

“PLACING IDENTITY: JOURNEYS TO SELF THROUGH COMMUNAL  
AUTONOMY IN AFRICAN DIASPORIC WOMEN’S LITERATURE”

by

LAUREN RENEE CHAMBERS

(Under the Direction of Barbara McCaskill)

ABSTRACT

The construction of identity formation is informed by the myriad places women inhabit, experience, and transgress. Place provides a lens into specific categories of women’s experiences, primarily one’s relation to community. My concept of “communal autonomy” refers to how individuals develop a sense of self and interact within larger communities. My study traces how female characters in Postcolonial and western African diasporic works use place to negotiate conflicting gender expectations as they mature into womanhood in communities and nations that silence their existence. I begin with a discussion of place as community in the autobiography *Call Me Woman* (1985) by South African author Ellen Kuzwayo, followed by a chapter on Edwidge Danticat’s novel *Breath, Eyes, Memory* (1994) that explores specific home places in the novel as sources of knowledge Sophie uses to fashion her identity. I then turn to the novel *Paradise* (1997) by Toni Morrison, to explore the configuration of women as outsiders who function as a community mitigated by place. Finally, I examine a representative twenty-first century voice of African diasporic literature offered by Nigerian author Chimamanda

Ngozi Adichie. Her novel *Purple Hibiscus* (2003) presents communities as versions of extended family the protagonist Kambili uses to construct identity. Place calls into question specific institutions and thereby spaces women inhabit in seeking knowledge to define the self. Social institutions such as the home, family, and nation constitute communities through the gendered expectations and behaviors reinforced within these spaces. Therefore, women's ability to read these places informs how they conceptualize identity formation.

INDEX WORDS: Identity, Gender, Community, African Diaspora, Home, Trauma, Family, Race, Border, Communal Autonomy, Nation

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## CHAPTER 1

### INTRODUCTION

“How am I to lose, maintain, or gain a female identity when it is impossible for me to take up a position outside this identity from which I presumably reach in and feel for it?”

–Trinh T. Minh-ha<sup>1</sup>

During a 1987 lecture entitled “Not You/Like You: Postcolonial Women and the Interlocking Questions of Identity and Difference,” the noted Vietnamese feminist scholar and filmmaker Trinh T. Minh-ha expounded on the difficulties postcolonial women encounter when creating an identity. To address the fluctuating nature of identity formation in the lives of postcolonial women, she described identity as “. . .the whole pattern of sameness within a being, the style of a continuing me that permeates all the changes undergone, . . .” (415). In her address, she interrogates the role of difference Western theorists impose upon postcolonial women who attempt to express their identities. Minh-ha argues that identity formation is a process of transformation for postcolonial women who struggle with gender ideologies, such as domesticity and motherhood, that proscribe and limit the available options for constructing a self. In the epigraph above, Minh-ha issues a statement defending the construction of an individualistic identity, one in which women are deeply invested in claiming a space for themselves. Her ideas stress the need for women to claim agency in constructing and renegotiating their identities.

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<sup>1</sup> Trinh T. Minh-ha, “Not You/Like You: Postcolonial Women and the Interlocking Questions of Identity and Difference,” *Dangerous Liaisons: Gender, Nation, and Postcolonial Perspectives*. Eds. Anne McClintock, et al. (Minneapolis: U of Minnesota P, 1997. 415). Minh-ha’s ideas explore the recognition of multiple selves in postcolonial women’s lives. This notion of identity examines the role of difference as a means of acknowledging the other. Minh-ha’s most celebrated work, *Women, Native, Other: Writing Postcoloniality and Feminism* (1989), identifies the positionalities of postcolonial women writers whose work examines intersections of self and community.



My dissertation examines four literary works by African diasporic women writers that explore how communities function as sites of lived experience that enable female protagonists to construct and redefine their identities. I seek to answer the following questions: 1) How do protagonists of African diasporic women's literature construct identities within various manifestations of community? 2) How is knowledge available in such places for African diasporic women to construct/renege their identities? 3) Why is the process of identity formation an act of what I call "communal autonomy"<sup>2</sup> for characters in African diasporic women's literature? My interest in identity formation stems from the nuanced manner in which women writers construct communities as places through and within which their characters navigate to establish an identity. African diasporic literature contributes to discussions of identity formation by disrupting the notion of a singular racial existence, and by highlighting the role of gender in women's ability to construct a sense of self. I have chosen representative works of literature that speak to the nuances of identity formation black women encounter due to their social positioning as gendered and racialized subjects. Despite distinctive national, political, cultural, and social differences, female characters in African diasporic women's literature share a common lived experience of gender, which validates their position as representative voices of the African diaspora. However, the ways female characters experience gender and the implications for their lives and families allow each work to engage in a conversation about the contested terrain of women's identity formation.

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<sup>2</sup> Philosopher Marina Oshana's *Personal Autonomy in Society* (2006) investigates autonomy as an achievable goal of individual identity. She defines autonomy through the lens of power and authority: "Autonomous persons are beings in *actual* control of their own choices, actions, and goals. [ . . . ] the person is in possession of the *de facto* power to govern herself" (3). I utilize her articulation of autonomy to examine female protagonists in African diasporic women's literature through their ties to larger communities.

The texts under examination reveal a sampling of African diasporic literature which I argue represents the complexities of black women's encounters when constructing an identity. I am by no means suggesting that these works represent all African diasporic women's experiences, yet they do reveal common tensions of gender identity women encounter in locating and sustaining communities that encourage their growth. Ellen Kuzwayo's *Call Me Woman* (1985) presents the complexities of a privileged black South African woman's life journey as a representative example of how black South Africans were stifled and oppressed under apartheid. Edwidge Danticat's *Breath, Eyes, Memory* (1994) traces the conflicting processes of women's identity formation at home and in exile as a response to women's experiences of trauma. Toni Morrison's *Paradise* (1997) questions the limitations of identity amidst conflicting communities that pit an all-black town against a group of unsuspecting women who revel in their outsidership. Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie's *Purple Hibiscus* (2003) articulates a family story to examine the resiliency of women confined to domestic roles amidst unstable national politics that threaten both family and gender identity.

My studies as an undergraduate and graduate student at Radford University established the foundation for my current research interests and success as a literary scholar. As an undergraduate, I studied American and British modernism, including works such as Virginia Woolf's *Three Guineas* (1938), William Faulkner's *The Sound and The Fury* (1929), and James Joyce's *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man* (1916). Through these courses in modernism, I gained an appreciation for these works' discussions of gender, music, and art as they explored themes of family, class, time, race, and home. During my undergraduate tenure, I also acquired a greater appreciation for the complexities of the African American literary tradition, which cultivated an increasing interest in twentieth-century texts, voices, and experiences that I found

both startling and familiar. The range of African American literature I explored in my classes spanned canonical twentieth-century works such as James Weldon Johnson's *The Autobiography of an Ex-Colored Man* (1912), Ralph Ellison's *Invisible Man* (1952), Ishmael Reed's *Mumbo Jumbo* (1972), Gloria Naylor's *Mama Day* (1988), and Toni Morrison's *Song of Solomon* (1977). Such exposure to African American literature made me more aware of myths, stereotypes, and histories of racial identity, while also problematizing the determination of a people to create and sustain a vibrant culture plagued by struggle.

I expanded my knowledge with my introduction to Native American literature, which spans a rich oral tradition of storytelling found in works such as Leslie Marmon Silko's *Storyteller* (1981) and Louise Erdrich's *Love Medicine* (1994). In graduate school, we explored the construction of the "Native" in American literary captivity narratives such as Mary Rowlandson's *A Narrative of the Captivity and Restoration of Mrs. Mary Rowlandson* (1682), and stories of exploration and conquest, such as James Fenimore Cooper's *The Last of the Mohicans* (1826), and Catherine Maria Sedgwick's *Hope Leslie* (1827). These and other works by Native American writers provoked an inquiry into the invention of the "Indian" examined through fantasies, preconceptions, religious, and philosophical traditions of colonial North America. Through these courses, I honed my literary analysis and interpretation skills, which helped invest my energies as a budding literary scholar.

My introduction to World Literature began with a graduate course at Radford University on voices of protest and prophecy, in which we examined American, British, and Latin American literature as sites of memory. We read novels such as Toni Morrison's *Paradise* (1997) and Virginia Woolf's *Mrs. Dalloway* (1925) in addition to Latin American novels, including Isabel

Allende's *The House of the Spirits* (1982),<sup>3</sup> and testimonial literature such as Alicia Partnoy's *The Little School: Tales of Disappearance and Survival* (1986) and the autobiography *I, Rigoberta Menchu: An Indian Woman in Guatemala* (1983). Courses like this one inspired my curiosity to read more widely outside the confines of western literature as I began to question and consider the complexities of identity that manifest throughout the world. These foundational courses were augmented by my introduction to feminist theories. With little initial understanding of gender as a socially constructed category of experience, I found myself engrossed in feminist and critical theory as frameworks for examining literature.

Despite my introduction to critical theory, I never took a class in postcolonial literature until graduate school at The University of Georgia. The term "postcolonial" in the seminal work *The Empire Writes Back* (1989) refers to "all the culture affected by the imperial process from the moment of colonization to the present day" (2). Although the term "postcolonial" is general enough to encompass globalized realities, it is the process of writing "back to" the colonial power and defining one's subjectivity for oneself that sustains and enriches this literature. Dr. Emma Hunt's undergraduate course "Postcolonial Literary Theory" helped to further my own discovery of postcolonial theory by exploring critical, literary, and philosophical traditions of the "Other." By tracing Western, Middle Eastern, Asian, African, and Caribbean diasporic experiences, this course introduced new and contemporary approaches to the colonial experience. Her South African Literature course in Fall 2007 opened new avenues to me for investigating South African life, since we examined novels including Miriam Tlali's *Between Two Worlds* (2004), J. M. Coetzee's *Disgrace* (1999), nonfiction written about the Truth and

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<sup>3</sup> My Master's thesis, entitled "Escaping a World of War: Women's Resistance to Patriarchy and Fascism in Virginia Woolf's *Three Guineas* and Isabel Allende's *The House of The Spirits*," examines how women's positioning in the patriarchal home and their subsequent exclusion by men restricts their access to power. Using these two literary works, I examine how women's resistance to oppression is determined by their refusal to participate in domestic and political tyranny.

Reconciliation Commission in Antjie Krog's *Country of My Skull: Guilt, Sorrow, and the Limits of Forgiveness in the New South Africa* (2000), and Percy Mtwa's drama *Woza Albert* (1983).

These works helped to expand my understanding of South African racial politics while gaining insight into the South African literary tradition. In Spring 2011, I also audited Dr. Santesso's course, entitled "The South Asian Diaspora and Identity," in which we examined postcolonial theory through the lens of British and American South Asian diasporic novels. While auditing this course, I also gave a lecture and discussion on Aravind Adiga's *The White Tiger* (2008).

As a result of this knowledge and my interests, I aim to incorporate postcolonial literature in my women's studies courses and, whenever possible, to provide students with access to postcolonial women's experiences through works such as Chandra Mohanty's *Feminism Without Borders* (2003) and Gloria Anzaldúa's *Borderlands/La Frontera: The New Mestiza* (1999) so that I can aid students in examining the local conditions and gender experiences women confront outside the West. When teaching a survey sophomore literature course titled "Multicultural American Literature: Immigrant Literature," I sought to expose students to the brevity of immigrant literature through the lens of gender using Jamaica Kincaid's *Lucy* (1990), Bharati Mukherjee's *Jasmine* (1989), and Edwidge Danticat's *Breath, Eyes, Memory* (1994). These experiences undergird my current research interests and scholarship.

My first introduction to African diasporic literature occurred when I enrolled in an Afro-Hispanic Literature course taught by Dr. Lesley Feracho, an Associate Professor of Romance Languages at The University of Georgia. After reading Edwidge Danticat's *The Farming of Bones* (1998), which is about the historical 1937 Dominican/Haitian massacre, I began to wonder about the processes African diasporic women utilize in literature to define and negotiate identities. My interest in postcolonial literature was fueled by the contextual circumstances of

women's lives that emerged amidst political, cultural, racial, economic, and religious tensions within and between nations. I became fascinated by the experiences of sub-Saharan African women writers such as Tsitsi Dangarembga, whose 1989 novel *Nervous Conditions* emerged as an early critique of black African women's subjugated positioning in Rhodesia during the 1960s and 1970s. I soon found myself engrossed by postcolonial women writers such as Buchi Emecheta (Nigeria), Jamaica Kincaid (Antigua), Michelle Cliff (Jamaica), and Bessie Head (Botswana), who each posit different approaches to the formation of women's identities. Each writer traces the complexities of female subjectivity in disparate climates that silence women's voices and demand their allegiance to patriarchal fathers. The father figure in postcolonial literature manifests as a literal representation of patriarchy, but it also functions as a symbolic and metaphorical representation of the nation at large.

Although drastically different on the surface, these works reveal a common theme of how a communal process of identity formation enables African diasporic women to develop their subjectivity. While racism also proves a common theme in the lives of African diasporic women writers, differing colonial legacies manifest in their wholly different representations of womanhood. Using postcolonial and western African diasporic theories, I will examine how female characters negotiate the contradictions between gender expectations and autonomy as they mature into womanhood in nations and/or communities that silence their existence. I will discuss how and why female protagonists in this literature often find themselves compelled to adopt feminine expectations and perform submissive roles that deny their access to autonomy.

To complicate how gender, race, and community affect the process of identity formation in African diasporic women's literature, I am drawing on a variety of African feminist theories. American feminist theories are useful in the context of examining oppression in the United States

because they strive to explore the root causes of women's oppression due to social factors of race, class, and gender. Yet, they fail to speak to the multiplicity of women's experiences throughout the world. These theories prove problematic for women writers from outside the United States like Kuzwayo, Danticat, and Adichie because they embody specific national, cultural, economic, and gendered systems of oppression that do not entirely apply to African women. For example, the larger issues of sexism and racism widely explored in American feminist theory do not speak to or for African diasporic women like Ellen Kuzwayo whose movements were monitored and controlled by tyrannical governments.

Discussions of identity formation in black women's literature abound, yet unlike my work, few studies explore multiple geographical regions of the African diaspora simultaneously.<sup>4</sup> Instead, contemporary criticism of African diasporic literature has highlighted major geographical regions such as the Caribbean,<sup>5</sup> continental Africa, and the United States. For instance, the edited collection *Out of the Kumbula: Caribbean Women and Literature* (1990) considers multiple genres of Caribbean women writers by defining "Caribbean women's text[s] [as] a locus for the reinscription of the woman's story in history" (6). As Carole Boyce Davies and Elaine Savory Fido examine the narrative strategies of Caribbean women writers, they make the claim that Caribbean literature "signifies for us movement from confinement to visibility, articulation, process. As process, it allows for a multiplicity of moves, exteriorized, no longer contained and protected or dominated" (19). Their collection privileges the experiences of Caribbean women writers who articulate the processes of identity formation female characters

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<sup>4</sup> Because the African diaspora is represented by numerous cultural and national traditions, critics tend to focus on a single geographic region to avoid generalizing African diasporic women as a monolithic category.

<sup>5</sup> See Lucía M. Suárez's *The Tears of Hispaniola: Haitian and Dominican Diaspora Memory* (2006) and Regine O. Jackson's *Geographies of the Haitian Diaspora* (2011), which attest to the empowerment of Caribbean women writers whose narratives contribute to African diasporic women's identity formation.

negotiate to construct an identity. In addition, Emilia Ippolito's *Caribbean Women Writers: Identity and Gender* (2000) demonstrates the roles of cultural identity and subjectivity in the works of Jamaica Kincaid (Antigua), Erna Brodber (Jamaica), Marlene Nourbese Philip (Tobago), and Merle Hodge (Trinidad). She argues that "the only possibility of articulating cultural identity and subjectivity from an aesthetic point of view must involve critical values which are not simply dependent on established Western hierarchies" (Ippolito 10). Moving outside western narrative conventions, Ippolito explores strategies such as a "rejection of the linear, realistic narrative" (7) and "the multiplicity of narrative voices and perspectives" (8) that articulate the construction of women's subjectivity in Caribbean women's narratives.

Some texts of feminist and postcolonial theory offer more geographically focused explorations of African diasporic women's experience. For example, Carole Boyce Davies' *Black Women, Writing and Identity: Migrations of the Subject* (1994) explores the literary production of black women who reside in and outside the borders of the African continent, the Caribbean, the United States, and the UK to articulate the processes of subjectivity. Using themes of home, migration, sexuality, and mobility, she questions the limits of feminist and postcolonial theory as tools of interpretation for black women writers. She argues for a perspective that she calls "critical relationality," which

becomes a way in which other theoretical positions interact relationally in one's critical consciousness. Critical relationality moves beyond a singular, monochromatic approach to any work to a complexly-integrated and relational theoretic; it allows the situation of a text in its own context, but provides an ability to understand and relate it to a range of other dimensions of thought. (Davies 56)



To expand the usefulness of her theory of critical relationality, Davies insists that a singular theoretical approach for examining black women's writing is inadequate, because no single theory can encompass the multiple subjectivities of black women as migratory subjects. The migratory subjectivity black women experience requires an attention to place, since "[m]igratory subjects suggest that Black women's writing cannot be located and framed in terms of one specific place, but exist/s in myriad places and times . . ." (Davies 36). Davies identifies the contested terrain of home as a source of identity found in black women's writing. Home is a contested terrain because of the often tumultuous love-hate relationship between women and their family members. Despite this fact, it is idealized as a place of love, support, and strength for individual and communal growth. My dissertation draws from Davies' work to explore how the home becomes a contested place due to the familial expectations imposed on women that limit their potential for identity development.

In addition, *Gender in African Women's Writing: Identity, Sexuality, and Difference* (1997) by Juliana Makuchi Nfah-Abbenyi interrogates the role of identity as a category of analysis in the literature of African women writers. Nfah-Abbenyi's analysis delves into the politics of women's identity formation, represented by African women's literature as

issues of identity and difference [that] directly influence the construction of subjectivity in women's bid for agency and self-determination. I would posit that gender and feminist theory, especially vis-à-vis identity, sexuality, and difference, has not been formulated in ways that are wholly adequate and appropriate for African, "Third World" women's lives and literature. (17-18)

Her study further examines how female characters represented in African women's writing are not powerless subjects; rather, they are empowered by gendered practices that embody feminist

agency. Nfah-Abbenyi challenges feminist conceptions of identity articulated by the West because they fail to address the contested gender roles African women experience. My dissertation does just that. I utilize Black Feminist theory and Africana Womanist theories to expose the communal processes of identity formation African diasporic women writers articulate to empower female characters' autonomy.

