, who joyously sacrifices everything for her children, who historically is characterized as having babies by the side of the road and then immediately returning to work, is debunked in *Hospice*. Cleage does not celebrate this mythical woman but instead suggests that black women must be able to express their pain. Where the “outraged mother” is more concerned about her children, Alice focuses on herself, telling Jenny that “I’d like to have been better at this, Sister. But I just don’t have any energy left for it now. I need all my energy for myself” (53). Her severing of her mother role is seen here, but in addition Alice’s referral to Jenny as “sister” reiterates her disassociation with that expectation. At every chance, Alice is reminding Jenny that they do not have a special

relationship. Referring to her as 'sister' and refusing to "play mother and daughter" is Alice's way of distancing herself from being a mother (53).

Alice stands in stark contrast to Braxton's "outraged mother." She is indeed outraged, but her rage does not stem from what has happened to her child but what has happened to her as a result of Jenny. It emanated from the expectations her husband placed on her about being a certain kind of wife and mother. It came from being enabled to be the artist that she wanted to be. Where she tells Jenny "I was always someplace loving you," she never sacrificed her desire to write what she wanted in order to be with her. The "outraged mother figure" Braxton portrays is concerned more about her children, whereas Alice focuses more on not being confined by what other people think she should be. Cleage demonstrates in Alice's need to look inward, to focus on herself first, the need to examine the effect of society's expectations. Through her actions, Alice is saying that what was expected of her was not only unfair but too unwieldy. Where she couldn't stay, Cleage posits that Alice may be able to help her daughter if she is able to share "the hard won knowledge she has about the harshness of the world" (Bosch 144). The wisdom that Alice could impart would be crucial in Jenny's journey to free womanhood.

Alice manifests to a degree the naming component of feminist protecting. She understands how expectations have influenced her life but she does not name. She does not say outright that her husband was unjust and controlling. Instead, she masks her inability to name with bitterness, sarcasm, and nastiness. She makes steps toward the communal aspect of protecting when she allows some lessons about the "secrets" of life to seep out (54). In her attempt to shield herself from any sweetness between herself and

daughter she tells Jenny that the only secret is that there are none (55). This façade diminishes some until she realizes that Jenny is learning more about her. Thus, throughout the play we see Alice alternately releasing and hiding. When her barriers are down, she imparts the necessity for Jenny to prioritize her work. For example, she tells Jenny, a journalist and poet, that she found self-imposed deadlines were the hardest to miss. She teaches Jenny that other deadlines, which can be translated into others' expectations, must wait.

The most beneficial and practical lesson comes as Jenny's labor pains intensify. As Jenny is preparing to go to the hospital, she instructs her daughter to use the birth as an opportunity to scream about the injustices of the world. Alice explains that people won't know that what she is expressing "isn't about the pain of your bones separating to let your daughter out. That yours is about the presence of injustice in the world" (68). She tells Jenny what was never told to her, not to worry about being brave, but instead "scream as loud as you want" (71). Alice falls short of naming on this magnitude and is learning while she is racing death "to absolutely shriek her disappointment at what's happened to her" (Interview). She helps Jenny by telling her of the importance of naming, but she was not able to help herself.

Although Alice is not successful at naming, she does pass on some information to Jenny that will help her to reverse the silencing of imposed expectations. When Alice is able to do this she helps her daughter to move toward free womanhood. Where Alice was not able to protect her with lessons on naming throughout her life, Jenny is in the position to help her soon-to-be-born child. Coincidentally, Jenny will have a girl child. This is pivotal because it stresses Cleage's hope in the restoration of a black woman's

community. Alice wasn't successful but perhaps Jenny will be. Jenny's success at naming will help her daughter. Cleage is rallying for the healing of the family circle.

Alice's lesson will not only help her granddaughter but it is pivotal for Jenny in her work as a writer. Jenny needs Alice's stories so that she can write about women and their experiences. Alice resists Jenny's writing about her because she has learned that writing about women, particularly black women, don't make best sellers (50). Jenny, however, fights against this type of thinking. Jenny, in this instance is acting as the spokesperson for Cleage who says in Deals with the Devil that she writes to feel the anger, to find solutions, and to pass them on (7). Jenny needs this language from her mother. Her mother's stories are pivotal so that Jenny can be an agent of change. They will help her to be a feminist protector, one who helps other black women to develop an oppositional viewpoint. Alice's stories will be the foundation for Jenny to put into language exactly what her mother could not say. The two weeks with her mother will allow her to write about how unfair it was that her father could have the career he wanted with no restrictions but her mother couldn't. She can now write about how the expectations for black women are unending despite location. Her stories will be the impetus for her audience to change how they see themselves in the world. They will be useful in replacing society's expectations with their own.

*Hospice's* ending is unlike *Late Bus to Mecca* where Ava takes ABW in hopes that they will be able to begin a new life. It's different from *Flyin' West* in that Minnie is part of a community where they repeat a ritual that reminds them to name, that reminds them that they are free. In *Hospice* Jenny leaves with the one major lesson on naming from her dying mother who does not want her to return. Alice is not interested in

building a community even though she needs Jenny's help. She still pushes her away saying, "Forgive me, sister, I did what I could" (71). Jenny has been given survival information, but she does not have a woman in her circle that will help her to apply it. So she is on the path to becoming a feminist protector, but she is still very much in isolation.

In comparing the outcome of all three plays, it remains clear that the journey to feminist protection happens most successfully when there are both elements: naming and communal support. Four of Cleage's contemporaries, co-playwrights Breena Clarke and Glenda Dickerson, Rhodessa Jones and Shay Youngblood also recognize the importance of naming within a community. The plays *Re/Membering Aunt Jemima: A Menstrual Show*, *Big Butt Girls*, *Hard-Headed Women* and *Shakin' The Mess Outta Misery* respectively celebrate the black woman's journey to feminist protection.