In the United States, Black Feminist theory draws its strength from deconstructing the country's racial legacy of slavery and subsequent Jim Crow systems to examine historical and contemporary practices of discrimination that have limited and denied the full participation of black women. Patricia Hill Collins's *Black Feminist Theory* (2000) considers the racial, historical, and social standpoints of black women's lives in the United States. Collins identifies the four criteria of standpoint consciousness that black women can utilize as ". . . the importance of self-definition, the significance of self-valuation and respect, the necessity of self-reliance and independence, and the centrality of a changed self to personal empowerment . . ." (119). In her work *Fighting Words: Black Women and the Search for Justice* (1998), she defines the position of 'outsider-within' as "social locations or border spaces occupied by groups of unequal power. Individuals gain or lose identities as 'outsiders within' by their placement in these social locations" (5). The 'outsider-within' concept is useful for interrogating how black women access and navigate both literary and actual places I have drawn from in my chapter discussions on community. The 'outsider-within' concept is also very applicable to African diasporic women outside the United States who occupy subjugated positions in society due to their racial identity. Outsiders-within have limited access in society due to their marginalized subjectivity as second-class citizens. However, the 'outsider-within' status can also be empowering because it enables individuals to perform subversive acts under the guise of invisibility. Having access to both the

center and margins of society, those who occupy the ‘outsider-within’ status possess the ability to navigate both worlds simultaneously using their agency to challenge social institutions that impose boundaries restricting their access to society.

Clenora Hudson-Weems, a noted Africana Womanist theorist, posits a new direction for examining the formation of African diasporic women’s identity which I also find valuable. She uses categories such as “self-namer,” “self-definer,” “family-centered,” and “whole and authentic” to articulate the complexities of African diasporic women’s identity formation. These descriptive labels are meaningful because they identify specific qualities Africana women utilize to navigate the world. These categories are useful for examining the communities female protagonists navigate by “rendering a truly authentic analysis of Africana women within a cultural and literary context, thereby more accurately reflecting Black life itself” (Weems xx). Weems rejects the theoretical frameworks created by western feminists because they privilege gender in favor of race and class without simultaneously examining how these social identities intersect with and impact women’s lives. While gender does influence the lives of Africana women, Weems argues “the Africana woman, too, trapped in a patriarchal society, must consciously address the gender question, which she can only realistically do after dealing with race” (38). Weems privileges Africana womanism in favor of western feminism because it situates race as the primary category of inquiry within a local context instead of situating gender as an unbiased oppression all women experience equally. Therefore, Africana womanism presents the most realistic approach to examine the experiences of black women globally who “both in their private and public lives, engage in supporting their male counterparts as a number one priority to ensure the safety and security of their families and communities” (Weems 50).

Finally, my study incorporates the ideas and theories of feminist geographers<sup>6</sup> whose work describes the gendered arrangement of spaces and places in communities. The British geographer Doreen Massey's *Space, Place, and Gender* (1994) defines place as a conceptualization "formed out of the particular set of social relations that interact at a particular location" (168). Her emphasis on "social relations" demonstrates how communities inform women's positioning with and access to institutions in society. Similarly, the feminist geographer Linda McDowell argues that the spatial arrangement of society reveals power dynamics respective to each society. In identifying the function of spatial arrangement, she states, "Places are made through power relations which construct the rules which define boundaries. These boundaries are both social and spatial – they define who belongs to a place and who may be excluded, as well as the location or site of the experience" (4). My examination of communities in African diasporic women's literature seeks to highlight how women transform or change identities in different places that ultimately inform how they define themselves.

I was introduced to Tim Cresswell's work and began to consider notions of place during a summer fellowship at the Indiana University of Pennsylvania in July 2010, where I served in an appointment as a Frederick Douglass scholar. In my discussions with graduate students in a seminar on Ethnic American Literature that I co-taught, I began to consider how common places such as the home function as microcosms of nations and how such places are experienced differently by men and women. From this experience, I started to read more widely about the social construction of space and place, which has directly informed my dissertation's emphasis on community. Tim Cresswell's *In Place/Out of Place: Geography, Ideology, and Transgression* (1996) offers a framework for my mapping of African diasporic women's identity

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<sup>6</sup> See the collection *The Geography of Identity* edited by Patricia Yaeger (Ann Arbor: U of Michigan P, 1996. Print.) and *A Companion to Feminist Geography* (Malden, MA: Blackwell Publishing, 2005. Print).

formation through what he defines as the “geographic environment” or more specifically, the “politics of place” (11). Cresswell offers theoretically based and practically sound methods for examining ideological beliefs created, maintained, and reinforced through places, and his emphasis on transgression<sup>7</sup> will figure prominently in each chapter of my dissertation.

“Transgression” refers to acts female characters perform to disrupt gendered expectations of femininity in place. It becomes difficult for women to assert the autonomy necessary to construct an identity when communities demand rigid definitions of femininity which deny their desires. Normative gender roles defined as wife and mother restrict women’s access to identity formation because such roles relegate women to a single category of femininity, which denies the opportunity to fashion a self.

The structure of my dissertation follows a chronological timeline from 1985 to 2003, which signals both cultural and historical realities of black diasporic experience. This structure helps to demonstrate a representative sampling of African diasporic women at the end of the twentieth century and the beginning of a new twenty-first century when categories of racial and national identity intersect with themes of class, hybridity, and migration. In post-Civil Rights America, the 1980s brought a resurgence of African American women’s literature with the publication of seminal works such as Alice Walker’s *The Color Purple* (1982) and Toni Morrison’s *Beloved* (1987), which trace and examine representations of black womanhood from pivotal moments of American history, specifically the Jim Crow South, as in the former work, and slavery, in the latter. From the early 1970s through the late 1980s, black diasporic women’s voices rose to the national literary stage through the efforts of women’s literature, including Buchi Emecheta’s *Second Class Citizen* (1974) and Bessie Head’s *A Question of Power* (1974),

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<sup>7</sup> Cresswell states “Transgression, in distinction to resistance, does not, by definition, rest on the intentions of actors but on the *results*—on the “being noticed” of a particular action” (23).

and the nineties ushered in new voices for female literary critics, such as Myriam J. A. Chancy, who reinserted the voices of Haitian literature into the larger African diaspora. I chose to examine African diasporic literature because of my interest in the multifaceted way in which women construct their identities. Race and gender are the two identity constructs that connect the authors who frame my dissertation, yet the definitions and meanings ascribed to and by women regarding these identities are different for each nation. Therefore, my dissertation attempts to isolate and examine specific places of community that culminate into a representative analysis of African diasporic women's literature. My dissertation's organizational structure brings my study full circle through the emphasis on the African continent. Beginning with South Africa and ending with Nigeria, my study offers a comparative look into the politics of African diasporic women's identity formation by creating a dialogue with the Americas.

Each literary work examined in my dissertation traces women's identity formation as an engagement with communities, yet how these female characters identify, maintain, and grow as a result of communal autonomy differs. My discussion of communal autonomy in African diasporic women's literature offers a comparative discussion of women's attachment to and membership in communities as a source of their own self-discovery. It is through the culmination of these ways of knowing, of being in the world as African diasporic women, that identity formation becomes a shared experience. Given African diasporic women's shared history of the Trans-Atlantic Slave Trade, I begin my examination with the African continent, specifically South Africa. Ellen Kuzwayo's *Call Me Woman* (1985) positions the journey of one woman as the progress of an entire race. Her concern and interest in larger group politics, such as representation, gender discrimination, and resistance fuel her definition of self and that of black South Africans who demonstrate the power of communal autonomy as communal

investment. Next, I turn to Edwidge Danticat's *Breath, Eyes, Memory* (1994) to investigate the construction of community defined not by place, but by the women who occupy the home. The home functions as a central experience in the lives of African diasporic women, and Danticat argues for multiple home places that constitute sites of discovery and healing for women. Then, I examine Toni Morrison's *Paradise* (1997) to question how African American women navigate conflicting communities of women to develop a sense of self. Finally, my analysis of Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie's *Purple Hibiscus* (2003) returns to the familiar space of the home to examine the degree of nurturance and support African diasporic women receive from their extended families. This work privileges the black female voice as a source of its own making, not simply the voice of a people defined by the male perspective. What each text provides is a closer examination of the intersection of blackness and gender as it manifests and impacts women's lives in the diaspora. My study extends beyond African American literature to show how race and gender problematize the construct of race in identity formation not only in America, but throughout the African diaspora.

In Chapter One, titled "*Transgressing Borders: Identity Formation in Ellen Kuzwayo's Call Me Woman*," I examine South Africa's pre- and postcolonial societies through the lens of autobiography. Place informs black South African women's identity formation by exposing the boundaries women must negotiate to establish autonomy amidst apartheid (1948-1994). Ellen Kuzwayo's autobiography *Call Me Woman* presents an individual woman's activism defined by her participation within the larger black community in order to explore black South Africans' communal struggles against apartheid. Through her roles as witness and participant in apartheid society, Kuzwayo utilizes her community involvement to transgress apartheid policies in acts of communal resistance that inform her identity formation.

In Chapter Two, “*Unclaimed Baggage: Community, Trauma, and Identity Formation in Breath, Eyes, Memory*,” I investigate Edwidge Danticat’s *Breath, Eyes, Memory* (1994) to explore the role of place as a marker of women’s identity formation. In this chapter, I examine multiple locations of home to uncover its role in disseminating expectations of feminine behavior. A closer look into the representative homes of the characters Tante Atie, Martine, and Grandma Ifé provides additional insight into the ways in which Haitian women construct identity. Danticat’s use of sensory cues and descriptions inform places, making women viscerally aware of feminine expectations and behaviors. This chapter contests a single notion of community by investigating various manifestations of community as a viable source of empowerment in such examples as the sexual trauma support group Sophie joins. Sophie’s migrations between her native Haiti and the United States reveal methods for securing the communal autonomy necessary for creating identity.

Next, I turn to Toni Morrison’s *Paradise* (1997) in Chapter Three, ““A backward noplac ruled by men’: Place and Outsiders Within in Toni Morrison’s *Paradise*,” to examine the function of community for the Convent women (Consolata, Mavis, Grace, Pallas, and Seneca) who occupy marginal positions in relation to the superiority claimed by the all-black, male-dominated town of Ruby. The Nobel Prize winner Toni Morrison explores the intimate realities of life within the African American community while also commenting on the historical and cultural circumstances of a people who resist a white, racist society. I focus my discussion on the novel’s women both in Ruby and the Convent, women who symbolize both submissive and independent communal practices of identity formation. In *Paradise*, these characters represent larger systemic issues of domestic abuse, self-hatred, and racial prejudice, but also they demonstrate how African American women who deviate from normative definitions of black



womanhood (defined by motherhood and sexuality) manage to gain wholeness. As these women embrace new definitions of healing, they ultimately recognize and celebrate their own self-worth.

The final chapter, “‘A freedom to be, to do’: Transforming the Self through Community in *Purple Hibiscus*,” examines Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie’s 2003 novel to interrogate different versions of home as communities female characters use as sites for African diasporic women’s identity formation. A contemporary writer raised in Nigeria, Adichie achieved international acclaim with the publication of *Purple Hibiscus*. The novel’s protagonist Kambili, a naive, fifteen-year-old girl, occupies a gendered position in modern Nigeria as she struggles to locate a sense of self amidst conflicting traditional and westernized notions of femininity. Western interpretations of Catholicism and patriarchal authority predetermine appropriate expectations of femininity in the communities Kambili encounters. However, the traditional beliefs practiced by her grandfather and visits to Auntie Ifeoma contradict this patriarchal worldview, by positing alternative definitions of women’s subjectivity. Through Auntie Ifeoma, Kambili begins to question the limitations of gender and work to construct her own definition of autonomy, which empowers her.

In *Autonomy, Gender, Politics* (2003), feminist philosopher Marilyn Friedman defines the formulation of autonomy as central to women’s identity when she states: “For choices and actions to be autonomous, the choosing and acting self as the particular self she is must play a role in determining them. The self as a whole, as the particular self she is, must somehow (partly) determine what she chooses and does” (4). In her reference to “the particular self she is,” Friedman articulates the role women play in the construction of their identity formation. Autonomy thus represents the wishes, desires, and individual choices African diasporic women articulate to construct their identities. My dissertation will contribute to the study of African

diasporic literature through its examination of what I call “communal autonomy” in women’s identity formation. The construction of community differs dramatically across African diasporic literature due to political, social, racial, and class distinctions. Yet, it is important to uncover how women fashion a sense of autonomy in communities, which provide knowledge that enables them to construct positive identities. My use of postcolonial and feminist theories provides the necessary framework to identify and explore the multiple subjectivities that African diasporic women embrace to stake their claim in the world.

## CHAPTER 2

### TRANSGRESSING BORDERS: IDENTITY FORMATION IN ELLEN KUZWAYO'S *CALL ME WOMAN*

The act of recuperating individual and group identities by marginalized groups within a given society necessitates and requires giving voice to their experiences, cultures, and traditions. The margins represent both real and imagined spaces along the periphery of society where people communicate and interact. While they allow for a fluid spectrum of experiences, those who occupy these borders encounter obstacles such as race and gender limitations that restrict access to education and employment that stifles both individual and communal growth. The autobiography *Call Me Woman* serves as what I call a “recuperative narrative” that focuses on how women utilize differing manifestations of community to construct positive and affirming identities. I define a recuperative narrative as the autobiographical space Ellen Kuzwayo constructs in retelling her life history. Because it explores how black South African women are both witnesses to and participants in communities, Kuzwayo’s autobiography is a “recuperative narrative.” Kuzwayo posits her own experiences as one of many common experiences of black South African women’s lives. By exploring the duality of experiences black women navigate as witnesses to and participants in communities, my argument demonstrates how Kuzwayo’s autobiography creates a reliable recuperative space in which to voice both an individual journey toward identity formation and a communal struggle for freedom.

Albeit thin, the critical response<sup>8</sup> to *Call Me Woman* supports my understanding of her autobiography as a “recuperative narrative.” Judith Lütge Coullie’s “The Space Between Frames: A New Discursive Practice in Ellen Kuzwayo’s *Call Me Woman*” (1996) examines the subjective position of black South African women by analyzing discursive narrative strategies that challenge both western and black male writers’ traditions. These discursive practices enable the autobiographical space to take shape because, as Coullie writes, “Kuzwayo is not in transit, so to speak, *from* traditional black notions of the subject *to* western modes of construing being; rather she presents a specific instance of the transformation of *both* into something which is new and different” (148). This transformational narrative process enables Kuzwayo to use her voice in articulating both personal and communal experiences of black South African women. In addition, Carmela J. Garritano’s “A Feminist Reading of Ellen Kuzwayo’s *Call Me Woman*” (2000) explores how Kuzwayo’s text “de-emphasizes the personal, the individual, to draw attention to the communal” (55). Despite Garritano’s recognition of communal identity in *Call Me Woman*, she believes Kuzwayo stresses “the autonomous individual, not the community, through whom racial and gender equality will be achieved” (63). Finally, Julie Phelps Dietche’s “Voyaging Toward Freedom: New Voices From South Africa” explores three black South African women’s autobiographies, including Kuzwayo’s *Call Me Woman* (1985), to examine how the trauma of imprisonment compels each woman to share her story.<sup>9</sup> While these three critics examine Kuzwayo’s autobiographical style, content, and structure, my analysis will expound upon how Kuzwayo’s memoir as a whole is a “recuperative narrative” that enables her path from childhood to adulthood.

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<sup>8</sup> The paucity of criticism surrounding *Call Me Woman* is likely due to its autobiographical structure, whereas novels generally receive a greater degree of critical engagement given their popularity.

<sup>9</sup> Dietche includes Emma Mashinini’s *Strikes Have Followed Me All My Life* (1989) and Caesarina Kona Makhoere’s *No Child’s Play: In Prison Under Apartheid* (1988) to complement Kuzwayo’s autobiography in recovering black South African women’s generational responses to apartheid.

Kuzwayo positions herself as a reliable narrator in the autobiographical space in order to voice the daily realities of black South African women's lives under apartheid. Her autobiography juxtaposes the black community's resistance to apartheid against her own life experiences in order to examine the complexities of racial and gender identities in South Africa. As Judith Lütge Coullie, a scholar of South African life writing, notes, "Kuzwayo's autobiography marks a departure by exploring the meanings of the black woman (both a *generalized* black woman and a *particular* woman, Ellen Kuzwayo) as autobiographical subject and not in order to translate her experiences for a white reader" (132). Coullie confirms Kuzwayo's narrative authority as both an individual and a communal voice by articulating the multiple subjectivities she occupies within the autobiographical space. By filtering her own experiences through the eyes of the community, Kuzwayo critiques the system of apartheid. Her emphasis on Soweto as a place, as the home for the black community, highlights Kuzwayo's investment in this community, which further legitimizes her role as a reliable narrator for articulating black South African women's experiences.

The autobiography opens with a letter to Kuzwayo from Debra Mabale, a young black South African woman detained by the police for her participation in the Youth Department of the YWCA, where Kuzwayo herself worked from 1964-1976 (4). Kuzwayo draws a parallel between her own life experiences and those of other black women to demonstrate the severity of racism and sexism black women encountered under apartheid. She calls attention to black women's detention experiences to acknowledge the tenacity of black South African women by stating, "[I]n a few words, [here in Mabale's letter] are the strength, calibre and outstanding personality of many black women – women who have been detained under extremely brutal and frightening conditions but who have emerged like tested steel, their character and courage

somehow untouched by bitterness and deep-seated frustration” (Kuzwayo 5). Using this letter, Kuzwayo calls readers’ attention to the fortitude black women maintained while living under apartheid. Drawing attention to their “courage somehow untouched by bitterness,” she recalls the tumultuous experiences black women underwent as “minors” in society (240). Kuzwayo’s own detention at the Johannesburg Fort for five months at the age of 63<sup>10</sup> attests that “it is through suffering, through adversity, through being tested that women have found their strength” (Dietche 62). For Kuzwayo, the decision to recuperate within the autobiographical space the experiences of black women living under apartheid enables her to present to her readers the specific elements of strong black women’s identities, and, particularly for women already marginalized by virtue of their race, the real possibilities for constructing such identities in spite of the terrors of repressive regimes.

Kuzwayo’s use of the epistolary form is an innovative way to stress the importance of black women’s voices and actions in South Africa. Using the epistolary mode, Kuzwayo manages to draw readers into the text through the use of personal correspondence to demonstrate the bonds women share. Since black South African women occupy positions as secondary subjects in *Call Me Woman*, Kuzwayo highlights the commonalities of black women’s experiences under apartheid to make known the daily experiences these women were forced to confront in their efforts of survival. Similar techniques are used in the African American literary canon by writers such as Alice Walker, whose epistolary novel *The Color Purple* effectively utilizes letters to represent and portray the loving bond between the novel’s protagonist Celie and her sister Nettie. The power of the epistolary form is its ability to alter conventional narrative structures by adding realism, which allows narrative events to unfold as they would in real life.

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<sup>10</sup> Ellen Kuzwayo was arrested along with nine other members of the Committee of Ten, who were “ten persons [chosen by residents of Soweto] to study the role of members of the local councils who were cooperating with the white regime” (Dietche 63). Kuzwayo served as the only female member of the committee (Kuzwayo 200).

The privacy of letters lends a degree of intimacy to Kuzwayo's autobiography as she discloses ties and reveals similarities she shares with black women in South Africa. Although Kuzwayo only uses the epistolary form once in her autobiography, she utilizes this narrative style effectively to establish a common ground between her experiences and those of black women throughout the nation.

Black South African women in Kuzwayo's autobiography come to self-knowledge through families and communities who assist them in becoming self-aware and feeling empowered to direct and/or alter their lives for the better. Kuzwayo recalls her own nascent self-awareness when she writes, "I became aware of myself at the age of six or seven years in the early 1920s" (Kuzwayo 55).<sup>11</sup> This consciousness of her individuality and subjectivity in relation to community becomes apparent as she narrates her family history in the first autobiographical section entitled "My Road to Soweto." Kuzwayo was the child of a loving and prosperous family who owned a farm "close to 100 years" that "had been earned and maintained with hard work and toil by our elders for the benefit and welfare of their children and their families" (56). Ellen Kuzwayo is born Ellen Kate to Phillip Serasengwe and Emma Mutsi Merafe in 1914. The two divorce two years later. As "one of four grandchildren," Ellen and her step-sister Maria grow up in a rich, loving family with a host of extended family including her grandparents "Jeremiah Makoloi and Madgeline Segogoane Makgothi" (55). In addition, her mother's sisters Blanche and Elizabeth initially live on the family farm as well. From childhood

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<sup>11</sup> See James Olney's chapter "'I Was Born': Slave Narratives, Their Status as Autobiography and as Literature," which identifies and traces the specific elements of slave narratives. Olney does not note a specific age at which early black American autobiographers become aware of their race and their enslaved status. In comparison to Kuzwayo's autobiography *Call Me Woman*, Olney identifies a specific feature of slave narratives that indicates birth using the phrase "'I was born . . .,' then specifying a place but not a date of birth" (153). It is at this moment that the autobiographer is identified by a "lettered utterance," which signals an "assertion of identity" (157). This feature is especially important given the fact that, like Kuzwayo, early black autobiographers usually describe becoming aware of their race and gender at a young age.

trips with her grandmother to nearby Thaba’Nchu in “the Cape carriage, drawn by four beautiful stallions” (63), to her involvement in community work-camps “for major duties, such as ploughing, reaping and threshing,” Kuzwayo was reared with a concern for others, for community (68). Such experiences of communal engagement undoubtedly spurred Kuzwayo’s future activism.

Given Kuzwayo’s passion for teaching, it comes as no surprise that her desire to educate others expands to include political organizing around issues of gender and race. Instead of describing her involvement in one aspect of her life, Kuzwayo engages a wide assortment of community service including “the Committee of Ten, as one of the Committee members for six years from 1976 to 1982; Zamani Soweto Sisters council, Consultant since 1978; Maggie Magaba Trust, Chairwoman since its inception in 1979; A re Godisend Chelete Basadi (Black Women’s Endeavour to Understand Investment); . . .” (Kuzwayo 222). These and other forms of activism reveal Kuzwayo’s commitment to the larger community as her efforts to engage others span age, gender, and racial categories of South African identity. For Kuzwayo, identity is not a single feat of individual accomplishments, but more importantly, the efforts one engages to assist and become part of the larger community.

Kuzwayo exemplifies aspects of community solidarity fostered by the rural lifestyle of her childhood when she provides descriptions of work-camps organized according to gendered roles. The voluntary work-camps were designed to assist and supply local farmers with communal labor (Kuzwayo 68). Kuzwayo situates the work-camps as the ultimate “community support-system” (70). Men and women joined together as the father “made sure that there would be manpower and sufficient equipment to carry out the job to be done. The mother, on the other hand, was responsible for providing sufficient meals for the day” (70). Although traditional



gender roles remained intact, the camps also unified men, women, and children into one community. For example, everyone including “men, women and children” participated in the main meal (69). Described as a moment of “relaxation and entertainment,” the meal provided a means for the work-camp participants to fellowship with one another after a long day’s work in a camp that included “hard work and a celebration” (69). In addition, community members joined together in “some form of entertainment – by singing beautiful, descriptive, traditional songs punctuated by the piercing ululating of the women” (69). Describing the entertainment and organization of work-camps allows Kuzwayo to draw readers’ attention to the communal dimensions of South African country life where neighbors worked together to ensure each other’s survival. Such memories from her childhood demonstrate how her early awareness of community informed her adult life. Kuzwayo’s early exposure to work-camps, embodied by the “joy, keenness and willingness” she and others children experienced, represents the foundation of communal responsibility she later cultivates in her adult life.

On her grandfather’s farm, where children had responsibilities “to ring the bell for the church service and to make sure that the chairs, benches and tables were well dusted and placed in their proper positions before the service,” Kuzwayo learned early the value of cooperation (59). Such memories reveal early lessons of responsibility Kuzwayo learned as a member of a specific type of community rooted in kinship ties. In addition, abundant opportunities for exploration and adventure were available as she and other children in the family “roamed . . . beautiful hills over-looking the homestead” and “occasionally went horseriding, to fetch the post from the local store” (Kuzwayo 64). As Kuzwayo writes, “we children played, ate, and went to school together, and often even shared our clothes and food. We teased each other constantly. Sometimes even to the point of telling tales to our elders, or fighting it out amongst ourselves”

(64). Kuzwayo's memories of joy, laughter, and adventure shaped her later awareness of and concern for others.

The autobiography reveals a noticeable change in Kuzwayo's life when she moves to the city of Thaba'Nchu, a "30 mile journey" (63) from her grandfather's farm, to attend higher primary school where she lives with "mother's youngest sister, Aunt Blanche" (Kuzwayo 76). For primary education, Kuzwayo had attended a rural farm school "about three minutes' walk from the homestead" (57). Demonstrating the close-knit nature of her rural community, she and other students had collaboratively maintained the school, which also held "church services on Sundays" (59). When she ventures outside the protective, caring borders of the family farm to travel to the city in order to attend higher primary school, Kuzwayo's life takes a turn as she becomes aware of herself as an individual. This change in location, in place, signals "a new era" for a young Kuzwayo. While living on the family farm, Kuzwayo can only conceptualize herself as part of a family. However, her move to the city changes her understanding of self because it is the first time she perceives herself apart from her family. In the city, Kuzwayo learns to "assert" herself among her peers. In fact, she even forms a "girls' singing group" who she "trained" as proof of her newfound confidence gained in Thaba'Nchu (76). Her newfound appreciation for town life becomes most apparent when she returns to her family farm, where she remarks, "Back there I convinced myself I was a different girl, better than the others I had grown up with" (77). These early attempts to erect a border between herself and other children can undoubtedly be attributed to her advancing education. The arrogance Kuzwayo exhibits towards her family is surprising given her happy childhood. She describes this period as one where she "became too big for my boots" (77). Place is significant here because Kuzwayo's new life in

the city requires that she reassess her priorities and the community she left behind on the family farm.

An education under apartheid such as Kuzwayo's became a metaphorical border for black South Africans whose training solidified a life of servitude and menial jobs. Protestant missionaries<sup>12</sup> were the sole administrators of black education until the Nationalist Party came to power in 1948, and missionary education equipped blacks with only basic, rudimentary skills, including religion and hygiene as topics for instruction. Such education focused its primary efforts on the salvation of the black South African masses, and, as Walton R. Johnson writes in his essay entitled "Education: Keystone of Apartheid," education became a means of social control to manipulate and further undermine the position of black South Africans. Although missionary education remained a permanent fixture until the mid-twentieth century, Johnson argues that South Africans continued to be stifled by an educational system that deliberately attempted to reinforce their subordination. The conditions of black South African schools indicate their inferior quality:

. . . African education, unlike white education, is of extraordinarily poor quality. Schools are overcrowded, usually have inadequately trained teachers, and experience chronic shortages of books and equipment. The few pupils who progress through the system, therefore, receive inadequate preparation. They do not have the preparation to be able to break out of their subordinate economic and social position. (Johnson 221)

The connection between education and social mobility is deeply intertwined. When black South Africans were denied access to proper educational facilities and instruction, it only stands to

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<sup>12</sup> See Richard Elphick's *The Equality of Believers: Protestant Missionaries and the Racial Politics of South Africa* for a historical discussion of missionaries in South Africa (Charlottesville: U of Virginia P, 2012).

reason that their training would be insufficient for any viable employment opportunities, which further (and often intentionally) solidified their marginal status in South Africa.<sup>13</sup>

Inadequate access to educational training left black South African women with few options to procure employment and, ultimately, a living, and often threatened to diminish their sense of self-worth. In her article entitled “South African Women Under Apartheid: Employment Rights with Particular Focus on Domestic Service and Forms of Resistance to Promote Change,” Judy Nolde examines how the link between education and employment stifled the potential of black South African women:

Employment can be a source of empowerment in all societies, not only is it a source of empowerment for the more direct purpose of obtaining income, but it is also a source of empowerment for self-awareness and self-identity. When women are not given the opportunity to fulfill education goals and seek jobs to use applicable skills and talents, they are denied a very significant part of themselves as well as what they have to offer society. (217)

Nolde’s emphasis on employment is especially important because it identifies aspects of identity women cultivate when employed. Self-aware women attract opportunities for empowerment, and other kinds of growth, such as independence. Access to employment allows women to perceive themselves occupying positions beyond binary roles as mothers and wives. Such restrictions on employment undoubtedly impacted black South African women’s perceptions of

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<sup>13</sup> Leon Litwack’s *Trouble in Mind: Black Southerners in the Age of Jim Crow* offers a thorough investigation of black life under Jim Crow. The similarities between white and Afrikaner fears of black education identify the need for black subordination: “To educate the Negro was to inflict on him cruel and unusual punishment, and to inflict on society a potential monster. Inflated with ideas of his own importance and capability, the educated Negro as bound to become discontented, resentful, and dangerous.” (New York: Vintage Books, 1998. 99. Print.). Also see Heather Andrea Williams *Self-Taught: African American Education in Slavery and Freedom*. Chapel Hill: U of North Carolina P, 2005. Print.

identity, yet they managed to create alternative methods for their survival and that of their families.<sup>14</sup>

In hopes of securing future employment as a teacher, Kuzwayo's educational experiences provide new opportunities for constructing community among her peers. Kuzwayo's early life experiences reveal an orientation to community situated in the family and physical localities as she engages in new forms of community-building throughout her education experiences. Her first introduction to higher education occurs when she attends Adams College at the age of eighteen to pursue teacher training. Kuzwayo acknowledges the college as "part of the community which surrounded it" (Kuzwayo 85). Such engagement appeals to Kuzwayo because "above all, Adams College was a community" (86). The sense of comradery Kuzwayo experiences as a student at Adams College fuels her passion for learning. She finds inspiration in her female teachers, who "made a lasting impression on me" (87) and serve as positive models of womanhood. She identifies specific female role models like Sis Frieda who "provided a model of married life and motherhood for all of us" (87). While her experiences at Adams College introduce Kuzwayo to adulthood, the community she creates among her peers and teachers sets the stage for her future activism because her educational experiences teach Kuzwayo to expand her understanding of community to encompass people outside her family.

Later, at Lovedale College, Kuzwayo fully embraces community by forming close relationships with her peers to excel in her academics. The opportunities available for building community abound, and Kuzwayo is "immediately taken into a group of three girls who were ranked as the cream of the class" (Kuzwayo 93). Kuzwayo's acceptance by her peers provides the motivation she needs to excel at her studies. The group adheres to specific standards "to be

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<sup>14</sup> For additional information about domestic workers, see Jacklyn Cook's *Maids & Madams: Domestic Workers Under Apartheid*. London: The Women's P, 1989. Print.

on time for the study period the group set itself and to sit right through the time set down for that period; to do one's best during tests or examinations; to make sure that we fell within the first four positions in class" (94). These standards ensure that Kuzwayo and her female classmates will bond, but more importantly, this example demonstrates the power women cultivate working together to build community. For Kuzwayo, this group of women serves as a community because they encourage and support one another to achieve academic success.

Similar experiences of community arise for Kuzwayo at the age of thirty-nine when she enrolls at the Jan Hofmeyr School of Social Work. Several years after marrying Godfrey Kuzwayo, who "supported me fully and even helped me to meet people who were influential" (158), Kuzwayo once again pursues her passion for learning which she describes as "real enjoyment" (159). The support Kuzwayo derives from her husband is coupled with the close bonds she forms with other female students. This experience she describes as "a very close and warm relationship. We gave one another moral support" (159). Kuzwayo's burgeoning relationship among her peers and most noticeably, her friendship with Winnie Nomzamo Madikizela (who later became Mrs. Winnie Mandela) attest to the bonds women created in spaces of higher education. For Kuzwayo, education plays an instrumental role in her development as a young woman and more importantly, her desire to create community as a method of survival. These scenes reflect moments of encouragement, comradery, and community Kuzwayo creates both with her peers and her future encounters with the Soweto community. In this instance, communal autonomy manifests through individual efforts to build a support system, a group of allies Kuzwayo leans on to motivate her academic success.

Gender compounds the issue of educational access and working class status because it cements a border between racial group members. While Bantu education officially labeled black

Africans as second-class citizens of South African society, black women suffered even worse due to the inferior gender status they occupied. Gender becomes a border within racial groups by fracturing notions of solidarity as “women are viewed as the reproducers and consumers in a society where their roles’ focus is on procreation and maintaining the household. As a race, black women are seen as inferior beings. As a class, black women suffer from lower levels of education and lack of employment opportunities” (Nolde 211-212). Due to the subordinate position black women endure as a class, their access to educational opportunities is not considered a priority given their roles as domestic nurturers. However, the roles black African women occupy as mothers are a testament to their resistance since “many Western women may view multiple childbirth as both oppressive and restrictive (to their work, careers, economic well-being, et cetera), [yet] most African women find empowerment in their children and families. They use their status as mothers to challenge some of the demands their cultures place on them” (Nfah-Abbenyi 24). The status attributed to African mothers identifies the role motherhood plays in the cultivation of identity. For South African women, education is only one hurdle black women confront in creating an identity. For many women, the emphasis on family and the home assumes a major role in the creation of identity because it is in this place that women are first introduced to community.

Contrasting Kuzwayo’s own privileged educational experiences, the children in the Soweto community grew up under the Bantu education system in “overcrowded classrooms” rife with “broken window panes, unhinged doors and cracked walls” (Kuzwayo 10). These contrasting images indicate two wholly different learning environments. We as readers are forced to make the connection between education and blacks’ exclusion in the nation, which appears in vivid detail in the autobiography. Although Kuzwayo’s life mirrors the larger black

community, education becomes a decisive element that underscores the black community's aspirations for racial uplift in the country. In recalling the implementation of Bantu Education, Kuzwayo attacks the defective system that perpetuates black subordination. She states:

The detested Bantu education (and its successors) introduced by the Nationalist government in 1953, in contrast, provides no education at all; it seeks only to suppress talent, to lower morale, and to produce obedient servants to carry out instructions without question, even when urgently needed. . . . The truth is, it is reinforcing and maintaining the *status quo* servant:master relationship between blacks and whites in South Africa.

(Kuzwayo 94)

What Kuzwayo opposes is the dichotomous relationship evidenced by the “servant:master relationship,” which imposes a subordinate status upon the black population. Without sufficient access to education, many women were left with few options but to pursue low-skill, low-wage domestic work. Education reinforces the double bind black women experienced as outsiders under apartheid.

Despite her educational opportunities and communal involvement, Kuzwayo continually wrestles with self-acceptance. For example, when her Aunt Blanche marries her step-father, Abel Tsimatsima, Kuzwayo is “driven out” of her home (Kuzwayo 109). Aunt Blanche disapproves of Kuzwayo's presence on the family farm because she plans to build her own family. Instead, she instructs Kuzwayo to “go now or as soon as possible. I don't want to see the sight of you any more here” (105). Surprised by the “hostile” actions of her aunt, Kuzwayo shares her disappointment with her step-father, who, as she writes, “seemed hurt, embarrassed, ashamed and utterly helpless about my plight” (108). Unable to reconcile with her aunt, she embarks on a journey to locate her natural father, Phillip Serasengwe, for she has nowhere else to



turn. Expressing sentiments of “loss” and “hurt” Kuzwayo garners the strength to contact her natural father in seeking a new home (105). Turned away from the only home she knows, Kuzwayo sets out to reunite with her paternal family.

Desperate to find a place to belong, Kuzwayo uproots herself to join her paternal family and to embrace a new community. Even though Kuzwayo locates her natural father, she still experiences a sense of loss and disappointment due to her rejection “by the people and surroundings I had once cherished as part of my very being” (Kuzwayo 107). Unable to fully come to terms with her abandonment by her family, Kuzwayo nevertheless embarks on a new chapter in her life. Despite “an awkward joy and happiness” (111) at their initial reunion, both Kuzwayo and her father appear apprehensive to begin a new relationship. At first she is uncomfortable in her new home. Kuzwayo acknowledges, “I had to carry myself and stop seeking support from other people” (113). The desire for autonomy and independence is revealed in this statement where Kuzwayo acknowledges the power she possesses as a woman. As a young, twenty-four-year-old educated woman, Kuzwayo’s awakening comes when she least expects it. The tumultuous separation from her maternal family left her questioning her own life goals and desires. Yet her own sense of empowerment is strengthened as she witnesses her father’s community involvement in Pimville, Johannesburg. Kuzwayo marvels at her father’s civic engagement when she “saw him campaign for local Advisory Board” (112), which signaled his concern for “the security and well-being of black people in Pimville (113). Her father’s role as a community leader is clearly a source of pride, although he “had never tried to contact me when I was in Thaba’Nchu, not even after my mother’s death” (111). By establishing a relationship with her natural father, Kuzwayo is encouraged to play a greater role in the black South African community. She attributes her “concern for people” to the values instilled by “the

heritage from my parents” (114). This self-awareness is inspired by her father’s participation in the Pimville community, which she emulates and draws upon to fuel her own future community involvement. In this moment, her desire for community shifts from the family to the larger black community as a whole.