Playwrights Clarke and Dickerson use *Re/Membering Aunt Jemima: A Menstrual Show* as an opportunity to take, examine, and turn the image of Aunt Jemima on its head. In this process, they not only reveal how detrimental stereotypes are, but they unmask them so they can no longer shape the way their primary audience, black women, views themselves. This play is intended to help reverse the erasing of the presence of black women who are "all but invisible in a popular culture which fears and loathes [them] unless [they] can be fitted comfortably into a recognizable stereotype: the Mammy, the Sapphire, the Jezebel, the Tragic Mulatta" (143). Their mission in helping black women to see how they are seen in the world is the first step in changing how they see themselves.

The transformation of how women view themselves happens under the guise of the minstrel tradition. They incorporate what they call the "most potent device" of the

minstrel tradition: “innovative word-play, i.e. malapropisms, puns, conundrums, and double entendres” (143). An important example of this is seen in the title where minstrel becomes “menstrual.” Through this play on words, Dickerson and Clarke, clearly state that the play is about women. They make their intention even more specific when La Madama Interlock-It-Togetherer, the narrator or hostess of the show, says “we will now present a true copy of the ups and downs in the life of Aunt Jemima, the most famous colored woman in the world” (145). Immediately, Dickerson and Clarke make the connection between race and gender. They characterize the play as being about black women.

The word “menstrual” holds another connotation, other than just identifying the characters and the play as women-centered. But the word choice also makes reference to a woman’s ability to be both self-cleansing and reproducers. If these women are “menstruals,” then they are able to cleanse themselves of society’s negative definitions of black womanhood. Simultaneously, as reproducers they are able to usher in a new mindset on the way black women were and continue to be seen in society. Since menstrual is connected to the woman’s body, Clarke and Dickerson, give women full responsibility to first make personal changes that will then ripple out into the community at large.

There isn’t a community in *Re/Membering Aunt Jemima* like the one that exists between Sophie and her sisters where they work together to kill the clearly established abuser. Nor is it similar to the one that is budding in *Late Bus* where Ava learns her responsibility to take care of ABW by taking her to Atlanta. There is no plan to protect the physical body. Instead their mission is to reinvent the way that black women think of

themselves. In essence, naming in the play is not physical. It has to do with the outing of psychological abuse that causes a negative sense of self. Through the company of menstrual singers, Dickerson and Clarke advocate the need for black women to re-envision their past in order to re-create their present thinking and future. Once the audience can name that looking at themselves in a self-deprecating way reaps magnanimous consequences, they can “find themselves, pull themselves together and feel alright” (144-5). This is the journey to feminist protection.

Dickerson and Clarke allow black women to present the truth immediately when the play begins with La Madama Interlock-It-Togetherer saying, “stereotypes, be seated! Contrary women and sympathetic gents, I extend a welcome on behalf of the greatest show on earth” (144). In their mention of “contrary women” they target a particular segment of the female population: women who name their refusal to be abused, women not unlike Sophie and Miss Leah of *Flyin’ West* and men, like Wil Parrish, who fight against the perpetuation of abuse. The first song the company sings details the need to rescue the image of Aunt Jemima by salvaging her bad name from the big, fat mammy of lies (144-5). This initial song not only reveals the purpose of the play, but the singers name the fact that this stereotype has caused self-hatred. In their questions “who do we hate?” and “why do we hate?” they force the audience to see the close association between stereotypes and self-evaluation (145). They argue that stereotypes are what have caused the black woman to stand as an object in the imagination of whites. This is the reason one of the menstruals says to another “you is just a creature of white imagination” (146). Dickerson and Clarke are debunking the myth of Aunt Jemima by

configuring her history. Behind the image of the mammy, there are experiences of black women that must be examined.

In this play Aunt Jemima is the mother of thirteen daughters, three of whom were fathered by the colonel of the plantation. In making Aunt Jemima a mother, the playwrights sever the notion of her as asexual. She has a range of children, all of whom are significant to American culture. For example, she mothers "Dorothy" or Dorothy Dandridge, the symbol of the tragic mulatto, who is sold to Paramount Pictures. Some of her other children include "Bondswoman" or Harriet Tubman, "Anita" or Anita Hill and "Anna Julia" or Anna Julia Cooper. In addition, the playwrights destroy any connection the contemporary audience can have with her in relation to self-hatred. By making her a person with self-confidence, the black women audience can look at her and not be shamed. When Aunt Jemima says "ain't got nothing to be ashamed 'bout. I got pretty black skin, I got a beautiful, long neck, I got a fine, rounded shape. I got plenty to smile about" the audience should see a woman who measures her self-worth by her own standards (148). She tells her daughter, Dorothy, that she is always happy because of her own personal attributes. She names that her happiness and smile, which has become popularized, has nothing to do with pleasing white people. This is crucial since the belief of white masters during slavery was that slaves aimed to please them. They needed to believe this in order to feel as if the institution was not immoral. Dickerson and Clarke shatter this romanticized viewpoint in their creation of a black slave woman who did not live to please. Instead, how she felt about herself was self-motivated.

In their characterization of Aunt Jemima, Dickerson and Clarke re-name her. She is no longer a myth, but she becomes a mother, a sexual being, a woman. They help to

sever all negative associations with Aunt Jemima so black women will not be ashamed. If Aunt Jemima is considered to be all black women then, with the invention of this new history, the playwrights name a different possibility for the audience. Dickerson and Clarke intend for their naming and re-naming to help transform the community of black women. Their rescuing and salvaging of the image so black women will “feel alright” acts as a blueprint for the audience to do the same (145). Their naming lays the foundation for communities of women to name.

Where Dickerson and Clarke use innovative word-play to give voice to Aunt Jemima, Rhodessa Jones incorporates hand-clapping, aerobics, direct address, and role playing to name the experiences of incarcerated women on the stage. Jones, who first began her work with incarcerated women at the San Francisco Jail in the role of aerobics instructor, developed a play based on the women’s monologues (Elam and Alexander 362). On stage, she re-enacts their stories. In playing their roles, in taking on their experiences, Jones brings to the world stories of women often unheard.