Kuzwayo’s need to belong in a community where she can nurture herself and grow as a woman is also supported by her desire for a home, a place of belonging. Kuzwayo’s sense of outsidership has been exacerbated by the absence of a spouse, since she states that “the answer to my feelings of homelessness was to find myself a life partner” (122). The sense of wholeness Kuzwayo seeks is tied to her desire for marriage and a life partner who she believes will help her develop a strong identity by providing a sense of belonging to a family and a community. Her first marriage at the age of twenty-seven to Ernest Moloto offers such a chance for happiness. Kuzwayo describes Ernest Moloto as “elegant, well spoken and [a] seemingly very well groomed gentleman,” qualities which suggest he is respectable. She addresses the reader directly to emphasize his privileged life “reading for a Bachelor of Arts degree,” and later as the “headmaster of the largest Higher Primary School in Pilanesburg District” (123). Despite her husband’s prominent social status, Kuzwayo initially finds her marriage blissful. However, several years pass and she can no longer continue because “the façade of putting on appearances had lost its meaning” (125). Even though she believes “I would never come across a better man than him in the world,” Kuzwayo soon realizes this ideal marriage “did not mean the pinnacle of life, but its stark beginning” (123). While the promise of companionship can prompt women to pursue marriage, Kuzwayo soon learns marriage can complicate one’s self-worth by limiting the full formation of one’s own potential.

Despite Kuzwayo's "image of a married life," she finds herself engrossed in rearing her young sons who "protected me" (Kuzwayo 124). Despite Kuzwayo's love for her sons, the sense of having "arrived" (123) is placed into perspective by the violence and abuse she endures at the hands of her husband. She describes her marriage with elliptical yet forbidding phrases such as the "torture I was exposed to" (124) and the "dreadful events" (132) that never directly state what abuses or violence she has suffered at the hands of her husband. Readers are left to navigate the silences, which Kuzwayo attributes both to "physical and mental sufferings" (124). In the absence of crucial details, Kuzwayo "simply requires that readers offer her their trust as an act of faith" (Coullie 143). For example, "eight to ten weeks" (124) into her pregnancy, Kuzwayo experiences a miscarriage that leaves her "bedridden and dazed by severe pains" (125). She suggests, but does not state directly, that her miscarriage was the result of physical and psychological abuse by her husband. Kuzwayo's silence about marital violence could easily be attributed to shame, but more importantly, it becomes a method of self-protection. In naming the violence, Kuzwayo assumes control of the memory,<sup>15</sup> which serves as fuel for her to withstand the violence.

Kuzwayo's marriage becomes so violent that she is forced to choose between her family and her sanity:

The violence, arrogance, meanness and downright selfishness which prevailed in our home eclipsed all the positives of his intelligence, his well-built stature and handsome appearance, his financial acumen – even if this was at the expense of his family. The

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<sup>15</sup> See Darlene Clark Hine's essay "Rape and the Inner Lives of Black Women: Thoughts on the Culture of Dissemblance" for an exploration of dissemblance utilized by African American women. Hine defines dissemblance as "behavior and attitudes of black women that evaded the appearance of openness and disclosure but actually shielded the truth of their inner lives and selves from their oppressors" (*Hindsight: Black Women and the Re-Construction of American History*. Brooklyn, NY: Carlson Publishing, 1994. 37. Print.).

atmosphere in that house left me no alternative but to leave, and in that way to save myself for myself as well as for my two sons. (127)

Kuzwayo describes an atmosphere in which her identity as a smart, mature, and capable adult is constantly challenged and stifled. Given the “daily harsh and hurting experiences” of Kuzwayo’s life, she struggles to make sense of her life while “being humiliated and degraded” (124).

Fearing for her life, Kuzwayo is forced to make an impossible decision. Unable to withstand the violence, Kuzwayo weighs the options of staying with the family to protect her children versus leaving her family to save herself.

Faced with an insurmountable obstacle, Kuzwayo reflects on the home she has come to despise. Unable to withstand domestic violence in the home, Kuzwayo decides to leave. She reflects, “[M]y life might terminate without warning, and my boys would be motherless at an early age” (Kuzwayo 130-131). The fear elicited by the violence of her husband causes Kuzwayo to doubt her ability to thrive within her family. Despite the agonizing prospect of losing her two sons, about which she ponders, “I would have to pretend that my children did not matter to me,” (131), Kuzwayo chooses to vanish “like a vapour” (132) in the hopes of reuniting with her children in the future. The decision to leave her children behind with an abusive father plagues Kuzwayo with “challenging moments of guilt,” but she manages to make peace with her decision to leave by telling herself that she eventually will be able to create a better future with her sons (132).

Returning “brow-beaten” (134) to her father’s house in Pimville, Kuzwayo begins the arduous process of reconciliation. Kuzwayo attempts to make good on her plan to “settle down and start life afresh” (Kuzwayo 132). In a moment of self-assurance, she acknowledges: “For as long as I remember, I have hated being a burden to anybody, or letting myself be treated as

worthless by anybody” (134). This statement speaks to Kuzwayo’s desire for independence, a step towards identity formation. Her consciousness of her desire for agency, for autonomy, makes Kuzwayo’s journey towards an empowering identity a possibility. After settling with her natural father and step-mother, Kuzwayo resolves to “find a job” (135), and later becomes a school teacher in the neighboring town of Orlando East. The desire to contribute to society, to create a life of her own choosing, mitigates the pain and loss experienced by the separation from her children.

As Kuzwayo works to rebuild her life, she receives a summons to address her husband’s claim of desertion as cause for their divorce (Kuzwayo 140). With the help of her father, Kuzwayo secures legal representation and proceeds to meet with her husband and his lawyer to establish the terms of their divorce. Initially granting control of the proceedings to her lawyer, Kuzwayo finds her legal representative inadequate “in his physical appearance and disposition, as well as his attire” and decides instead to “take charge of this boat, whether you sink or swim” (140). Resolved to represent herself, Kuzwayo soon finds herself addressing her husband’s lawyer and “refused to allow him to intimidate me in any way” (141). Unwilling to assume a silent position at such an important event, Kuzwayo asserts herself by moving beyond the passive presence expected to directly challenge her husband’s lawyer.

Kuzwayo performs a transgressive act by refusing to allow her lawyer to speak on her behalf and instead, she vows to plead her own case. Instead of assuming a passive, silent presence, Kuzwayo asserts her voice to ensure she maintains contact with her sons. She reflects, “The only demand I made was that, when my husband had got the divorce he wanted, I must have free access to see my sons at any time convenient to me, and that the court should protect me from any abuse by my husband when I went to see my sons” (Kuzwayo 141). All too often,

when abused women such as Kuzwayo assert their voices to acknowledge the harm caused to them by others, they are silenced or not taken seriously. As the African Diaspora Studies scholar and literary critic Carole Boyce Davies has commented, speech, in the context of such acts of silencing, can act as a tool of transgressive agency for black women:

Speech and speaking out and coming to voice are all forms of the search for modes of articulation by black women, locating places of authority, identifying the issues that are critical to our survival as a people and, above all, expressing the inner feelings, needs, and desires of black women in society. One may argue then that black women's writing occupies the position of transgressive speech because it transgresses the boundaries and locations for black women within the context of societal authorities and norms. (8)

As Davies notes, speech becomes an effective mode of transgression because it allows women to cross gender role boundaries of docility and submission imposed by society. In doing so, women become more comfortable asserting their grievances in an effort to confront and remedy problems they experience.

In addition to this scene between Kuzwayo and her husband's lawyer, such transgressive speech is enacted throughout the entire recuperative narrative space of *Call Me Woman*. Kuzwayo articulates the usefulness of transgressive speech by sharing the autobiographical space with the black community, in general, and black women specifically. Historically, black South African resisted attempts to stifle their mobility. Pass laws were one of many legislative practices created to reinforce the black community's subjugation.<sup>16</sup> Kuzwayo laments the efforts of these women who "were scheduled to carry passes like men" but collectively resisted

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<sup>16</sup> Passes refer to individualized booklets that identify "who the bearers were, showed who they worked for and where, and established whether or not they had official permission to be living and working or travelling in the area" (Walker 6).

“a delay of about 40 years before women were forced to carry such passes” (241).<sup>17</sup> Black women’s vigilance in protesting pass laws for women demonstrates their role as political agents of change. Pass laws became one of many daily borders black women were forced to circumvent in order to provide for and support their families. Instead of simply chronicling the women she encounters throughout her life, Kuzwayo uses her voice to explore the harsh realities black South African women experienced as a group. In recalling her life experiences, Kuzwayo strives to voice the experiences of all black women when “every duty and office in a family and community became their responsibility. It was a responsibility they carried with great steadfastness and courage. These women, their daughters, and their daughters’ daughters have defied the cultural myth that black women are inferior to men and to women of other racial groups” (Kuzwayo 241-242). By demonstrating the fortitude black women wield in caring for their communities, Kuzwayo uses her voice to champion the efforts of black women as a group in favor of positioning herself as the norm. The power to assert one’s voice provides a source of power for women to lay claim to their identities and their positioning in the world.

Kuzwayo also marvels at the transgressive acts women negotiated to care for their families. She examines the lives of black women who are at once denigrated for their race and deemed inferior due to their gender, yet her descriptions of black women’s self-perceptions are anything but denigrating. For example, when black South African men left their families to pursue mining work in cities, black women assumed full responsibility for the family’s survival. These women soon found themselves drawn to cities “in search of their husbands, but never found them; some came as a result of the deaths of their husbands in the mines, or because they

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<sup>17</sup> The 1913-1914 pass campaigns reference “one of the earliest expressions of discontent by black women in modern South Africa” (Walker 26-27). In addition, Julia Wells’ *We Have Done With Pleading: The Women’s 1913 Anti-Pass Campaign* (1991) chronicles the history of black South African women’s 1913-1914 opposition to passes as a method of influx control and the freedom of mobility. Such attempts to police black women’s lives were met with open defiance.

had become invalids from a mine disease” (Kuzwayo 31). Many women secured employment as washerwomen or other specialized domestic roles such as cooks, which Kuzwayo describes as being “born from the desperate need of these black women” (22).

Black South African women also turned to beer-brewing as a form of economic empowerment because it allowed the flexibility to run a business and the family. Even when prohibition made the purchase of liquor by black South Africans “illegal” (Kuzwayo 27), women from rural areas used their skills as beer-brewers to sustain their families, and their work garnered respect as “accepted family practices in the rural setting” (24). Whites viewed black South Africans’ access and consumption of liquor as both “a source of revenue and profit and as an effective tool of social engineering and control, as well as a dangerous source of disorder, indiscipline, societal deterioration, and human degradation” (Crush and Ambler 2).<sup>18</sup> Illegal brewing by black South Africans drew increased restrictions and penalties for violators. In spite of whites’ anxieties about blacks’ alcohol consumption and white and black peoples’ negative perceptions of shebeens,<sup>19</sup> or home-based liquor brewers, black women brewers claimed a transgressive space to create their own economic empowerment.

For women with limited educational training, and for those unable to secure employment as domestic workers in white homes, beer brewing became a viable option for survival. Kuzwayo attests that women beer brewers were subject to “the risk of being arrested and fined large sums of money or sentences to long terms of imprisonment” (Kuzwayo 27). Despite such risks, they continued to produce alcoholic beverages using recipes cultivated in rural communities where the consumption of alcohol was welcomed at weddings, family gatherings,

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<sup>18</sup> This collection of essays provides an interesting look into the politics of liquor production, consumption practices and the gendered division of labor concerning the alcohol trade in South Africa.

<sup>19</sup> Shebeens refer to home-based liquor brewers. These homes often provide access to illegal liquor and a friendly atmosphere for patrons to converse.



and leisure activities. Beer brewers were well regarded members of the community, as Kuzwayo relates based upon her own experience in Pimville with a brewer named Motena. She is “a lovely person, warm and very orderly in her life as a mother and housewife.” “Her house,” writes Kuzwayo, “was the only shebeen I ever ventured to enter” (27). Despite Kuzwayo’s admiration for Motena, her distance from such establishments is noticeable. Significantly, Kuzwayo foregrounds Motena’s traditional gender roles as “mother and housewife” as features of her life, thus suggesting her low opinion of Motena’s participation in the illicit liquor trade.

Although Kuzwayo is conflicted about black South African women’s participation in the liquor trade, she admires the transgressive acts these women pursue to support and sustain their families. For instance, they “coined certain calls to warn one another of the arrival and wrath of the police once they were spotted in the vicinity” (Kuzwayo 33). In addition, women “usually buried the liquor which they were brewing in large barrels underground” (Hausse 44). These tactics were effective because they could easily hide their alcohol and avoid detection by the police. These tactics demonstrate how black South African women worked together as a community to protect their businesses, which ensured their potential for economic prosperity. Even though members of the white and black community shunned the actions of women beer brewers, these women continued to produce alcohol as a form of financial independence, thus symbolizing transgressive acts of autonomy. Such acts highlight black South African women’s desire for economic empowerment as a necessary tool for their survival. With fewer resources than their male counterparts, women brewers forged a path in South African communities by cultivating a trade learned and accepted by rural communities. Denied the privilege of adequate educational training like Ellen Kuzwayo, the majority of black South African women did not possess the skills required to procure viable employment. Denied the opportunity to secure

viable educational training, these women performed transgressive acts as beer brewers to provide for their families.

My examination of the gendered perspective of female beer brewers is not an attempt to suggest that men were not active producers and consumers of illegal alcohol, too. Anne Mager's *Beer, Sociability, and Masculinity in South Africa* (2010) demonstrates the privileged positions men served in the illicit market, since they "tended to enter at the top end, using savings from formal jobs" (24).<sup>20</sup> As beerhalls emerged for the black male population to meet and socialize, South African men possessed greater access to alcohol. Although black South African men had access to government sanctioned beerhalls and alcohol distributed by mining camp owners, black women were barred from such activities.

Kuzwayo's exposure to entrepreneurial female role models reveals the desperate situations black South African women were forced to occupy as marginal members of society. Despite Kuzwayo's awareness of such options, her tone indicates disapproval. Given the negative social positioning of shebeen's, Kuzwayo justifies her admiration of Motena, a neighborhood shebeen whom she describes as "a lovely respectable mother" (Kuzwayo 28). Although Kuzwayo's disapproval of blacks participation in the illicit liquor trade is evident by "negative criticism" directed towards "immoral and debased" (24) members, she also acknowledges the integrity of such women "to see the other side of their lives once you came to know them as residents, individuals and ordinary people" (27). In drawing attention to the efforts of women to create an "income-generating commodity" (28), Kuzwayo lays bare the efforts black women undertook for survival. Despite their marginal position in South African

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<sup>20</sup> Anne Mager's work explores the relationship between masculinity and alcohol in South Africa by examining social, political, and economic mechanisms that reinforce sociable behaviors and acceptance. This relationship is strengthened by Mager's focus on history, tourism, advertising, capitalism, and global markets to demonstrate how versions of masculinity are constructed and supported by one's connection to alcohol.

society, shebeen's serve as a powerful example of community through their independent efforts to service their communities while also sustaining their family's survival. Kuzwayo's decision to include information about these female entrepreneurs speaks to her desire to demonstrate the courage and sheer determination black South African women pursued.

Given the brevity of female role models Kuzwayo experiences, her identity is informed by both women she admires and those that society considers undesirable. With the awareness of identity comes the realization of others with whom we construct a sense of self. For Kuzwayo, the journey to identity is hinged on her connection to the larger black community, as Coullie suggests: "Her claim is not that she is extraordinarily typical, but rather that she is one of many" (144). Although Kuzwayo weaves her life story throughout the autobiographical space, the articulation of black women's lives takes prominence. The autobiography, then, articulates a collective journey of black womanhood. Kuzwayo acknowledges the identity of black women as community to emphasize the power of their perseverance:

. . . to the many, many black women, old and young, who emerged uncorrupted regardless of the obstacles which blocked their way in an effort to make ends meet; the women who have made both humble and outstanding marks in education, industry, commerce, social commitments, trade, sport, and in day-to-day family life. These are the women who impress me beyond all telling. . . . If there was weakness, then that weakness is shared by all members of the human race; my point is that there was virtually no choice for these women in how they came to conduct their lives. (38)

With the absence of choice, black women subverted dominant systems to construct some semblance of an identity and positioning in society. The accolades Kuzwayo cast upon black

women identify their contributions as forbearers of knowledge and leaders in their respective communities.

By articulating black South African women's struggles of resistance, Kuzwayo narrates her process of maturity and womanhood on the backs of women positioned as outsiders. Ellen Kuzwayo utilizes the autobiographical form to record and give voice to the many contributions of black South African women. Using this recuperative space, Kuzwayo chronicles specific moments in her own life to mirror the challenges black women as a group experienced during apartheid. Kuzwayo's herstory provides a contextual backdrop for her investigation of black women's experiences in South Africa. The inclusion of black women's positioning as witness and participants<sup>21</sup> in society seeks to unearth the multiple dimensions of femininity ascribed to and espoused by women. Ellen Kuzwayo enacts an authoritative voice of the people by recuperating black women's lives as a written record of communal experience.

In conclusion, black women's journey to establish their own identities demonstrates the resiliency of community as a source of inspiration for women to construct an identity. In a world shaped by oppressive racial and gender borders, black women construct a self using their connections to larger communities as a source of continued inspiration for change. Despite race and gender borders, black South African women's marginal position as outsiders depicted in Kuzwayo's autobiography enables transgressive methods of resistance in direct opposition to apartheid. Furthermore, Black women's survival under apartheid reinforces their desire for autonomy, which arose through their connections to the community. For black South African women, communities defined by family, place, education, and labor serve as testament to the

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<sup>21</sup> I use the terms "witness" and "participant" to explore the intersection of Ellen Kuzwayo's roles as autobiographer (witness) and citizen (participant) in South Africa. As a black woman born and educated prior to apartheid, Kuzwayo occupies a privileged position at the margins where she examines the lives and contributions of black South African women whose identity she shares.

power women cultivate by working together to resist oppressive structures that restrict their identities. Black women's resistance and development of autonomy cannot be divorced from their communal involvement, which bestows the consciousness necessary for articulating an identity.