*Big Butt Girls, Hard-Headed Women*, which Jones calls a “feminist piece” begins with a girl’s transformation from innocence to prostitution. Jones marks the child’s too soon development by having her first play a youthful hand-clap game that involves saying the name of the sweetheart. She then dances suggestively to Aretha Franklin’s “Respect” portraying her new awareness of her sexuality. At this point, Jones simultaneously plays the girl’s father who recognizes his daughter’s new sense of sexual prowess. He tells her to get in the house but in the next instance we see her being groped at the store by Jerry, who becomes the father of her baby and abuser. Jones suggests that a father’s authority isn’t enough to prevent a child’s growing too soon. The next scene

shows the girl being arrested and then incarcerated for prostitution. All throughout these scenes, her father reprimands her either for suggestive dance or for teen pregnancy.

Jones uses the young girl's self-loathsome response—"I ain't nothing"—to indicate the consequences of negative self-naming (365). In her marking, what she considers the all too frequent ramifications of innocent girl child turned prostitute, she argues for a different solution (364). It is one that requires the audience, the larger community, to be involved.

Throughout the play, Jones continuously provides the audience with her reasons for working with incarcerated women. After she plays the girl child who is incarcerated for prostitution and then jailed, she alternates roles. She is either the aerobics instructor or herself as the artist. It is through direct address as the artist where she reveals her purpose. She tells the audience that she is aware that her work with the women can't make all of the difference because of the "too great, too immense" circumstances in which they live (374). But with the work of a community, differences can be made. In her saying "can a body, catch a body," which is repeated three separate times throughout the play, she holds the audience responsible. Black women must catch each other. This is comparable to Cleage's notion that black women must be accountable for another woman's survival. Ava, Fannie, and Sophie are charged with "catching bodies." In *Late Bus to Mecca*, Ava learned to be responsible for ABW and in *Flyin' West*, Sophie forced Fannie to end her participation in Minnie's abuse. Like Cleage, Jones believes that community involvement is crucial if changes are to be made. By providing Statistics--"85% women of all women incarcerated in U.S. penal institutions are women of color. 50% are African-American women"--Jones brings the problem to surface. The

facts make it real, tangible; they make it so that the audience cannot hide. She is naming that incarceration, often caused by prostitution, is a real problem that must be addressed.

As Jones brings to the forefront the experiences of incarcerated women, she, like Cleage, forces the audience to abandon any conservative values. She portrays drug addicts, prostitutes, and women who end up in jail for making extreme choices to protect their children. She portrays Lena, an Italian-American, who was once the valedictorian of her class. She becomes addicted to drugs. In her portraying more than just black women, Jones argues for a more expansive definition of community. Where Cleage's first priority is the continuation of a black women's community, Jones is arguing for women to be accountable for each other.

The community that Jones represents is not only multi-racial, but they also have different reason for being in jail. For example, she tells the story of crack addicted Deborah, a Berekeley graduate, who smothers her child once her boyfriend leaves her. Deborah's relationship with her child differed drastically from inmate Doris. Doris, age 19, who is incarcerated for cursing at a policeman after he disrespects her at the arrest of her boyfriend, a convicted felon, doesn't understand Deborah's choice. A young mother of two, Doris manifests a commitment to her children. She doesn't use drugs because she doesn't want it to interfere with her ability to take care of her children. In Jones' characterization of Doris, she is forcing the audience to see that incarcerated women have human instincts. So committed to her children Doris says to her mother on visitation day, "these people ain't seen no criminal activity until some of them try to take my babies and put them in a home. I love my kids (372). Doris is prepared to make extreme choices in order to be with her children. She is concerned that her public defender may not work on

her behalf so that she will be released. The fact that she has a job, is working toward her GED, may not be enough to counter her actions toward an unruly and distasteful policeman. Through Doris, Jones argues that women stay in jail because of a lack of resources and a reliance on a system that works to keep them incarcerated.

Jones also takes on the persona of Regina Brown, to whom the play was dedicated. She died at age 27 after her third release from jail. Through this role-play, we see a woman manifesting the trait of contrariness that marks a woman's refusal to be abused. She names this when she says, "I am a prostitute straight up. I decided a long time ago, wasn't no man gonna tell me what to do. I'm a full-grown woman, straight up and down. Or my name ain't Regina Brown" (368). In this scenario, Jones shows a woman who chooses prostitution as her form of independence.

Regina Brown's definitive sense of self, and in particular, the way she names herself models the Waters women in Johnson's *Blue-Eyed Black Boy*. Pauline and Rebecca Waters base their sense of self on the ability to walk straight, which for them means living virtuous lives. For Brown, she chooses prostitution for autonomy. Although their lifestyles vary greatly, what links all three women is their choosing or desire to choose a life that is straight or correct for them.

Just as Regina Brown was committed to being independent and in control, Mama Pearl is jailed because she embezzles money from her job in order to provide an opportunity for her deaf and dumb daughter to take care of herself. In this role-play Jones wants the audience to understand that incarceration is sometimes a result of the choices a mother, who does not have enough resources, will make in order take to care for her child. Mama Pearl, now 70 acts as the trustee for the jail. She, like Miss Leah,

because of age and experience, is in the position of griotte. Having been “in and out of jail since 1965” Mama Pearl is able to give Jones information on what the new generation of incarcerated women need. Her insight is of great value; her name is reminiscent of the “Parable of the Pearl of Great Price” where the merchant sells all he has for one pearl. Mama Pearl plays a significant role. It is because of what she knows that the audience sees the difference in the generation of women. The great price she pays to ensure the a good quality of life for her daughter makes her strikingly different from the younger women who wind up in jail for being “pimped” in order to get “drugs, money, cars, even a leather coat” (369). She believes that these young women need to have a greater level of self-worth; they need to be taught that being incarcerated is not equal to feeling important (369-370). Here, she is naming the importance of a community. Mama Pearl is arguing that contemporary young women cannot just exist in isolation. They need to be re-taught. They can not continue to birth babies in jail and then sell them to the dealer for drugs. Mama Pearl’s perspective: she would rather them flush the babies then perpetuate this cycle. In the incorporation of Mama Pearl’s story, which ends with her saying “I know that it’s a hard line, but in this life I’ve learned you better come with something if you wanna get something,” Jones is propositioning for a different outcome (370).

Jones wants the audience to leave with a new awareness. In her asking the audience: who are these women? And what are they to you, and you, and you?” she is forcing them to see their responsibility to incarcerated women. She further stresses this point when at the end of the play she says, “my point is, we’re all involved here. My point is, this ain’t no time to be buying dogs and locking doors ‘cause you see ‘them’ comin’. ‘Cause ‘they’ could be ‘us’” (376). Her belief is that only a “twist of fate” keeps

“me in here and she out there” (357). She argues that women may fall victim to drug abuse, or choose prostitution as a means to independence, or make choices to save their children and wind up jailed. She asserts the trait of feminist protection by coupling the naming of the contemporary reality of black women with theater work that makes a change. She holds herself responsible and the audience as well by reminding them that “the struggle continues for all of us” (376). Her wish is expansive: no matter race, class, or gender, society as a whole should be working to protect each other.

Jones, Dickerson and Clarke are similar in that they do not establish a community on stage where a woman is teaching another woman. For example, in neither of the plays does there exist a character like Ava who teaches a catatonic, helpless woman. Instead, they are teaching the audience to be involved in preventing incarceration or showing them a new way of thinking of themselves. Like Cleage, they are giving the audience and opportunity to change the world around them by first changing themselves.

The play *Shakin' the Mess Outta Misery* is most similar to communities that Cleage stages in *Late Bus To Mecca* and *Flyin' West*. In *Shakin' the Mess*, which spans from the 1920s through the present, Youngblood establishes a community of African-American women who are invested in teaching “Daughter” what she needs to know as she becomes a woman. Once “daughter” gets her blood, the nine women, whom she refers to as her “mamas,” prepare her for the summer-long process of going to the river. “Daughter” and “mama” are social designations, not biological. The absence of names allows for an immediate connection to the play. The simple fact that the girls are daughters who have mothers makes the ritual universal to the female audience. The fact that “Daughter” isn’t connected biologically to the women who rear her demonstrates that

the passing on of “life saving information” is not limited to family. Both Cleage and Youngblood show that biology does not always pre-determine a mother’s ability to pass on survival information. In *Hospice* Alice focuses on herself instead of her daughter as a form of self-preservation and in *Shakin’ the Mess*, “Daughter” is left to her mamas because her mother, after being raped at age fifteen in broad daylight by several white boys, loses her mind. The women who raise “Daughter” collectively “catch” her and prepare her for entrance to womanhood. It is at the river, a symbol of life and cleansing, where she will be prepared to embark on the rest of her life, as a woman. When she is guided to the river on her birthday, she is given a few tangible “gifts” (401). The majority, however, are “stories” of the “mamas”’ experiences.

“Daughter” is taught to name through storytelling, an art form rooted in oral culture and tradition. Youngblood illuminates the art of telling stories through Big Mama who tells “Daughter” who is impatiently waiting to for the lesson to unfold, “A story ain’t something you just read off like ingredients on a soap box. A story’s like a map, you follow the lines and they’ll take you somewhere. There’s a way to do anything and with a story you take your time” (390). It is through the stories that “Daughter” learns about being a woman. In addition, through all of the listening she is learning how to tell stories. Eventually, she will be able to take position amongst the other “mamas” and lead young women to their own rivers. In essence, she is being trained to be a protector.

“Daughter” learns a variety of lessons from the women that will teach her to name and that will mark her entrance into feminist protection. Most of the stories end with a familiar phrase like “You got to know where you come from to know where you going” or “what don’t kill you, will make you strong” (386). These phrases reiterate the

moral of the story. She learns from Aunt Mae the importance of being independent. Aunt Mae, who ran a liquor business out of her home believes that “the wine taste sweeter and the berries have more juice when you got your own” (386). In addition, she tells her that independence must carry over into relationships. She is taught never to go anywhere with a man without having money to come home. Miss Tom is the nontraditional woman. She’s homosexual, carries a male, and works as a carpenter, a job generally thought to be for a man. From her example, Miss Tom teaches “Daughter” that possibilities are endless; she learns that she does not have to be make choices that are relegated for her because she is a woman. .

Youngblood teaches the importance of women being independent in regards to business but also in terms of mindset. Through Miss Tom she suggests to the audience to not be confined by what society says a woman should do in terms of work or sexual preference. In addition, to these lessons, she also brings to the stage more historical portraits of black women. “Daughter” learns about the socio-political times of the early nineteen hundreds and how this climate affected black women specifically. Through Miss Lamama “Daughter” learns about Miss Shine. The connotations of her name are manifested in her character. “Shine” can be in reference to skin color. Race and racism is at the root of Miss Shine’s story. She was reminiscent of real slave cooks who “knew what to do to save the race, stop the screams” (403). Miss Shine, a cook for Miss Emmie, the governor’s wife, saw a grave injustice when the black choir, who sang at the house, was not asked in for hot chocolate. Only the white children were. As she watches this injustice play out, the coveted chandelier, which she took pride in cleaning, falls to the floor. What she had “shined” and taken personal achievement in making clean made

little difference as racial injustice is made more apparent to her. Her awareness of racism, stemming from slavery, causes her mind to ease back and she remembers familiar slave experiences: “blood, boil thick, run red like a rive, slave scream, wail, moan after they dead. Daddy lynched, Mama raped, baby sister sold downriver. Slaves scream, wail, moan after they dead” (403). This instance forces her to recall the experiences of slaves and coping mechanisms they used to survive. She takes the pieces home and grinds them up and puts them into the governor’s tea. Nobody knew how the governor got sick and Miss Shine wasn’t seen again. The story ends with Miss Lamama instructing “Daughter” to honor her ancestors. In this lesson, Youngblood stresses the importance of remembering the past. She names the experiences of slaves and black women domestics while simultaneously presenting the daring ways they fought back against racism and injustice.