## CHAPTER 3

UNCLAIMED BAGGAGE: COMMUNITY, TRAUMA, AND IDENTITY FORMATION IN  
*BREATH, EYES, MEMORY*

“There are real logistical barriers to being a community, but I think it also strengthens what it means to be a family as well because, as the idea of transnationality tells us, you don’t have to break ties completely to the family. That’s something that’s constantly being redefined as people find more and more ways to be a community, to be a family. . . . I think we’re constantly striving to define what it means to be a family, what it means to be a community.” (29)

-Edwidge Danticat<sup>22</sup>

In the epigraph above, Danticat clarifies the impetus behind the role of community in what she calls the “Haitian diaspora.” She uses the term to call attention to the geographic, linguistic, and cultural dispersal and return of Haitians to their homeland. Her use of the verb “redefined” is telling because it demonstrates the fluidity of community that informs Haitian diasporic identity. In her novel *Breath, Eyes, Memory*, a sense of community emerges through the characters’ migration to homes in multiple locations. Danticat also challenges definitions of community that limit such spaces to the home and family. The novel’s protagonist, Sophie Caco, occupies such multiple locations of home throughout the novel, as she navigates the transnational borders of Haiti and the United States during her development of self and voice. By distinguishing the home itself as a kind of community in the novel, as compared to other communities such as religious and cultural ones, I explore how this place informs and imparts

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<sup>22</sup> The following response is quoted from Nancy Raquel Mirabal’s “Diasporic Appetites and Longings: An Interview with Edwidge Danticat.” When asked whether the Haitian diaspora “has changed how Haitians and the Haitian Diaspora view or define community, culture and place?” (Mirabal 29), Danticat replies by discussing the difficulties of defining a single Haitian community, given the migration habits of the Haitian diaspora. Instead of consigning her definition of community to a single location defined by family members, Danticat cautions readers to consider a multifaceted version of community that spans beyond the boundaries of nation.

knowledge upon women. I will examine communities in the novel because they remain a contested source of knowledge for black diasporic writers like Danticat to explore the process of female identity formation.

Although each place Sophie lives in or travels to represents a version of home, spaces within these homes signal traits of femininity women perform and are encouraged to emulate. The British geographer Doreen Massey has examined the expectations of gender inscribed by places. As she states: “spaces and places are not only themselves gendered but, in their being so, they both reflect and affect the ways in which gender is constructed and understood” (Massey 179). Women develop their identities not only in relation to others, but also in reference to the places they inhabit and navigate. Many scholars have problematized Sophie’s autonomy in the novel through the lens of displacement, healing, and voice.<sup>23</sup> The voice she reclaims to narrate her story becomes the impetus necessary for the future negotiation of her identity. Sophie’s family members play a central role in the construction of Sophie’s identity through displays of maternal knowledge. Each life change Sophie endures finds her challenging gender expectations and negotiating transgressive acts of resistance in private spaces as an expression of agency and subjectivity. Although the negotiation of identity can occur practically anywhere, the home places in this novel highlight the ways in which identity manifests in connection to Sophie’s acts of transgression. These acts of transgression serve as sources of knowledge for her growth.

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<sup>23</sup> Newtona Johnson examines displacement as the “hope for healing” mitigated by “the “colonized” mentality of women, a state of mind that keeps women locked within the grids of patriarchal power and control” (159). Whereas, Jennifer C. Rossi argues that autonomy is where “hope resides—that by giving testimony to past traumas, others can avoid perpetuating this trauma” (211). Such interpretations serve to demonstrate the multifaceted nature of autonomy, which mimics the actual experiences Haitian women confront to establish an identity. Nancy Gerber uses psychoanalytic theory to examine the function of storytelling as the creation of mother-daughter bonds in *Breath, Eyes, Memory*. She argues that storytelling invokes Sophie’s voice as it “both establishes and reproduces the maternal bond. Telling a tale binds mother to daughter and creates cross-generational connections. Telling a child a story is a maternal gesture that provides comfort, security, and emotional sustenance” (194).

Edwidge Danticat's *Breath, Eyes, Memory* (1994) tells the story of Sophie Caco and her maternal family, whose lives are informed by the traumatic experiences of testing, which occurs when a mother checks to ensure her daughter's hymen is intact, thus signaling her virginity. Each section of the novel interrogates a specific home place as a source of knowledge Sophie uses to fashion her identity. My close reading will examine Sophie's life in Croix-des-Rosets with Tante Atie, her life with Martine in New York, and Sophie's return to Haiti to visit Grandma Ifé's home La Nouvelle Dame Marie. In each place the bedroom is a focal point for encounters that directly inform Sophie's and other characters' identity formation. The comforting space of the bedroom allows the women to grapple with the complexities of their lives, because it serves as the sole space where female characters confront their lives and begin to chart their journeys to identity. First, I will analyze the home of Tante Atie in Croix-des-Rosets in order to introduce Sophie's character and to examine how idealized versions of home manifest in private spaces of security. Second, I will turn to Martine's home in New York to examine how the private bedroom can also become a debilitating site of trauma. Finally, I examine Sophie's return to Haiti to visit Grandma Ifé's home, La Nouvelle Dame Marie, as a catalyst for individual wholeness and healing.

In general, the critical reception of *Breath, Eyes, Memory* covers three overlapping themes. For example, scholars such as Newtona Johnson, Jennifer Rossi, Clare Counihan, Sharrón Eve Sartou, and Adlai Murdoch discuss the concepts of displacement and exile as they affect Sophie's transformation and identity formation.<sup>24</sup> Other scholars, such as Patrick

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<sup>24</sup> Newtona Johnson's essay "Challenging Internal Colonialism: Edwidge Danticat's Feminist Emancipatory Enterprise" examines the role of patriarchal dominance in Haitian culture to determine how women utilize geographical movement, and thus displacement, to critique masculine powers that thwart their identities (*Obsidian III: Literature in the African Diaspora* 6-7. 2-1 (2005-2006): 147-66). Jennifer Rossi's "'Let the words bring wings to our feet': Negotiating Exile and Trauma through Narrative in Danticat's *Breath, Eyes, Memory*" contends "Recovering memories of one's past selves, loved ones, and home country creates connections that form a new



Samway, Heather Hewett, and Simone A. James Alexander, examine motherhood as a trope that relegates women solely to spheres of domesticity.<sup>25</sup> Similarly, an even larger group of scholars, including Donnette A. Francis, Suzanne Crosta, Semia Harbawi, Jana Evans Braziel, Valerie Loichot, Sandra C. Duvidier, and Nancy F. Gerber explore Danticat's analysis of women's bodies as textual domains.<sup>26</sup> Despite the majority of extant scholarship on Danticat's treatment of the roles that geography, motherhood, and gender play in women's identity formation, no one

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identity" (*Obsidian III: Literature in the African Diaspora* 6-7. 2-1 (2005-2006): 212). In "Desiring Diaspora: 'Testing' the Boundaries of National Identity in Edwidge Danticat's *Breath, Eyes, Memory*," Clare Counihan argues for a reading of ambivalence as "the novel does not and cannot reconcile the logics of memorialization and resolution with which it attempts to manage Haitian history" (*Small Axe* 16.1 (2012): 48. Print). In addition, Sharrón Eve Sarthou's "Unsilencing Défilés Daughters: Overcoming Silence in Edwidge Danticat's *Breath, Eyes, Memory* and *Krik? Krak!*," explores two works by Danticat to demonstrate "the unnatural silence that is the consequence of pernicious violence in the lives of Haitians" (*The Global South* 4.2 (2010): 106-107. Project MUSE. Web. 2 Mar. 2012. <<http://muse.jhu.edu/>>. Lastly, Adlai Murdoch's "Being Haitian in New York Migration and Transnationalism in Danticat's *Breath, Eyes, Memory*" traces the hybridized subject in Danticat's novel.

<sup>25</sup> Patrick S. J. Samway's "A Homeward Journey: Edwidge Danticat's Fictional Landscapes, Mindscapes, Genescapes and Signscapes in *Breath, Eyes, Memory*," illustrates "All the sign-images spring from and return to this fundamental human desire for freedom" (*Mississippi Quarterly* 57.1 (2003/2004): 80. Print). In "Mothering Across Borders: Narratives of Immigrant Mothers in the United States," Heather Hewett analyzes the role of transnational motherhood in Danticat's novel to discern how Haitian women navigate cultural expectations of femininity mediated by violence against women's bodies and their sexualities (*Women's Studies Quarterly* 37.2 (2009): 121-139. Project MUSE. Web. 5 Jan. 2012. <<http://muse.jhu.edu/>>. Finally, Simone A. James Alexander's "M/othering the Nation: Women's Bodies as Nationalist Trope in Edwidge Danticat's *Breath, Eyes, Memory*," argues that Danticat contests the "erroneous, mythic representation of blind female patriotism" cast upon women as nationalist representations (*African American Review* 44.3 (2011): 375. Print).

<sup>26</sup> In "Silences Too Horrific to Disturb: Writing Sexual Histories in Edwidge Danticat's *Breath, Eyes, Memory*," Donette A. Francis explores the function of women's bodies in five scenes identified as "scenes of subjection," which "become sites to speak of national trauma and the erosion of the Haitian body politic" (*Research in African Literatures* 35.2 (2004): 77. Print). Sernia Harbawi's "Against All Odds: The Experience of Trauma and the Economy of Survival in Edwidge Danticat's *Breath, Eyes, Memory*," offers an informative review of the cultural politics found in Haitian literature as a source of cultural identity (*International Journal of Francophone Studies* 5.1 (2003): 22-38. Print). Jane Evans Braziel's essay "Daffodils, Rhizomes, Migrations: Narrative Coming of Age in the Diasporic Writings of Edwidge Danticat and Jamaica Kincaid," situates Martinican writer Édouard Glissant's *Poétique de la Relation* (1990) as a critical framework for investigating "diasporic identities and relations." Valérie Loichot's essay entitled "Edwidge Danticat's Kitchen History" traces food as "an unavoidable and complex form of language" and to explore Danticat's novel as "integral agent of contemporary American identity" (*Meridians* 5.1 (2004): 92. Print). Sandra C. Duvidier's article "(Re)Writing Haiti and It's 'Brave Women' into Existence: Edwidge Danticat and the Concept of Métissage," examines the role of métissage in deciphering "the novel's political, gender, and sexual ambivalences" (*MaComère* 6 (2004): 50). Lastly, Nancy Gerber's article "Binding the Narrative Thread: Storytelling and the Mother-Daughter Relationship in Edwidge Danticat's *Breath, Eyes, Memory*," expands the analysis of women's bodies as textual domains through a "framing technique" in which Danticat "signifies the continuing role of the oral tradition in the voices of a scattered people and emblemizes a thematics of community and collectivity" (*Journal of the Association for Research on Mothering* 2.2 (2000): 189).

has examined the role of community as a space that empowers women to reclaim their own voices to renegotiate their identities. This chapter marks my entry into this conversation.

The novel opens as a twelve-year-old Sophie Caco arrives home from school. As a child, Sophie enjoys a nurturing childhood with Tante Atie in Haiti, while her mother Martine has immigrated to the United States for work in hopes of distancing herself from the trauma of having been raped by a man who “might have been a Macoute” (139).<sup>27</sup> As a teenager, Martine was raped, and the trauma of this event eventually fuels her exodus to the United States. Martine’s child Sophie is the product of this rape, which has driven a wedge between mother and daughter. To spare Sophie the truth behind her birth, Tante Atie remembers Martine as a loving mother. Atie explains Martine’s absence to Sophie by stating: “[W]e agreed that it would only be for a while. You were just a baby then. She left you because she was going to a place she knew nothing about” (Danticat 20). Although Martine’s absence troubles Sophie’s understanding of the mother-daughter relationship, Atie proves herself to be a loving surrogate mother, by creating a loving home. Atie creates a nurturing environment where she encourages Sophie to thrive. In the loving home environment Atie cultivates, she acts like an affectionate mother, rearing Sophie “as she opened her arms just wide enough for my body to fit into them” (3). Such experiences of home allow Sophie to thrive in an environment of support and guidance. As a child, Sophie learns that the home is a safe place, a space where she receives the necessary nurturance to establish an autonomous self despite the absence of her mother. While the separation of parents and children is a common experience for those who pursue the lure of the American Dream in the United States, such separations also have the potential for disrupting

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<sup>27</sup> Donette Francis provides information on the Tonton Macoute as the organization responsible for violations against women’s bodies. She states: “In 1959, for example, Duvalier instated tonton macoutes, a rural militia group, to gain control of the rural countryside. Within a two-year time span, Duvalier’s rural militia wielded more power than the Haitian Army and their own brand of politically motivated rape was a notorious method of maintaining their power” (78).

future relationships. My discussion that follows does not attempt to interrogate whether decisions to immigrate are warranted or not, but rather, how such absences in the home inform mother-daughter relationships and influence the construction of women's identities.

Even though Atie functions as her surrogate mother, Sophie does maintain partial contact with her mother Martine, who would “. . . send us two cassettes with our regular money allowance. One cassette would be for me and Tante Atie, the other for my grandmother” (Danticat 12). Thus, her mother's voice and sound function as sensory modes of communication that compensate for Martine's absence. Sophie's relationship with Martine is a shared experience, not one she enjoys for herself alone. Sophie “only knew” her mother through her voice and “the picture on the night table,” in spite of the tapes Martine sends (Danticat 8). Martine's absence proves difficult for Sophie, who is forced to rely on visual and aural stimuli to establish a connection with her mother.

Even though Martine attempts to compensate for her absence, Tante Atie becomes the physical embodiment of motherhood for Sophie. Despite the close relationship Sophie and Tante Atie share, it is a neighbor at a community potluck, Madame Augustin, who reveals to Sophie that she will be traveling to see her mother in New York. Sophie's surprised reaction to the news of her impending departure is noticeable, as she “kept wishing that everyone would disappear so I could go back home” (Danticat 14). Despite the community's congratulatory response to this “good news” (14) and the sharing of “very wonderful news” (15) by Madame Augustin, Sophie is confused rather than happy. She struggles to understand and accept the announcement of her impending departure, which she perceives as a disruption to her life. Yet, Tante Atie reassures Sophie of her mother's love with the statement that “there are many good reasons for mothers to

abandon their children” (20). Such statements provide little consolation for Sophie, who interprets her departure as a betrayal.

Sophie unleashes her anger over her departure when she and Tante Atie return home. Unable to process what she perceives as betrayal, Sophie “stomped [her] feet and walked away” as she raced to the bedroom “to take off [her] clothes so quickly that [she] almost tore them off [her] body” (Danticat 16). The bedroom becomes a space of solitude from the outside world, which Sophie desperately wants to hide from. As a child content with the circumstances of her life, Sophie’s uncertainty and surprise over her impending reunion with Martine manifests in hostility towards Tante Atie. At home, Sophie accuses Tante Atie of lying as they enter the bedroom. Tante Atie apologetically reassures Sophie of her intentions, by stating “I kept a secret, which is different. [ . . . ] I needed time to reconcile myself, to accept it” (16). Despite Sophie’s sense of betrayal, Tante Atie acknowledges the change will be difficult for both women. Tante Atie must also confront the reality of Sophie’s departure while recognizing the changes she makes in the journey “back home to take care of your grandmother” (19). Tante Atie voices the arduous transition she must make after devoting her life to Sophie’s care, but she acknowledges “We have no right to be sad” (17).

Sophie’s reunion with Martine presents an opportunity for the two to confront the consequences of their separation for twelve years and to cultivate a relationship. Yet, Sophie responds to this news with a sense of longing. She imagines missed opportunities in Haiti “for more potlucks, more trips to my grandmother’s, even a sewing lesson. The suitcase made me realize that I would never get to do those things” (Danticat 27). The suitcase symbolizes Sophie’s mobility and her impending journey to the United States. Despite the abundance of opportunities available in the US, Sophie initially perceives her newfound mobility as a serious

hindrance to her life, not a means of reuniting with her mother. During a trip to visit her Grandmè Ifé, Sophie envisions her reunion with her mother Martine as a “nightmare” (24). Such an odd description is telling because it signals the tension Sophie feels as she anticipates reuniting with her mother. Imagining a life outside her home in Croix-des-Rosets appears at first troubling to Sophie, who ruminates on the missed adventures and lessons she must relinquish by leaving Haiti. In leaving the surrogate maternal figure she has grown to love, Sophie will plunge into a new world of discovery to meet her biological mother Martine. The struggle to assimilate in a new country will be plagued by uncertainties, as Sophie and Martine work to establish a home together. For Sophie Caco, home will become an uncomfortable reality of experiences since she must learn to navigate a space mediated by an ambiguous relationship with a mother she does not know.

Martine’s excitement over Sophie’s arrival is apparent “[when] she grabbed [Sophie] and began to spin [her] like a top, so she could look at [her],” yet her efforts to forge a bond with her daughter prove difficult (Danticat 40). Sophie’s apprehension towards her mother becomes evident on the ride home. Although Sophie grew up hearing stories of her mother Martine who “left you because she was going to a place she knew nothing about” (20) and listening to her voice via cassette, the image she conjured does not resemble the woman she confronts. As Sophie watches Martine in the car, she thinks, “She did not look like the picture Tante Atie had on her night table. Her face was long and hollow. Her hair had a blunt cut and she had long spindly legs. She had dark circles under her eyes and, as she smiled, lines of wrinkles tightened her expression. Her fingers were scarred and sunburned” (Danticat 42). Sophie’s first impressions of her mother Martine suggest a stranger, whose dis familiarity and distance is heightened because she bears no resemblance to the women Sophie has imagined during her

childhood years. The initial reunion of mother and daughter is quite jarring because Martine appears drastically different from the motherly image she initially conjured.

Danticat uses both interior monologue and conversational dialogue to create the appearance of an ordinary mother-daughter interaction that belies or obfuscates the tensions underneath. Martine dominates the conversation while driving, as Sophie silently ponders, “I still had not said anything to her” (Danticat 42). As Sophie and Martine travel home from the airport, Martine inquires briefly about Atie before reminiscing on her childhood. “You should have seen us when we were young,” Martine says. “We always dreamt of becoming important women. [. . .] Imagine our surprise when we found out we had limits” (43). Yet, Martine never asks questions about Sophie’s well-being. Martine uses this trip to inform Sophie of the gender limitations she and Atie experienced in Haiti in order to make her aware of the bountiful opportunities available in the United States. Instead of inquiring about Sophie’s life, Martine proceeds to outline the expectation of educational success Sophie must embrace. Martine enacts her motherly duties by telling Sophie, “You are going to work hard here, [. . .] You have a chance to become the kind of woman Atie and I have always wanted to be. If you make something of yourself in life, we will all succeed. You can *raise our heads*” (Danticat 44). These expectations reveal the onus of familial obligations Sophie is expected to meet once she has completed her education. Martine recalls aspirations she and Atie shared in “becoming important women,” even as she acknowledges “surprise” over the realization of their “limits” (43). Desperate to create opportunities for Sophie and the family’s future, Martine reaches back to her own youthful ambitions in order to encourage her daughter to become successful. Unable to make a direct connection with Sophie, Martine relies on her own past experiences to motivate Sophie’s future educational success.