Youngblood also presents other experiences that detail the consequences of racism and white male power. “Daughter” is told about a black woman who was found dead after being raped, and sawed open by white men who forced her brother to watch. The women’s stories did not only illuminate rape, but one of Big Mama’s stories revealed, in another fashion, the white man’s power over the black community. She tells of a day when the women, who worked as domestics, were riding the bus. Miss Corine misplaced her spit cup and spews her chewed snuff out of the window. As a result of it landing in a white woman’s face, the bus is pulled over, the police are called, and the women, who are called “aunties” are lined up on the wall (393). The man, who was driving the car, was allowed to “hark spit” on each of them (393). Big Mama ends the story session by explaining the importance of remembering the past when she says “don’t

you never forget where we been, or that we got a long way to go” (393). Through these stories to “daughter,” and to the larger audience, Youngblood names the position of the black woman as subservient during the early 1900s and posits that a great amount of work needs to be done in order for racism to be dismantled.

After a summer of stories, “daughter” is ready for the river. At this time, her name is revealed to the audience. Throughout the play she is mostly called daughter, but sometimes she is referred to as peaches, baby, ‘lil sister, little mama. She is finally called “Rita,” after being inducted into womanhood. The name comes only as a result of her experiences an integral part of her existence. She undergoes several meetings with her “mamas” who give her the precepts necessary to understand her role as a black woman who lives and survives with dignity (386). As a result of time spent and lessons learned from her “mamas,” her name is announced to the world. She is no longer the child being taught by the mother, instead, she is prepared to be a vital participant in the family and community. She can not take the position of “mama” and help others on their own journey to naming and self-identity protection.

Youngblood does not limit the journey to naming to Rita only. The women in the audience are also part of the journey. They connect with her because they are daughters or they have been daughters. In this way, Youngblood charges the women who accompany “Daughter” to the river with the responsibility of passing on stories that tell what it means to be a woman. Youngblood and Cleage both argue that women must use their “gifts” as learning tools. Their passing on of their experiences is required so other women can learn to name. The message emphasized by both playwrights is that women, in fact, become protectors as a result of their responsibility to each other.

Through conversation, whether it is through storytelling, river rituals, free womanhood rituals, or recalling past experiences, lessons on what it means to be women are taught. Cleage emphasizes the community's responsibility in passing on this information in *Late Bus to Mecca* and *Flyin' West*. She uses *Hospice* as an example of the detriment of not having a community. Isolation, as a result of societal expectation, inevitably works against women teaching one another to cope. It is through a community of women, not an individual experience like Alice's, where women are named, where women are taught to be protectors, where women are taught to be free. Through this kind of community they can re-define themselves, as the menstruals did in *Re/Membering Aunt Jemima*. In these communities women can teach younger generations on the importance of self-worth as Mama Pearl does. In these communities, women can pass on "gifts." The passing on of these gifts is essential in the journey to feminist protection. Cleage, Dickerson, Clarke, Jones, and Youngblood use their writing as the impetus to change how women, particularly black women, think of themselves. In this fashion, they are feminist protectors, concerned about the "free"dom, survival and wholeness of other women.

## CHAPTER V

### EPILOGUE: MAKING HOMES

In the aftermath of minstrel productions, black scholars and artists were eager to re-create the African-American image on stage with truth and sensibility. In the 1920s W.E.B. DuBois appealed to the black community for their involvement in the creation of meaningful theater by making it “about us, by us, for us, and near us” (Perkins 5). Almost nine decades later, DuBois’ suggestion still rings true.

In a recent article by theater artist and playwright Thulani Davis, she writes that African-American artists “continue to try to get it said, get it said right, and put it where people can hear, so the children of the twenty-first century will know it” (Davis 26). This statement parallels DuBois’ as it not only talks about the material being available, but she addresses how, why, and for whom it is presented. Davis suggests that theater must be produced in locations that are accessible so it has the potential to teach and influence future generations. Overall, the message in that theater must be done truthfully; implicit in both calls is the responsibility the artist has to the accuracy of the work.

Black women playwrights of the past and present have worked simultaneously to create meaningful theater while paying attention to the intricate relationship of race, class, and gender. Theater for black women becomes, to use Pearl Cleage’s terminology, “a hollering place” (Bell-Scott 159). It is an environment where the naming of what it means to be black and a woman unabashedly occurs. Consequently, the dramatic work is informed by this intersection. The “hollering place” is a venue for black women to write themselves and experiences into the world so that they can be seen.

Georgia Douglas Johnson, Alice Childress, and Pearl Cleage expanded DuBois' definition of meaningful theater by concentrating on issues facing black women. The notion of "meaningful theater" became black women-centered as issues of motherhood, the black woman's place, and free womanhood took the forefront. Each playwright took seriously her position as storyteller; she charged herself with the responsibility of telling stories that illuminated the experiences of black women. Barbara Christian considers this type of story telling to be indicative of black women moving past silence in order to create a dialogue where experiences are spoken and answered (Christian xii).

Similarly to Christian, Cleage suggests that black women be responsible for validating their experiences. Her purpose for writing is imbued with an urgency to tell the truth: "I'm trying to write the kind of herstory that lets us see ourselves...groping for truth...and rising to the occasion *because we can, and we did, and we do, and we better* (Bell-Scott 163). Johnson, Childress, and Cleage are linked in their success at telling the truth about black women's various experiences. Whether the theme was lynching, the black woman's place on the stage, or the urgency to move beyond societal expectations, each playwright was invested in portraying a drama that truthfully reflected the relationship black women have with race, class and gender.

While truth-telling is a major component uniting the three playwrights, they are also intricately bonded in their varying explications on the notion of protection. Johnson illuminates the effect of lynching on the black mother as she copes with not always being able to be a physical protector. *A Sunday Morning in the South*, *Blue-Eyed Black Boy*, and *Safe* force the reader to confront the fact that black mothers, who had little autonomy

and influence over the law, were not always able to protect their children, in particular their sons, from rampant lynching.

Each major protagonist in Johnson's anti-lynching dramas shares the same angst and desperation when faced with the potential fate of their male children. However, Johnson expands the notion of protection as each woman tries to save and protect differently. In doing this, she demonstrates that protection there is not only one way to protect; providing varying outcomes suggests that Johnson opposed the presentation of the black mother's experience as monolithic. She shows clearly that different circumstances require different responses.

In *A Sunday Morning in the South* Sue Jones' home is first seen as an atmosphere of warmth. However, it becomes a place of terror when the police enter unwanted. This exposition of white authority's ability to enter a black woman's home without her consent illuminates her place in society. Because she was powerless in keeping her home a safe haven, Sue loses her grandson to lynching. Johnson imbues the play with great helplessness as she argues that nothing can prevent lynching on earth. Sue's only hope comes in knowing that her grandson will be safe in Heaven.

Where Johnson stresses salvation and protection in the hereafter in *A Sunday Morning in the South*, she advocates a different solution in *Blue-Eyed Black Boy*. In this play, the protagonist places her faith not only in God, but also in white male authority. Pauline Waters, mother of Jack, uses her mysterious past with Judge Tinkhem as leverage to save her son. Johnson keeps their relationship ambiguous, as it is never clear if it was one resulting from love or rape. Whatever the circumstance, Johnson creates a protagonist who defies the silence she was expected to keep in order to save her son.

Johnson's conclusion is starkly different than in *A Sunday Morning in the South*. Here, she is not suggesting that protection come after death. Instead, she argues that black men should have the right to protection on earth.

*A Sunday Morning in the South* and *Blue-Eyed Black Boy* feature black women who struggle to save adult men. However, in *Safe*, Liza, a pregnant woman, deals with the likelihood of her son's death at the hands of the lynch mob. After hearing the pleas of Sam Hosea as he was dragged to his death, Liza is certain that she does not want to birth a male child who could be lynched due to his race and gender. In order to prevent his death at the hands of the lynch mob, and to shield herself from the experience of being a mother who is unable to answer her son's pleas, Liza immediately strangles her newborn upon seeing his sex. In her creation of a woman who refused to sit and wait for death or for someone to intervene, Johnson posited that there was no time to waste in addressing and ending unchecked, rampant racist brutality.

Johnson's answer to the call for meaningful theater was manifested in her determination to stage the experiences of black mothers who coped with the possibility of lynching. Through the diversity and complexity of her portrayals, Johnson indicates the bitter position black women were in as their ability to protect was compromised by outside authority. In response to the usurping of her power, the black mother sometimes coped like Sue, who prayed for the afterlife; perhaps she found her only solution came in threatening to make a prior relationship visible; and most troubling, she responded by offsetting the possibility of lynching by killing herself. As a result of Johnson's and her contemporaries' treatment of the black mother's experience on the stage, a foundation

was being laid for future generations to continue to discuss issues that were black women centered.

Alice Childress, like Johnson, found her answer to meaningful theater in her exposition of poor black heroines who transcend their circumstances. In *Florence*, *Trouble in Mind*, and *Wine in the Wilderness*, she focuses on the process of transformation where the main characters separate themselves from society's definitions of black womanhood and create their own. Transformation is only possible for Mama in *Florence* because her daughter, after whom the play is titled, leaves home to pursue a career as an actress in New York. It is after Mama's conversations with Mrs. Carter, a self-proclaimed liberal white woman, that she is able to support Florence in her career that has only landed her roles or jobs as domestics. After refusing Mrs. Carter's offer to help Florence attain a job as a maid, Mama steps into the role of protector and encourages her daughter to keep trying. As a result of her unyielding commitment to help her daughter and her anger at society's perpetuation of the black woman as the domestic, Mama is ready to help others. Her journey ripples out to the community as she is prepared to help Marge, her other daughter, who finds Florence's aspirations inappropriate.

An examination of the effects of whites' racist expectations on black womanhood is discussed in Childress's *Trouble in Mind* as well. Childress uses the play within a play technique in order to present tangible and likely scenarios of the treatment of blacks in the theater during the 1950s. Wiletta, an actress, makes a transformation from a woman who teaches John, an eager new actor, to laugh and grin to a woman so angered by racist portraits of blacks that she demands that the director make immediate changes in the

script. Her role in “Chaos in Belleville” requires her to support and participate in her son’s pending lynching. Ultimately, Wileta is able to use her journey to self-identity protection as an opportunity to re-instruct John.

Both *Florence* and *Trouble in Mind* discuss how white racism initially stunts, but eventually triggers the protagonist’s journey to self-identity protection. Childress examines protection differently in *Wine in the Wilderness* as she focuses instead on the ramifications of blacks’ racism and class biases. She points out the potential that each individual has by having Tommy, a poor black woman, teach the small bourgeoisie community she is introduced to. In her conversation with Cynthia, Tommy criticizes her point of view that demeans the choices poor black women make in order to survive. Additionally, Tommy transforms Bill, who is eventually able to use his art to represent the world in which he lives instead of glamorizing African beauty and demeaning everyday black women.

In each of Childress’s plays she brings to the forefront the journeys women take to become self-identity protectors. Mama, Wileta, and Tommy must confront oppression so that it will no longer inform how they think about their place in society. As a result of their journey, they can help to rebuild the community. In each case, the protagonist recognizes the artist’s potential to not only impact society but to be agents of change. Childress vehemently argues through her protagonists that if art is going to be meaningful, it must be done truthfully and with sensibility.

Contemporary playwright Pearl Cleage recognizes the importance of portraying truth so that she can “save lives” (Bosch 246). *Late Bus to Mecca*, *Flyin’ West*, and *Hospice* explore the necessary steps to feminist protection. Once a feminist protector, the

protagonist is able to claim free womanhood, a way of life that drives Cleage's work.

Free womanhood is connected to the safety of women and their ability to be financially independent. The protagonists in Cleage's plays learn to become feminist protectors in a community of women. Cleage stresses accountability so black women will see the urgency in teaching each other how to survive.