The fact that Martine has not recovered from her own rape becomes apparent during the first night of Sophie's arrival. The trauma of rape is all too visible and real for Martine, who struggles daily with nightmares. Sophie awakens to Martine "screaming for someone to leave her alone" (Danticat 81). Initially unaware of her mother's sudden nightmares, Sophie then swaps roles with her mother, keeping vigil at her bedside to comfort her "thrashing against the streets" (48). The sense of fright Martine experiences upon seeing Sophie when she wakes from her nightmares is a consequence of the traumatic memories associated with her rape, because "a child out of wedlock always looks like its father" (61). As Martine recalls, "A man grabbed me from the side of the road, pulled me into a cane field, and put you in my body" (Danticat 61). The sense of detachment Martine conveys when describing her rape here indicates her inability to confront the trauma. Sophie, however, seems perplexed by this revelation. She states, "Part of me did not understand. Most of me did not want to" (61). As a rape survivor, Martine is haunted by "[t]he testing and the rape. I live both every day," which signals the difficulty women encounter when confronting traumatic memories (Danticat 170). Both mother and child respond with silence to protect themselves from confronting their connection to the past. Yet, in order to develop positive and sustaining identities and to begin the process of healing from their pain, individuals must confront traumatic experiences triggered by episodic memories of place.

Martine introduces Sophie to her new bedroom and shows her a doll, which symbolizes a kind of surrogate child. For Martine, the trauma of rape is too vivid to enable her to establish a real connection with Sophie, so she has devised an imitation of Sophie by using the doll as a surrogate daughter. The bedroom has provided the space for Martine to create an ideal relationship with a doll to mimic her longing for her daughter Sophie. The doll mimics the relationship Martine desires with Sophie, yet one she is incapable of sustaining due to her

inability to deal with the trauma of her rape. Martine grooms the doll like a mother with her child: “[S]he picked up a small brush and combed the doll’s hair into a ponytail,” and later she “unbuttoned the back of the doll’s dress and changed her into a pajama set” (Danticat 45). The fact that Martine has ritualized the protective care of a doll indicates her desire to nurture her biological child, but also her inability to do so.

Danticat highlights the estrangement evident in this mother-daughter relationship in order to demonstrate the alienation Sophie feels in her new home. Despite the positive connotations of home as a place of familiarity and comfort, Sophie’s isolation is marked by her silence. Although her silence can be equally attributed to the stresses of adjusting to her new environment and to her distant relationship with Martine, the sense of outsidership Sophie expresses becomes most noticeable when they join Martine’s boyfriend, Marc, for dinner. Martine chooses a “loose-fitting, high collared dress” from Sophie’s suitcase to indicate “what a proper young lady should wear” (Danticat 53). Despite Martine’s attentiveness towards Sophie, noticeable barriers are present in their relationship. At dinner with Marc, Sophie detachedly witnesses “my mother and Marc [eyeing] each other like there were things they couldn’t say because of my presence. I tried to stuff myself and keep quiet, pretending that I couldn’t even see them. My mother now had two lives: Marc belonged to her present life,” (56). In situating her life as a “a living memory” (56) of her mother’s past, Sophie articulates the distance she feels towards her mother, and her sense that her mother privileges her romantic relationship with Marc above her own relationship to her daughter. Despite Martine’s efforts to include Sophie in her new life, Sophie’s detachment expresses a conflicting identity she feels as “my mother’s daughter and Tante Atie’s child” (Danticat 49). Sophie’s inability to bond with her mother



directly suggests she might have difficulty forming future relationships. However, the bond she developed with Tante Atie provided Sophie with positive experiences of a loving relationship.

The novel's second section finds Sophie at eighteen with plans to attend college (Danticat 65). Aside from her school interactions, Sophie has had no friends to speak of and few interactions with men. Therefore, her orientation to the world and her place in it have been shaped largely by the conservative examples of femininity her mother has modeled. Then, Sophie meets and falls in love with her neighbor whose "name was Joseph and he was old. He was old like God is old to me, ever present and full of wisdom" (67). Sophie's interest in Joseph makes her immediately aware that "we knew no other men" (67) than Marc. Martine's apprehension towards men stems from the trauma of her rape, and Sophie has not cultivated any relationship with men aside from her mother's boyfriend Marc.

Given Sophie's sheltered life, it's surprising she develops a relationship with her older neighbor Joseph. Sophie's use of "old" to describe Joseph's character highlights his age difference, but more importantly his position as a father figure. Given the smothering relationship Sophie shares with her mother Martine, Joseph offers a breath of fresh air: "Ever since we had become friends, I'd stopped thinking of him as old. He talked young and acted young" (Danticat 73-74). For Sophie, Joseph represents a newfound freedom, which fills a void in her relationship with Martine, but more importantly, her life. Joseph cares about Sophie the person. His appreciation and concern for Sophie mimics the love a father conveys for a child. Although Joseph is physically attracted to Sophie, he demonstrates a desire to encourage Sophie's future because, as he states, "[he has] a passion for what you do" (71) despite Sophie's realization that "I had never really dared to dream on my own" (72). It is Joseph, not Martine

who “always knew the right things to say” (82). Joseph fills a dual purpose as a father-like figure who instills confidence and he also serves as a potential suitor for Sophie.

Sophie finds Joseph intriguing because of his position as a musician and his generous personality, yet she knows her mother will disapprove of the relationship. Sophie’s awareness of Martine’s apprehension towards Joseph is indicated by her mother’s nervous attitude: “When she came home during the day and saw him sitting on his porch steps next door, she would nod a quick hello and walk faster. She wrapped her arms tighter around me, as though to rescue me from his stare” (Danticat 68). Martine’s need to “rescue” Sophie from Joseph’s “stares” indicates her desire to maintain Sophie’s virginity. As the critic Donette Francis argues, “The logic of this practice intimates that woman is property and her worth is determined by an exchange value that is measured by her virginity” (82). As a sheltered young woman whose “great responsibility was to study hard,” Sophie has “spent six years doing nothing but that. School, home, and prayer” (67). Sophie has no intimate or sexual knowledge of men, only the story of her conception as a child of rape. Martine’s maternal desire to protect her child has stifled Sophie’s capacity for sexual autonomy, which functions as an aspect of women’s identity formation.

Despite her infatuation with Joseph, Sophie knows she must hide her true feelings about Joseph from Martine to avoid unwanted disapproval. To bridge a compromise with Martine, Sophie fabricates a story about “Henry Napoleon,” an imaginary Haitian boyfriend, in order to conceal her relationship with Joseph (Danticat 79). Given the restrictive boundaries of Martine’s home, Sophie can only discuss a potential love through deception. However, Sophie fears her mother’s reprimand over her new love interest. She acknowledges “A good girl would never be alone with a man, an older one at that. I wasn’t thinking straight. It was nice waking up in the

morning knowing I had someone to talk to” (72). Sophie’s interest in Joseph provides a way of equalizing her relationship with Martine, but she risks alienating her mother in the process. Sophie’s excitement over Joseph is heightened by Martine’s desire for her to find “‘yourself a man who will do something for you. He can’t be a vagabond. I won’t have it’” (78). Martine envisions a life for Sophie where marriage compliments her positioning as an educated woman. Given Martine’s history with men, it’s surprising that she would want Sophie to be defined by her relationship to a man. Yet, Martine’s desire for Sophie’s happiness is hinged on her ability to acquire further education to elevate the family and a spouse to protect and provide for her. Therefore, Sophie’s interest in Joseph functions as a transgressive relationship because she willingly defies the boundaries of femininity Martine establishes in search of love.

For Sophie, the bedroom furnishes a space she can call her own. In the novel, this space becomes the place where she can relish her relationship with Joseph. It offers her a sense of familiarity, the expectation of privacy, and a space of refuge from the outside world. She “heard him playing his keyboard as [she] lay awake in bed. [. . .] [She] felt the music rise and surge, tightening every muscle in my body. Then [she] relaxed, letting it go, feeling a rush that [she] knew [she] wasn’t supposed to feel” (Danticat 76). The bedroom becomes the only space within the home where Sophie can relish her burgeoning relationship with Joseph and the emotions that accompany her sexual awakening.

The trauma of testing functions as both a violation of Sophie’s body and a violation of her safe space, her bedroom. Martine’s desire to maintain Sophie’s virginity is evidenced by her response to Sophie’s late arrival home. Martine suspects that Sophie has engaged in some type of promiscuous behavior with Joseph and she must check to ensure her daughter’s chastity. As Sophie recalls, “She took my hand with surprised gentleness, and led me upstairs to my

bedroom. There she made me lie on my bed and she *tested* me. [. . .] In my mind, I tried to relive all the pleasant memories I remembered from my life. My special moments with Tante Atie and with Joseph and even my mother” (Danticat 84). The “surprised gentleness” Sophie observes makes the incident appear innocent, yet we learn that the consequences mentally and physically cripple her character. Sophie revisits specific “moments” using episodic memories, also known as doubling (155), to distance her mind from the traumatic experience of testing at the hands of her mother. With nowhere to turn, Sophie resolves to endure the ritual through dissociation: “I had learned to *double* while being *tested*. I would close my eyes and imagine all the pleasant things that I had known” (Danticat 155). Doubling becomes a defense mechanism Sophie utilizes to cope with the unfathomable trauma of testing. When the home becomes a violent reminder of individual trauma, escape becomes the only means of survival.

Sexual acts of violence are forced upon women as a means to control women’s sexuality.<sup>28</sup> The cultural practice of testing in the novel justifies the policing of women’s bodies by other women to ensure their virginity. Such acts limit the choices available for women to fashion identities independent of or different from the societal or cultural norms regarding femininity. As the property of her mother, Sophie ostensibly has no control over her sexuality, thus denying her an opportunity to negotiate her identity. As the long-estranged mother, Martine has no boundaries. Danticat challenges ritualistic/cultural acts such as testing to highlight the lingering effects of trauma women struggle to process.

Place is thus a site of trauma, repression, and blocking of sexual and psychological growth for women like Sophie in the novel, but it also can become a catalyst for the process of healing, wholeness, and autonomy that lead to the construction of satisfying female identities.

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<sup>28</sup> Sexual violence functions as male dominance, as control in patriarchal societies. The fear of being raped or sexually assaulted sets the female body as a constant site of potential conflict. However, the female body, if controlled by the individual, can also function as a site of resistance to such violence.

The scholar Sharrón Eve Sarthou explores how, upon returning to Haiti, Sophie discovers her own subjectivity by becoming what she calls a “hybridized citizen.” She argues that “this hybrid identity is particularly valuable, as the hybrid citizen can also assume an agency that can mediate between the isolated and alienated present and the traumatic past” (Sarthou 102).<sup>29</sup> The fractured relationship Sophie and Martine endure in the United States makes the process of reconciliation impossible. Both women are trapped by the horrors of trauma that fuels their distance. A return to Haiti, to the native home, provides a space of comfort where both women can begin their respective healing. Sophie’s sudden departure to Haiti with her daughter Brigitte signals the emergence of her personal autonomy. Sophie performs a second act of transgression by leaving her husband, Joseph, unexpectedly. She returns to Haiti searching for answers to reconcile the trauma afflicting her life.

The return to Haiti brings a wealth of emotions and memories as Sophie makes her way to Grandma Ifé’s house. Sophie experiences a renewed sense of belonging to those she meets along her travels. Rural places come alive when Sophie catches a ride amidst “the sheds, stands, and clusters of women in the open marketplace” (Danticat 93) to La Nouvelle Dame Marie. One can feel the rhythms of “body-raking soka” (Danticat 94) that envelop the air as Sophie surveys her immediate environment. The smells of “crusted mint leaves” contrast with the pungent odor of “stagnant pee” (Danticat 94). Sophie experiences a renewed sense of belonging to a community as she meets random people along her travels.

Unable to deal with the repercussions of Martine’s testing, Sophie probes her grandmother for answers about this traumatic practice. When Grandma Ifé asks Sophie if

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<sup>29</sup> See Lesley Feracho’s *Linking the Americas: Race, Hybrid Discourses and the Reformulation of Feminine Identity* (2005) for a detailed look into the reformulation of women’s identity created by writing and also by voice. She argues that reformulation occurs when “each subject (re)creates not a static product but rather a fluid exchange between the author, protagonist, text, and sociocultural factors that influence her” (Albany, NY: State U of New York P, 2005. 3. Print.).

Martine tested her, she responds by stating, “I hate my body. I am ashamed to show it to anybody, including my husband. Sometimes I feel like I should be off somewhere by myself. That is why I am here” (Danticat 123). The alienation Sophie experiences toward her own body is a result of the testing she sustained at the hands of her mother, which she describes as “humiliation” (123). The ritual of testing contributes to Sophie’s hatred of her body, which then leads to her developing bulimia. An alienated self makes it impossible to come to terms with the many selves that contribute to one’s subjectivity.

The dialogue between Sophie and Grandma Ifé begins the process of healing Sophie must endure to make amends with herself and her mother Martine. In an effort to uncover the reason for testing, Sophie continues her discussion with Grandma Ifé. Sophie asks “Why do mothers do that?” (Danticat 156) in probing her grandmother to reveal some semblance of evidence to justify the practice of testing. Grandma Ifé exclaims, “From the time a girl begins to menstruate to the time you turn her over to her husband, the mother is responsible for her purity. If I give a soiled daughter to her husband, he can shame my family, speak evil of me, even bring her back to me” (156). What this response reveals is that women’s sexual autonomy remains outside their own control. Sophie learns the intentions of testing are motivated not only by individuals, but also by cultural expectations of female behavior. The fears of women being “soiled” by intercourse before marriage and the threat of familial “shame” motivate the cultural ritual of testing performed on women’s bodies. This fear derives from an understanding that the attainment of marriage as the ideal goal of women’s lives rather than their own choosing. Grandma Ifé continues the conversation by telling Sophie that she “must know that everything a mother does, she does for her child’s own good. You cannot always carry the pain. You must liberate yourself” (157). Grandma Ifé tells Sophie to accept the past in order to secure her future. More

importantly, Sophie realizes she must learn to stake a claim to her life. As Emilia Ippolio has asserted, “Identities are the names we give to the different ways we are positioned by, and position ourselves within, the narratives of the past” (19).<sup>30</sup> Liberation becomes a method by which individual women seek to ascertain their connections to the past in order to assert their personal autonomy and individuality.

For Sophie, home is people, not just physical places. In a later scene, Sophie and Joseph reunite after her return from Haiti and she refers to the nation as home. Joseph is confused by this reference to home because she “never called it that since we’ve been together,” and he exclaims, “Home has always been your mother’s house, that you could never go back to” (Danticat 195). After traveling with her daughter Brigitte to Haiti to visit Grandma Ifé, Sophie returns to the United States with a newfound appreciation of home constructed as people in place. For Sophie, the process of healing entails more than individual will, but also the assistance of communities who help her come to grips with the trauma that stifles her existence. The sexual phobia group Sophie creates with Buki, “an Ethiopian college student,” and Davina, “a middle-aged Chicana,” provide Sophie with the necessary support to confront her past within a safe place (Danticat 201). These women have suffered from differing traumas and their meetings demonstrate their willingness to confront their experiences to heal. The ritual process occurs at Davina’s house, where the women change “into long white dresses” and “white scarves,” which serve as symbols of purity, of the cleansing the women endure as they meet to confront their respective traumas (Danticat 201). Danticat utilizes sensory cues to make readers aware of the group meeting space, which “smelled like candles and incense” as the women sit “on green heart-shaped pillows that Davina had made” (Danticat 202). We learn the “color

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<sup>30</sup> See Ippolito’s *Caribbean Women Writers: Identity and Gender* (2000) for a more in-depth examination of Caribbean women writers through the lens of postcolonialism and culture.

green stood for life and growth” (202). The color green represents the journey these women pursue in meeting to resolve the trauma of their lives. The act of confrontation each woman seeks is indicative of her desire to accept and move past the trauma to embrace life. The women perform a final ritual to unleash the trauma prohibiting their growth “We each wrote the name of our abusers in a piece of paper, raised it over a candle, and watched as the flames consumed it. [. . .] I felt broken at the end of the meeting, but a little closer to being free” (Danticat 203). The sense of freedom Sophie acknowledges is due to her willingness to confront the trauma of testing.

Although the phobia group provides a place of belonging for Sophie, she also visits a therapist to reconcile the trauma prohibiting her identity negotiation. Sophie relays her trip to Haiti and the acts of reconciliation she pursued in questioning Grandma Ifé and Martine about the practice of testing. In therapy, Sophie discusses her newfound bond with Martine. She states, “I want to forget the hidden things, the conflicts you always want me to deal with. I want to look at her as someone I am meeting again for the first time. An acquaintance who I am hoping will become a friend” (Danticat 207-208). Although admirable, Sophie’s desire to cultivate a friendship with Martine can only occur if both women are willing to confront the past in order to heal. Sophie wants to feel and perceive her mother as a friend to resuscitate their relationship without having to resolve past conflicts. Sophie’s therapist offers a final piece of advice for confrontation when she states: “You and your mother should both go there again and see that you can walk away from it. Even if you can never face the man who is your father, there are things that you can say to the spot where it happened. I think you’ll be free once you have your confrontation” (Danticat 211). The “spot where it happened” refers to Martine’s rape, which fuels the alienated mother-daughter relationship both women experience. In confronting



the cane stalks where Martine's rape occurs, both she and Sophie can make the experience real, which relinquishes power from the past that haunts the present reality. Confronting trauma is a difficult yet necessary process for the cultivation of the self. Therefore, reconciliation can only begin with self-awareness of the past to identify and repair the traumatic damage sustained in one's life.

Martine's arrival in Haiti is an initial step towards reconciliation that Sophie must acknowledge to continue her path to identity. In conversation, Sophie questions Martine about her nightmares, which include Sophie's fears of her mother's rejection. Martine reveals her initial fright over Sophie's arrival in the United States as a reminder of her rape, but she explains "it is not something that I can help. It is not something that you can help. It is just part of our lives" (Danticat 169). Seeking to reconcile the mother-daughter relationship, Martine voices her initial fears to Sophie when she enters the bedroom. By removing blame from either party, Martine encourages Sophie to make sense of this "part of our lives" by engaging in dialogue with her daughter as they both confront the trauma of testing. What this sentiment evokes is the need for individuals to make sense of their lives by acknowledging past and present experiences. This acknowledgement does little to soothe Sophie's "need to understand, so that I would never repeat it myself" (170), yet it does facilitate an initial acknowledgement that both women must be willing to voice their past experiences to each other to begin their process of healing. Sophie's fears of testing her daughter Brigitte motivate her return to Haiti and her eventual reconciliation with Martine. These acts demonstrate the difficulty of formulating an identity that respects both family and community expectations and individual configurations of self. By questioning her family, Sophie gains the necessary strength to question her bodily alienation.