An essential element to Cleage's work is her belief that all black women can help others, despite their past, or their career. This is seen clearly in *Late Bus to Mecca* where she makes Ava, a prostitute, the heroine. In the retelling of her experiences, Ava teaches ABW that women must not prey on each other but instead affirm each others' humanity, teach each other how to develop a plan and make a move in order to escape oppression. Ava initially plans to make a move in isolation, but after the time she spends with ABW she realizes the importance of transcending her circumstances in a community. Cleage makes Ava responsible for taking ABW with her to Atlanta in order to stress the importance of accountability and the need for a community of women.

The community of women in *Flyin' West* come together to save the pregnant younger sister, Minnie, from death at the hands of her abusive husband, Frank. Their declaration of free womanhood, where they proclaim their strength and courage, is juxtaposed with domestic abuse. Cleage, like Johnson, empowers women by creating them to be the ones who can protect Minnie so that their ritual of free womanhood can continue. Where the women unite to help Minnie, she too has to be accountable for her own recovery. She eventually moves from hiding Frank's abuse to naming it. The overarching idea is that women must be safe and free in order to help each other, and to be able to pass on survival information to future generations.

Whereas both *Late Bus to Mecca* and *Flyin' West* center on women teaching each other essential life skills that will aid them in their journey to feminist protection, Cleage takes a different approach in *Hospice*, where the ramifications of not passing on survival information, and its effect on the journey to feminist protection, is explored. She uses a strained mother-daughter relationship as the vehicle to illuminate the consequences of societal expectations. Alice, at the end of her life, and Jenny, just about to begin hers as a mother, struggle in their discussion of life choices. Although Alice abandoned her family, through their reunion she is given the opportunity to pass on life saving information that will help her daughter to name the oppression in her life. Jenny is taught by her dying mother to scream about the injustices in the world. Jenny is given the tool -- the stories, the truth -- to pass on to other women and most importantly, her soon to be born daughter.

In each of the plays Cleage creates characters that make life choices which are imbued with the spirit of survival. Ava is a prostitute who decides to have sex with men to acquire enough money so that she can open a hair salon. Sophie is prepared to kill Frank and would have, if her sisters didn't stop her. Alice abandons her family; her actions stand as a critique of the mythical, matriarchal strong woman. Cleage forces her readers to confront women and their circumstances without class bias and/or conservatism. She brings to the forefront choices that may be difficult for the audience to grapple with so that the audience will critique, not the women, but the socio-political and economic circumstances that influence their choice.

Georgia Douglas Johnson, Alice Childress, and Pearl Cleage create protagonists who explore their relationship with protection. Whether "physical," "self-identity," or

“feminist” protectors, the protagonists bring a sensibility to the stage that reflects their struggles and coping mechanisms. Johnson, Childress, and Cleage add generously to the work done on black women in theater in their commitment to telling their stories truthfully. They’ve expanded DuBois’ notion of meaningful theater, by making room for black women’s stories to be heard on stage.

For some black women playwrights there remains a correlation between telling the truth and protection. In the 1970s Ntozake Shange’s groundbreaking play *for colored girls who’ve considered suicide/when the rainbow is enuf* not only continued the legacy of black women staging their experiences, but the range of issues that she discussed proved that there is no one set identity for black women. She discussed a myriad of issues ranging from abortion, coming of age, domestic abuse, identity, spirituality, and rape. Despite the controversy associated with the play because of its “implied criticism of black men,” Shange’s new theatrical poem, the choreopoem, presented “women’s issues with intimacy and candor” (Wilkerson xx11). *for colored girls* not only provided Shange with notoriety, she won the Obie in 1974, but the provocative combination of poetry, dance, and storytelling, proved beneficial for the black women’s community as their experiences were witnessed, discussed, and brought to the forefront.

Thematically, “rape” continues to be discussed and staged by contemporary black women playwrights. Laurie Carlos’s *White Chocolate For My Father* (1989) and Robbie McCauley’s *Sally’s Rape* (1989) both discuss rape in order to break the culture of silence that keeps women, in this case black, mute. In *White Chocolate* Carlos examines the violence of rape that was perpetuated in her family for several generations. In the breaking of the silence, she releases the shame, providing an outlet not only for herself

but for other women “who could not speak, for those women who were speaking for themselves but were never heard” (Mahone 4). Similar to Carlos, McCauley’s interest was to provide women with life saving information that will help them not only move beyond the silence of rape, but to release it, learn more, move with it, and eventually transform (Mahone 214). In *Sally’s Rape* McCauley reaches back historically and examines Thomas Jefferson and Sally Hemmings’ relationship differently from scholars who argue that it was actually based on love. Instead, she looks at it, names it rape, and addresses the power white men had over black women’s voices and bodies. In the examination of the historical rape, she imagines and stages the “tightness” between Sally’s thighs and expresses the terror in order to bring to the forefront the power dynamic existing between white masters and black slaves. Staging the tightness and the terror is intentional as McCauley seeks to teach her audience that the linking thread between rape in the past and rape today is male control. The message is that rape is never about “good sex” or a woman’s pleasure, only power (215-216).

Carlos’s and McCauley’s contribution to this study on protection is manifested in their commitment to heal women emotionally. In their focus on rape, they uncover the rock of shame that keeps women buried, hidden, and deadened. In essence, they are proposing a cyclical form of protection where they require women to reach back to their past, examine the rape, break the silence and shame around it, and then move with it in efforts to thwart the familiarity of muteness. The urgency in their work stems from their desire to make sure that black women will no longer participate in the culture of silence that prevents their stories from being told. In essence, they are protecting the storytelling, enabling black women to be griottes.

Rape isn't the only theme that contemporary playwrights have in common with their ancestors. Alongside this conversation of rape are discussions of womanhood and motherhood. Kia Corthran's *Come Down Burning* (1993) and *Cage Rhythm* (1993) examine the choices of black mothers who are pushed to the edge. In *Come Down Burning* Corthran brings to the forefront the unavailability of birth control for poor black women who inevitably are forced to make bitter decisions in order to protect the livelihood of their families. Skoolie performs illegal abortions for the town's women who are unable to afford contraceptives from medical doctors. Corthran not only examines the consequences for women who can not afford birth control but she also raises a realistic question: what happens specifically to poor women when it isn't one hundred percent effective?

There is no optimism rendered in this play as Skoolie's sister, Tee, a mother to two living children, and two dead due to malnutrition, dies from "yank[ing] the wrong thing (Uno and Perkins 104). Tee dies performing her own abortion with a hanger. Tee is not unlike Johnson's protagonist Liza who made bitter choices in order to protect her family. In this case, Tee thinks about her hungry family, but her efforts to prevent their starvation ends in her own death. Just as Johnson wanted her audience in *Safe* to think about the cruelty behind lynching that could lead a mother to kill her own, Corthran urges her readers to think about the seriousness of unaffordable and unavailable health care for poor women and families.

The politics of birth control is replaced with differentiated crime sentences in *Cage Rhythm*. In both plays, Corthran incorporates the dynamics of race, class, and gender. In *Come Down Burning*, being black, poor, and female meant limited, if any,

access to health care that could save lives. In *Cage Rhythm*, the combination of being black, poor, and female is manifested in more stringent jail sentences than white women, who are often sent to rehabilitation centers instead of jail (Mahone 35). One of her characters, T.J, becomes Corthran's political mouthpiece in order to highlight this unequal punishment. After finding out how long Avery, the main protagonist has been in jail, T.J. retorts "Seven for using?!... Too bad you're not white. White they send you to the rehab center. Black they send you to jail (Mahone 49-50). As in *Come Down Burning*, Corthran's political message remains unhidden. In both cases, the ramifications of being black, poor, and female are clear.

Corthran not only illuminates unjust punishment, but the subject of motherhood is paramount as Avery struggles to better her relationship with her children, who are in the foster care system. Since she is imprisoned past the fifty-mile limit the state imposes, her children's foster parents are not required to bring them for visitation. Thus, Avery's only recourse is to work on parenting through dream-like sequences called "getting out" where she envisions herself in different scenarios with her children. In these instances, she is away from prison, free, clean and a completely different parent. She is so different that even in the dreams her children find her responses and behavior unfamiliar. In one situation the child says, "you never talk like that before. Yesterday you tole me I get in the pond you beat my butt" (Mahone 41). Avery responds, "that was yesterday" (Mahone 41). Avery has the ability to be a better parent, but because of the politics of the legal system, she isn't given the chance to be the woman she is in her self-imposed dreamscape.

The theme of motherhood is treated differently by Corthran than by Johnson.

Avery is not trying to physically protect her children. She is more similar to Alice in *Hospicem* who for years has tried to protect herself. Where Alice has worked to protect herself from the pain of society's expectations, which wouldn't allow her to be a mother and the artist she wanted to be, Avery is psychologically protecting herself. She's aware that she may not be given the opportunity to parent her children as a result of her past and an unjust legal system. Psychologically and emotionally, however, she creates an environment where she can be different, where she can see her transformation and its effect on her children. This becomes her coping mechanism.

For black women playwrights the notion of protection is not solely thematic. Theater artists remain committed to developing meaningful theater. The same kind of expansion that occurred in the past where Johnson stretched DuBois' definition in order to legitimate the discussion of black women on the stage still happens today. In an interview, Anna Deveare Smith examines the black woman's difficulty in fostering meaningful theater in environments that are not welcoming:

It's back to this thing. Are there any *homes* or black women?  
I wonder how much of our work is evidence of our comfort, or our discomfort, of our having people around us in our professional lives who feel pulled to invest more than money and interest—real care? ... I feel that there's a way in which we are nomadic. If we are nomadic, why is it that we are walking and walking and walking and not finding a place to rest? Is it that the houses that we enter are warm instead of hot? It makes me really sad, to tell you the truth (Mahone 359).

Smith's comments describe the treatment of black women theater artists who seek to represent their experiences on the stage. The fact that there isn't a "hot" response is

indicative of a limited perspective that doesn't see black women's stories as important, as valuable additions to the body of existing theater.

In hindsight it is evident that Johnson and her contemporaries like Angelina Grimke, Mary Burrill, and Shirley Graham, were building homes. They were creating atmospheres where black women stories would be heard. They were laying the foundation that continues to be shaken as black women dramatists of today continue to look for more than lukewarm responses to their work. What is implied in Smith's commentary is that racism and sexism prevent hot responses to black women's work. But, when looking at what must be taken from it, it is apparent that there is an urgent call for action, similar to the one DuBois echoed decades ago. When at a threshold where black artists could continue to participate in white interpretations of blackness, i.e. minstrel and vaudeville shows, DuBois suggested a different route. He advocated that black artists walk in a new direction, one that would produce truthful representations of blackness. The urgency today stems from the possibility of homelessness, from the possibility that black women's stories will be forgotten. The idea of protection remains significant not just in theme, but in terms of the longevity of the African-American women's theater tradition. If there are no places for black women to stage or publish their stories, how will they be passed on?

Black women, aware of the danger and possibility of homelessness, continue to show their commitment to protecting this theater tradition with the publication of theater anthologies specifically designed for black women or women of color. These publications not only show the need for homes for black women's stories, but they also portray black women making a place. If other environments don't garner a "hot"

response, black women are putting themselves into the position of protector, where they create environments where their stories can be called and responded to, or as Pearl Cleage simply puts it, “hollered.”<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> The following is a list of anthologies edited by black women or women of color. Margaret Wilkerson’s 9 Plays by Black Women (1986); Kathy Perkins’ Black Female Playwrights: An Anthology of Plays before 1950; Elizabeth Brown-Guillory’s Wines in the Wilderness: Plays by African-American Women from the Harlem Renaissance to the Present (1990); Sydne Mahone’s Moon Marked & Touched by Sun: Plays by African-American Women; Perkins’ and Uno’s Contemporary Plays by Women of Color (1996); Perkins’ and Stephens’ Strange Fruit: Plays on Lynching by American Women (1998).

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