The autonomous recognition of self is necessary for the process of identity formation and Danticat suggests this process engages the family, but also external factors as well. For Sophie, mother-daughter reconciliation is the impetus for her individual process of growth and the development of the self. Upon returning to the United States, Sophie becomes self-reflective of her relationship with her mother. Their reunion in Haiti forges the beginning of a new relationship, as Sophie exclaims “I kept thinking of my mother, who now wanted to be my friend. Finally I had her approval. I was okay. I was safe. We were both safe. The past was gone” (Danticat 200). These remarks emphasize the role of mother-daughter relationships in the cultivation of identity formation. For Sophie, Martine’s approval dictates her happiness, which is required for her to confront the trauma of her past and begin to heal. Danticat equates safety with healing, since Sophie’s remarks indicate both she and Martine are “safe.” Their reconciliation has entailed journeys through various places: nations, rooms, and minds. Sophie’s meditations indicate that she and Martine are well on their way to recovery, yet their return to the United States demonstrates they both have only begun to recognize the trauma in their lives.

In their efforts to build a relationship, Sophie and Martine appear committed to spending more time together. The two grow closer when Martine shares that she is pregnant with Marc’s child. Yet, Martine soon says that she can no longer carry her child by Marc due to the voices, more specifically, “a man’s voice” that she fears and decides she must “get . . . out of me” (Danticat 217). Martine’s desire to abort her child is due to the unresolved trauma of her rape and the growing fear that the child will resemble her rapist, because she exclaims, “I never want to see this child’s face” (217). While Sophie understands her mother’s concerns, she urges her not to “do anything rash” in an effort to calm Martine (217).

Since Sophie spent her adolescent years with her mother, she understands as an adult the real effects of Martine's trauma. In her efforts to console her mother, Sophie believes her ability to spend time together and become a part of her mother's life will be enough. Despite attempts to help her mother, Sophie herself still struggles with bulimia upon returning to the US. When Joseph goes to sleep, Sophie goes to the kitchen where she "ate every scrap of the dinner leftovers, then went to the bathroom, locked the door, and purged all the food out" (Danticat 200). Despite Sophie's attempts to gain control of her life, bulimia manifests as a coping mechanism. These female characters reveal the power of trauma to splinter one's life when left untreated.

The role of memories in the novel is mitigated by female characters' willingness to confront and address trauma, which is a difficult process. Both Martine's rape and Sophie's testing function as acts of violence against women. As the critic Heather Hewett suggests, "*Breath, Eyes, Memory* makes a powerful connection between testing and rape, suggesting that both of these should be recognized as a violence against women that contributes to the social control of women's sexuality and behavior" (133-134). The recognition of rape and testing as acts violence against women helps to clarify the resistance Martine and Sophie relinquish in refusing to address their respective traumas. As Jennifer C. Rossi argues, the secret nature of trauma "perpetuates the cycle of shame and oppression, ensuring that the daughter will grow up to despise her own sexuality" (207-208). The shame Sophie feels manifests in her bulimia, which she attempts to remedy through her support group. After a meeting, Sophie exclaims, "I knew my hurt and hers were links in a long chain and if she hurt me, it is because she was hurt, too. . . . It was up to me to avoid my turn in the fire. It was up to me to make sure that my daughter never slept with ghosts, never lived with nightmares, and never had *her* name burnt into

the flames” (Danticat 203). Sophie comes to acknowledge that her testing is steeped in cultural norms of women’s purity, not solely the intentions of her mother. Therefore, Sophie’s desire to reconcile and heal is an attempt to save not only herself, but her young daughter Brigitte as well. Unlike Martine, Sophie is willing to pursue numerous avenues in the form of family, therapy, and a sex therapy support group to confront and come to terms with her traumatic past.

Just as Sophie begins to cultivate a relationship with her mother Martine, the unthinkable happens when Martine commits suicide. Upon learning of her mother’s death, Sophie reprimands Marc, her mother’s lover, for his negligence, but he asks Sophie “where were you?” (224). Sophie transfers her anger on Marc in an attempt to sort through the tragedy. Yet, she soon learns Martine stabbed herself in the stomach “seventeen times” (224), which indicates her willingness to make the decision to end her life. However, the imagined voices of her unborn child and Martine’s fear of raising a child who might resemble her rapist indicate her fragile state of mind. Unable to process the trauma of her rape after suffering years of nightmares, Martine makes the only decision she can to free herself of past memories. Although scholars disagree over the interpretation of Martine’s suicide, others such as Simone A. James Alexander argue that “Despite Martine’s ongoing battle with invisibility, illegitimacy and self-worth during her living years, I read her suicide as an act of courage” (284). Additionally, in Nancy F. Gerber’s “Binding the Narrative Thread: Storytelling and the Mother-Daughter Relationship in Edwidge Danticat’s *Breath, Eyes, Memory*” she argues that “Martine can only be free in death” (196). While Martine’s suicide ends her life, it also functions as an act of agency. For Martine, the trauma of rape is impossible to escape and death becomes the only viable option. In choosing death, Martine chooses herself, which implies an act of agency despite the finality of her choice. While I doubt Danticat wants readers to consider suicide a viable option, what we learn from

Martine's character is that trauma can debilitate, confuse, and ultimately, destroy a person's self-worth. Sophie differs because she finds a way to confront her testing trauma and make peace with her mother's rape as well.

The novel ends with Sophie and her family attending her mother's funeral in Haiti. Unable to deal with the final funeral proceedings, Sophie "turned around and ran down the hill, ahead of the others" (Danticat 233). Sophie then attacks the cane field, which scholar Donette A. Francis reads as an act of liberation. She states:

the violence is enacted on the canefields rather than on her own physical body. In this way, she frees herself from the debilitating subjection implicit in the previous scenes. Sophie's actions here must be understood as her willful re-membering of devastations enacted upon the bodies of her family members. Recognizing that the collective Caco body is in dire need of restitution, she lashes out against the very site that symbolically produced three generations of violated and broken bodies. This final act is a step in her journey to wellness, and it makes the final scene an act of healing. (87-88)

Francis articulates the connections between self and family Sophie embodies when she attacks the canefields. By returning to the site of her mother's rape, Sophie refuses to allow past traumas to determine her future life. This one act of "wellness" indicates Sophie's desire to confront her past traumas and work to resuscitate her self-worth to avoid replicating acts such as testing with her daughter Brigitte.

In *Breath, Eyes, Memory*, communal autonomy materializes through women's relationships to the home. As a source of continued strength, the home offers multiple opportunities for women to engage acts and practices of womanhood that are used to create an identity. For Sophie, the journey to identity has only begun. Her efforts to address and deal with

the trauma of testing provide a sense of hope for future generations of Haitian women. The challenges of femininity women confront to develop autonomy useful in the construction of identity is pitted against cultural norms and practices that deny African diasporic women full access to their own bodies. Danticat's use of trauma serves as a source of conflict Haitian women confront when working to establish their identities. The power of communal autonomy in *Breath, Eyes, Memory*, suggests that women have a lot to learn from versions of womanhood represented in the home. It is only when women engage female family members in the home that the true intentions of self-worth can be utilized by women to create the necessary autonomy to negotiate an identity.

## CHAPTER 4

### “A backward noplacel ruled by men”: PLACE AND OUTSIDERS WITHIN IN TONI MORRISON’S *PARADISE*

Toni Morrison’s *Paradise* (1997) depicts an imagined patriarchal society both threatened and nurtured by women. As indicated by the physical places of Ruby, Oklahoma, and the Convent miles outside of it, Morrison’s preoccupation with gender reveals two contrasting representations of womanhood.<sup>31</sup> The women of Ruby exhibit a visible, yet silent, presence in the novel, thereby reinforcing the patriarchal authority of Ruby’s men. In contrast, the Convent women occupy a world unto themselves where, despite their differences, they thrive and ultimately heal one another. Morrison’s novel thus offers two oppositional versions of womanhood, represented by the Ruby women and the Convent women, in order to critique the former’s maintenance of and the latter’s resistance to patriarchal ideology. Both groups of women are restricted by patriarchal limitations that define appropriate roles for women and their potential for agency. Morrison utilizes places such as the town of Ruby and different kinds of homes within and without it in order to explore the complexities of women’s lives. In spite of the brevity of interior spaces illuminated in the novel, Morrison examines how the concept of place informs and influences the renegotiation of women’s identity formation. The places that unfold on the pages of *Paradise* not only provide context for the narrative, but also serve as moments of psychological awakening for female characters.

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<sup>31</sup> Ruby is the fictional all-black town begun by the 8-Rock community in 1950. In addition, the Convent exists “seventeen miles” outside Ruby (3). First used as an embezzler’s mansion, the Convent later becomes a boarding school “where stilled Arapaho girls once sat and learned to forget” (4).

While the all-black town of Ruby functions as a self-sufficient community, defined by the town members' ownership of it, its neighbor, the Convent, is defined by the organic creation of a community where women find solace in an unfamiliar place. In Ruby, community is defined by the racial purity of the town members; whereas, in the Convent, people just arrive and there are no conditions for being included. My analysis will evaluate the patriarchal community of Ruby and the Convent's matriarchal community as specific places of knowledge that inform female characters' identity formation. In *Paradise*, place provides a framework to examine how communities inform and direct the actions of its members, specifically women. A closer look into place reveals how methods, rules, and expectations assigned to female members can both empower and stunt women's growth.

Although much of the extant criticism on the novel constructs female agency as a positive form of empowerment, I think that the fragmented, nonlinear narrative calls into question the presence of agency for the Ruby women whose silent, submissive support for the all-black town renders the Convent women perpetual outsiders. As female characters in *Paradise* navigate both the all-black town and the Convent, it also becomes difficult to determine whether they are ever conscious of the power contained in their silence. By exploring specific places within the Convent and Ruby, I will uncover and examine how the Convent women function as a communal family, whereas Ruby women are expected to occupy subordinate roles in the town, which stifles their potential and stunts their identities. The Convent is positioned as a source of communal autonomy in the novel due to its inclusive nature. Given its function as a source of refuge, respite, escape, and shelter, the Convent functions on multiple levels as a home away from home, a place its inhabitants come to embrace.



In general, criticism of *Paradise* falls between three clear categories. For example, scholars such as Peter R. Kearly, Phillip Page, Magali Cornier Michael, Channette Romero, Candice Jenkins, and Josef Raab examine the concept of community in *Paradise*. In her article “Re-Imagining Agency: Toni Morrison’s *Paradise*,” for example, Magali Cornier Michael situates agency within the confines of coalitional politics to critique manifestations of social justice issues. Candice Jenkins’ “Pure Black: Class, Color, and Intra-racial Politics in Toni Morrison’s *Paradise*,” argues that class privilege coupled with questions of racial authenticity permeate the novel as “The central conflicts of the novel have to do with the perceived boundaries of black identity and community; indeed, it may be fair to describe *Paradise* as a novel about black nationalism” (274).<sup>32</sup> Other scholars, such as Marni Gauthier, Jennifer Lee Jordan Heinert, and Katrine Dalsgard, discuss how Morrison forces her readers to revisit -- even to question -- our concept of truth in American history. Gauthier articulates the role of mythic histories, stating that “*Paradise* explores the ways that truths are constituted, maintained, and subjugated in the process of mythologizing history, a process Morrison suggests is endemic to national community” (396). Finally, Elizabeth Yukins, Carola Hilfrich, Chia-chin Tsai, discuss Morrison’s treatment of memory.<sup>33</sup>

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<sup>32</sup> See extant criticism from Peter R. Kearly’s article “Toni Morrison’s *Paradise* and the Politics of Community.” (*Journal of American & Comparative Cultures* 23.2 (2000): 9-16. Print.); Philip Page’s article “Furrowing All the Brows: Interpretation and the Transcendent in Toni Morrison’s *Paradise*.” (*African American Review* 35.4 (2001): 637-649. Print.); Magali Cornier Michael’s “Re-Imagining Agency: Toni Morrison’s *Paradise*.” (*African American Review* 36.4 (2002): 643-661. Print.); Channette Romero’s article “Creating the Beloved Community: Religion, Race, and Nation in Toni Morrison’s *Paradise*.” (*African American Review* 39.3 (2005): 415-430. Print.); Candice Jenkins’ “Pure Black: Class, Color, and Intra-racial Politics in Toni Morrison’s *Paradise*.” (*Modern Fiction Studies* 52.2 (2006): 270-96. Print.); Josef Raab’s “Deviance and Exclusion in Toni Morrison’s *Paradise*.” (*Millennial Perspectives: Lifeworlds and Utopias*. Eds. Brigitte Georgi-Findlay and Hand-Ulrich Mohr. Heidelberg: Winter, 2003. 211-225. Print.).

<sup>33</sup> Marni Gauthier’s “The Other Side of *Paradise*: Toni Morrison’s (Un)making of Mythic History.” (*African American Review* 39.3 (2005): 395-414. Print.); Jennifer Lee Jordan Heinert’s “Situating Morrison in (African-) American Literary Criticism.” (*Narrative Conventions and Race in the Novels of Toni Morrison*. New York: Routledge, 2009. 1-11.); Katrine Dalsgard’s “The One All-Black Town Worth the Pain: (African) American Exceptionalism, Historical Narration, and the Critique of Nationhood in Toni Morrison’s *Paradise*.” (*African American Review* 35.2 (2001): 233-248. Print.).

Furthermore, given the nature of *Paradise* as a novel that, by its very title, intimates the concept of space, much of the extant scholarship on this novel interrogates the concept of space as defined by race, gender, physical geography, or the characters' idea of home. For example, Ana María Fraile-Marcos, Seongho Yoon, Andrew Read, Andrea O'Reilly, Sarah Appleton Aguilar, and K. Zauditu-Selassie examine the nuances of gender in *Paradise* by tracing the function of Ruby women and the Convent women.<sup>34</sup> Lindsay M. Christopher and Patricia McKee explore physical geography as freedom and imagination in *Paradise*,<sup>35</sup> and Sweeney and Schur investigate the manifestations of social movements in *Paradise*. Richard Schur uses critical race theory in "Locating *Paradise* in the Post-Civil Rights Era: Toni Morrison and Critical Race Theory" to examine the role of decolonization as a practice African Americans use to heal from histories of racism and sexism. Although these scholars tread the same scholarly terrain in their investigation of Morrison's treatment of issues such as place and identity, none of them specifically examine how Morrison uses place to challenge and renegotiate women's identities; this is where I enter into dialogue with them.

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<sup>34</sup> See Ana María Fraile-Marcos's article "Hybridizing the 'City upon a Hill' in Toni Morrison's *Paradise*." (*Melus* 28.4 (2003): 3-33. Print.); Seongho Yoon's "Home for the Outdoored: Geographies of Exclusion, Gendered Space, and Postethnicity in Toni Morrison's *Paradise*." (*The CEA Critic* 67.3 (2005): 65-80. Print.); Andrew Read's "As if word magic had anything to do with the courage it took to be a man': Black Masculinity in Toni Morrison's *Paradise*." (*African American Review* 39.4 (2005): 527-540. Print.); Andrea O'Reilly's "Maternal Interventions: Resistance and Power: *The Bluest Eye*, *Song of Solomon*, *Tar Baby*, *Beloved*, *Paradise*." *Toni Morrison and Motherhood: A Politics of the Heart*. (Albany: SUNY P, 2004. 117-152. Print.); Sarah Appleton Aguilar's "Passing On" Death: Stealing Life in Toni Morrison's *Paradise*." (*African American Review* 38.3 (2004): 513-519. Print.); K. Zauditu-Selassie's "In(her)iting the Divine: (Consola)tions, Sacred (Convent)ions, and Mediations of the Spiritual In-between in *Paradise*." *African Spiritual Traditions in the Novels of Toni Morrison*. (Gainesville: UP of Florida, 2009. 119-141. Print.).

<sup>35</sup> Patricia McKee's "Geographies of *Paradise*." (*The New Centennial Review* 3.1 (2003): 197-223. Print.) utilizes the work of Homi Bhabha and bell hooks to explore the work of freedom at play in Morrison's novel. For example, McKee argues, "Rather than assume a freedom that requires empty space, these women assume a social freedom which always depends on others' allowance" (212). In addition, Lindsay M. Christopher's article "The Geographical Imagination in Toni Morrison's *Paradise*" examines the role of maps in literature as "literary cartography plays close attention to the use of space, place, narrative movement or plot, and the actual use of maps in texts." (*Rocky Mountain Review* 63.1 (2009): 89. Print.).

The all-black town of Ruby was established by the patriarchal fathers of the founding 8-Rock families, including “Deacon Morgan, Steward Morgan, William Cato, Ace Flood, Aaron Poole, Nathan DuPres, Moss DuPres, Arnold Fleetwood, Ossie Beauchamp, Harper Jury, Sargeant Person, John Seawright, Edward Sands and . . . Roger Best” (Morrison 194-195). Their devotion to their ancestors and racial bloodlines stand in stark contrast to the inclusive community the Convent women cultivate to maintain their survival. Ruby exists as a “quiet, orderly community” (8), a place its residents call home. However, this seemingly idyllic paradise is flawed because of its exclusionary practices driven by the town’s fears of outside encroachment. The danger of such exclusionary communities lies in their ability to label strangers, such as the Convent women, as outsiders and thus shield the community from these influences -- “those heifers” -- who seek to destroy its “peaceable kingdom” (276). The use of the phrase “peaceable kingdom” refers to the earthly heaven that the town of Ruby considers itself to be. Ruby’s isolation breeds a unique form of governance, one which “neither had nor needed a jail. No criminals had ever come from this town. And the one or two people who acted up, humiliated their families or threatened the town’s view of itself were taken good care of” (8). Because the patriarchal fathers of Ruby care deeply about their town, they do whatever is necessary to protect their own and keep others out. The fear of strangers, of outsiders, seeks to disrupt the order established by Ruby’s fathers, whose power is contingent on their authoritative control of the town’s citizens.

In Morrison’s *Paradise* the town of Ruby resembles early all-black towns such as those established in Nicodemus, Kansas, and Boley, Oklahoma.<sup>36</sup> African Americans migrated from

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<sup>36</sup> See Kenneth Marvin Hamilton’s *Black Towns and Profit: Promotion and Development in the Trans-Appalachian West, 1877- 1915* (Urbana: U of Illinois P, 1991. Print.). Nicodemus began in 1877 when “seven Kansans formed the Nicodemus Town Company, the first trust association that would attempt to develop a town in the Trans-

the South during and after Reconstruction into the western frontier to establish self-sufficient towns free of white control, violence, and intimidation. George O. Carney also identifies economic stability and racial solidarity as motivations for black American expansion westward.<sup>37</sup> The reasons for such journeys were as numerous as the blacks seeking to escape southern segregation: “Some blacks wanted to live with people of their own race, which gave them a sense of security in a new homeland. Others saw the black towns as an opportunity to control their own destiny, politically and economically, without interference from whites. Many viewed the towns as a safe haven from groups such as the Ku Klux Klan” (Carney 151). Such opportunities to secure land in the West sent droves of black citizens searching to establish their own sense of freedom. Morrison problematizes this freedom through the tensions that erupt over the coveted 8-Rock bloodlines in the fictional town of Ruby.

Desperate to stake their own claim in the West, members of the 8-Rock community venture further westward from “Mississippi & Louisiana” in search of their own earthly and exclusionary paradise, as the Old Fathers<sup>38</sup> and “seventy-nine or eighty-one” (Morrison 188) others erect a home in Haven, Oklahoma.<sup>39</sup> The racial shame experienced during the Disallowing<sup>40</sup> reinforces the town’s racial superiority. The Disallowing happens when

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Appalachian West for an all-black population” (6). The town of Boley emerged in 1904, and by “April 1905” there were “400 people on the townsite” (124).

<sup>37</sup> For additional information on all-black towns see Douglas Flamming’s *African Americans in the West* (Santa Barbara, ABC-CLIO, 2009. Print.); Quintard Taylor’s *In Search of the Racial Frontier: African Americans in the American West, 1528-1990*. (New York: W.W. Norton, 1998. Print.); William Loren Katz’s *The Black West* (3<sup>rd</sup> ed. Seattle: Open Hand Pub., 1987. Print). Nell Irvin Painter’s *Exodusters: Black Migration to Kansas after Reconstruction* provides a detailed look into the lives, motivations, and journeys of African Americans in search of freedom (Lawrence: UP of Kansas, 1986. Print.).

<sup>38</sup> The “Old Fathers” reference the original group of 8-Rock men, “Blackhorse, Morgan, Poole, Fleetwood, Beauchamp, Cato, Flood, and both DuPres families,” who traveled from the South to burgeoning all-black towns only to be “thrown out and cast away in Fairly, Oklahoma,” (Morrison 188).

<sup>39</sup> Haven is the town establish by the 8-Rock Old Fathers in “1890” (Morrison 16).

<sup>40</sup> The Disallowing refers to the rejection “from fair-skinned colored men” (195) who turned away the “nine large intact families [. . .] in Fairly, Oklahoma” (188). This seminal event instantly became a stain and later, a source of strength the original 8-Rocks and future generations would remember. After being cast out from seemingly welcoming all-black towns, the group decides to forge ahead to construct their own paradise.

intrasocial tensions make the inclusion of 8-Rock impossible within burgeoning all-black towns: “[F]or ten generations they had believed the division they fought to close was free against slave and rich against poor. Usually, but not always, white against black. Now they saw a new separation: light-skinned against black. The sign of racial purity they had taken for granted had become a stain” (Morrison 194). The Disallowing evokes shame<sup>41</sup> by 8-Rock community members, who expect a welcoming embrace from emerging Midwestern all-black towns. These rejections due to their dark complexions cause alarm and confusion among the members of the group, whom the external narrator describes as “a tight band of wayfarers” (189). Instead, the group members take pride in perceiving themselves as a chosen people.<sup>42</sup> The stigma attached to their dark complexion leads the 8-Rock community to establish the town of Ruby in 1950 (89), out of their rejection by “rich Choctaw and poor whites.” Due to the betrayal Native Americans both witnessed and experienced during the formation of the United States, they are equally cautious towards outsiders. Their apprehension towards blacks seeking to establish lives in the West is a consequence of genuine reservations about outsiders seeking to establish laws that denigrate Native American beliefs and culture and ultimately pose the threat of extermination.<sup>43</sup> Given their identity as members of 8-Rock, the original members of the community believe

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<sup>41</sup>The shame experienced by the 8-rock community is still with us today because the legacy of racism remains an unspoken and often contested topic of discussion and experience for people of color living in the United States, and also around the globe. Dr. Valerie Babb’s text *Whiteness Visible: The Meaning of Whiteness in American Literature and Culture* (1998) traces the literary and cultural construction of whiteness as the privileged racial identity in the formation and sustainability of the United States. In summarizing the lasting effects of whiteness, Babb states, “Much of our dialogue on race has concerned itself with making an existing system, founded on a belief in the supremacy of whiteness, more amenable to the concerns of a diverse population, and not changing that system” (New York: New York UP, 1998. 176. Print.).

<sup>42</sup> According to the King James version of the Bible, the “chosen people” refer to those of Jewish descent as exclaimed “For thou art an holy people unto the LORD thy God: the LORD thy God hath chosen thee to be a special people unto himself, above all people that are upon the face of the earth” (Deut. 7:6). However, biblical scholars debate the meaning of Jewish peoples as both a nationality and a religion. Contemporary scholars also interpret this passage of the “chosen people” as believers of God’s commandments.

<sup>43</sup> See Murray R. Wickett’s *Contested Territory: Whites, Native Americans, and African Americans in Oklahoma 1865-1907*. (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State UP, 2000. Print.).

“they are more than prepared—they were destined” (14) to develop a town and thrive without support from neighboring all-black towns and interference from local white authority.

The novel opens with a vivid, visual orientation to place. A group of men from Ruby descend on the Convent to attack the women in “no hurry” because they are shrouded by “ninety miles between it and any other” town (Morrison 3). The novel opens with lush but sparse detail to identify the Convent interior spaces as “the halls, the chapel, the schoolroom, the bedrooms” (3). Noting the “rose-tone marble floors” (3), “ornate bathroom fixtures,” and “princely tubs and sinks” (4), all relics of the previous owner, an embezzler, the men proceed through the mansion. They are appalled by the flashy sexualization of the Convent’s decor, which signifies the presence of “throwaway people” (4) who threaten Ruby. Their destruction of the Convent and the women becomes a means of cementing Ruby’s authoritative power to ensure “nothing inside or out rots the one all-black town worth the pain” (5). The fears aimed at the Convent women reflect Ruby’s desire to remain pure and distant from outside influences. The novel’s opening stage presents disorderly acts of incomprehensible violence because the Ruby men forcefully attack the Convent and its inhabitants. Although the Convent women are taken by surprise, they manage to fight back in an attempt to resist the men’s violence. Such a violent, visceral image sets the scene for the novel’s events, as the Ruby men resemble the very evils they sought to escape in creating their town.

The outsidersness of Ruby’s women suggests the women’s relation to and disassociation from the town’s patriarchal fathers, and their positions as outsiders-within. The sociologist and feminist theorist Patricia Hill Collins defines the contours of the “outsider-within” as “social locations or border spaces occupied by groups of unequal power” (Collins 5). Collins further articulates the role of outsiders-within by stipulating that “the outsider-within location describes

a particular knowledge/power relationship, one of gaining knowledge about or of a dominant group without gaining the full power accorded to members of that group” (6). Ruby’s women function as outsiders-within because they occupy a dual position as privileged members of the town, yet they do not possess the same power wielded by the town’s menfolk. Ruby women face a daunting challenge as outsiders-within because their efforts to assert individual agency are intertwined with the maintenance of Ruby’s patriarchy.

For example, Patricia Best, Ruby’s local historian, laments the shame cast upon her father Roger Best, who was the “first to violate the blood rule” (105) by marrying her mother, Delia. Although Roger Best serves as one founding father of Ruby, his decision to marry a woman outside the 8-Rock community creates conflict and disapproval. Described as the “first visible glitch” in the 8-Rock community, Patricia’s mother Delia is shamed because she “looked like a cracker” (196). The town “despised Daddy for marrying a wife with no last name, a wife without people, a wife of sunlight skin, a wife of racial tampering” (197). Due to the pride 8-Rock members have internalized surrounding their skin complexion, Delia finds herself cast as an outsider in her own community. When Delia falls ill during childbirth, Ruby women step in to help; yet, despite their interest, the men “looked down” on her. Because of her “long brown hair” and “honey-speckled eyes” (200), Delia is perceived and treated as an outsider. Town members shun her, even as they also consider her an asset to the town’s survival since she possesses the ability to pass for white. During the group’s travels, Delia is called on to assist in whites-only spaces. Patricia remembers “they needed you, used you to go into a store to get supplies or a can of milk while they parked around the corner” (200). The town disapproves of Delia’s light complexion because she has access to the world the 8-Rock fathers do not. Because she can easily pass for white, the 8-Rock community exploits Delia to secure necessary

provisions, even though they otherwise shun her presence. Thus, Delia functions as a lightning rod for everything Ruby members love and despise about themselves.

The domestic spaces in Ruby reinforce the outsider-within status of its women. As citizens of Ruby, women share in the material bounty and exclusion from white authority afforded its members, yet they are most often confined to domestic roles whose meanings are reinforced by the interior spaces they occupy. The sisters Soane and Dovey Morgan, wives of Ruby's wealthy patriarchs Deacon and Stewart Morgan, highlight the role of domestic places as a constant source of women's outsider-within positioning in the novel. On the one hand, Ruby women like these sisters are affluent enough to purchase "soap for the face alone or diapers only," and the bountiful increase of consumer goods because of modernity makes domestic chores easier for them: "appliances pumped, hummed, sucked, purred, whispered and flowed. And there was time [. . .]" (Morrison 89). Ruby women find that their modern conveniences free up leisure time, with "front yards . . . given over completely to flowers for no good reason except there was time in which to do it" (89). On the other hand, their womanhood is defined and limited to their domestic labor, which denies them the opportunity to engage in the public sphere and community leadership roles. Ruby women perform an assortment of domestic responsibilities that reinforce the power of patriarchal authority and the absence of agency in their lives.

One such place exemplifying this outsider-within status where Ruby women are confined exclusively to domestic work is the Fleetwood home, where Stewart and Deacon Morgan meet Arnold Fleetwood and his son, Jeff, to discuss the ramifications of their nephew's violence against Arnold's daughter, Arnette. Interior spaces in the Fleetwood home are narrated by male characters who silence and deny the presence of women, despite their maintenance and



sustainability of the home. Arnette is nowhere to be seen or heard during this meeting. In fact, she is not included in the discussion by the men to avenge her honor. Given the austere dimensions of patriarchal Ruby, Arnette is denied the right to voice her disapproval of violence. Instead, her father and brother meet with the accused to reach a settlement.

Arnette's position as an outsider-within demonstrates how boundaries erected under the guise of protection equally disempower women, denying their ability to articulate their experiences and confront those who do them harm. The officiating member Reverend Misner offers the only details about the Fleetwood women, "who [are] nowhere in sight" as the men [sit] on "spotless upholstery" (58). The absence of the Fleetwood women (including Arnette) implies the lack of power these women command, even when they occupy the domestic sphere, which is traditionally considered a feminine space.<sup>44</sup> Although Reverend Misner reports to the group that the "ladies promise to bring us coffee" and "rice pudding" (58), their absence is due to the endless cycle of care administered "to massage a little bottom to keep sores away; or to siphon phlegm or grind food or clean teeth or trim nails or launder out urine or cradle in her arms or sing" (124). Given Arnette's submissive role in her family, she cannot voice her outrage over K.D.'s violence. Instead, her father and brother assert their authority to negotiate a peace offering on her behalf. In his attempts to save his daughter's honor, Arnold Fleetwood agrees to allow Deek Morgan to "help out some" (61) with Arnette's education while she is simultaneously stripped of her voice.

Sweetie Fleetwood is a young, Ruby mother whose daily existence is burdened by four sickly children who her husband "Jeff and her father-in-law couldn't look [at], let alone watch" (Morrison 125). The sole responsibility, and thus survival, of these children falls to Sweetie and

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<sup>44</sup> See Barbara Welter's article entitled "The Cult of True Womanhood: 1820-1860." *American Quarterly* 18.2/1 (1966): 151-174 . <<http://links.jstor.org/sici?sici=0003-0678%28196622%2918%3A2%3C151%3ATCOTW1%3E2.0.CO%3B2-H>>.

her mother-in-law, Mable. Although the women are primarily confined to the house tending to Sweetie's sickly children, the novel illuminates scant details of their routine or schedule. The life Sweetie lives is symptomatic of exhaustion, despair, and mere snatches of hope as she navigates the daily chores in the house. Yet, "unwashed, coatless and with uncombed hair," she musters the mental strength to leave home: "she opened the front door and left. Quickly" (Morrison 125). Sweetie's decision to flee the mundane interior spaces of home suggests the overwhelming nature of her maternal responsibility, where after "six years" (125) she can no longer withstand the daily grind of tending to her children. In a moment of indecision, Sweetie fathoms escape-- the "one possibility" (125)-- as both a strength and a weakness. Her decision to temporarily abandon her family is perceived by Sweetie as an act of weakness because the stress of motherhood becomes too heavy a responsibility. The care Sweetie administers to her sickly children requires constant monitoring, which she finds unbearable. Unable to cope with the monotonous love and attention required for her children, Sweetie leaves home in search of temporary escape.

Although few women occupy an independent status in Ruby, those who do also often negotiate shifting borders of inclusion and exclusion. For example, Ruby's resident midwife, Lone DuPres, marvels at her "never-fail reputation" with new mothers. Soon, however, Ruby women prefer the "comforts of the Demby hospital" to Lone's "clean bellybands" and "drops of mother's urine" used to deliver children (Morrison 271). Once considered a revered member of the Ruby community, Lone finds herself without work, and she believes the Ruby women no longer trust her because of their access to better, modern accommodations for childbirth and because she was midwife to the mother of the damaged Fleetwood children, who had "stained her reputation as if she *made* the babies" (271). Unable to provide any other services, Lone is

cast aside and left to the charities of “congregations and neighbors” (272) when the town blames her for Jeff and Sweetie’s “defectives” (271). Lone’s position as outsider-within is also directly tied to the lack of 8-Rock blood she shares with the Ruby community. Lone joins the original 8-Rock group as one of the “stolen babies” claimed by Fairy DuPres during the journey west. Fairy DuPres fought to keep Lone who she reared and “taught her everything she came to know about midwifery” (Morrison 190). Lone occupies a position as outsider-within because she does not share the ancestral bloodlines members of Ruby prize. However, Lone’s rejection by the town is inconsequential. She is allowed to live in Ruby because she poses no threat to Ruby’s patriarchal authority. In fact, “at seventy-nine, unlicensed but feisty, she was going to learn to drive and have her own car too” (270). Given Lone’s position as an outsider-within in Ruby, she has the freedom to live in and navigate the town on her own terms.

For Lone, the town of Ruby functions as both a home and a community. Yet, her ability to navigate the town as an outsider-within grants Lone the freedom to determine her own path toward identity. Her character represents an idealized version of communal autonomy because she occupies a position as witness to the conflicting communities of Ruby and the Convent as she straddles both worlds lending help when she can. Independent women such as Lone exist as perpetual outsiders in Ruby. Anna Flood, the daughter of Ace Flood, returns to Ruby from Detroit when her father dies to “sellout—the store, the apartment, the care, everything [. . .].” Yet, she decides to stay due to a potential relationship with Richard Misner (Morrison 116). Although Anna’s burgeoning relationship with Misner brings ridicule from Ruby women, “her unstraightened hair” garners the most “disapproval” (119). Anna challenges Ruby’s definitions of womanhood by choosing a natural hairstyle. However, owning the store grants Anna the greatest degree of independence because she is not dependent on the town for her survival.

Instead, she prospers within Ruby, and “Ace’s Grocery blossomed through variety, comfort and flexibility” (120). Her success lies in her decision to cater to her patrons, who found “free coffee on cold days” in addition to items that “catered to the appetites of the young” (120) who frequented the store. Anna represents an outsider-within in Ruby because her independence does not threaten the town since she provides a valuable service through her store.

Anna’s connection to the black community in Detroit helps to solidify her orientation to communal autonomy. Anna’s ability to define herself as an individual is due to the communal ties of racial solidarity she procures in Detroit. Upon her return to Ruby, Anna has the ability to withstand the town’s judgments and assumptions because she no longer relies on the single version of community expected by the patriarchal fathers of Ruby. Ultimately, the town’s disapproval of Anna stems from her abandonment. Yet, Anna reveals to Reverend Misner the reason for her departure when stating, “Well. Thought I could do something up north. Something real that wouldn’t break my heart. But it was all, I don’t know, talk, running around. I got confused. Still, I don’t regret going one bit—even though it didn’t work out” (Morrison 118). This passage reveals that Anna’s desire to leave Ruby stems from her individual desire to become a part of a larger community. In a search to belong, Anna’s travels to Detroit in hopes of joining the Civil Rights Movement, one that Ruby citizens have rebuked. Magali Cornier Michael argues that separatism does not lead to coalitions and “*Paradise* nevertheless indicates the necessity at times of separatism for survival and the (limited) possibilities of coalition within a separatist structure” (648). For Anna, the allure of racial solidarity associated with the Civil Rights Movement mirrors the identity politics of Ruby, yet Anna learns such separatism often excludes those members who seek to benefit from such types of community. The ability to use

community to define the self can only work if the community embraces individual members as they are.

In contrast to women like Lone and Anna, the five Convent women—Consolata (Connie), Mavis, Grace (Gigi), Seneca, and Pallas-- are complete outsiders. The Convent exists as an idyllic place of refuge nestled in the middle of nowhere in Oklahoma. Consolata, the Convent mother, rejuvenates the boarders comprised of African American women and one “white girl” (Morrison 3) by encouraging them to exist as they please. The town’s initial attitude towards these women, deemed “[s]trange neighbors . . . but harmless” (11), is one of appreciation. Yet, while the town initially approves of the Convent as a resourceful aid that “took people in—lost folk or folk who needed a rest” (Morrison 11), Ruby’s citizens soon perceive the women as “a lie, a front,” (11). Ruby’s patriarchal fathers, who perceive independent women as a threat to their authority and a temptation to the women of the town, repeatedly challenge the Convent’s communal arrangement of inclusivity and “take aim” at the Convent “[f]or Ruby” in order to expunge the women and thus their problems (18). The problems attributed to the Convent women reveal Ruby’s denial of its own decay: “A mother was knocked down the stairs by her cold-eyed daughter. Four damaged infants were born in one family. Daughters refused to get out of bed. Brides disappeared on their honeymoons. Two brothers shot each other on New Year’s Day. Trips to Demby for VD shots common” (11). Although the town casts blame for its problems on the Convent women, its citizens’ acts of disobedience and violence result from Ruby’s patriarchal control and their prideful exclusion of outsiders.

In opposition to spaces that emphasize the privileged yet disempowered status of the Ruby women, the Convent women work together to cultivate a home. The women who appear

sporadically and reside at the Convent function as a surrogate family for one another. The inclusive nature of the Convent is important because it demonstrates the potential power of place as a source of healing for women. The Convent rests on the edges of Ruby as a place for women with nowhere else to turn. It is a place of “[n]ot women locked safely away from men; but worse, women who chose themselves for company” (Morrison 276). Each of the women, including the maternal figure, Consolata, has experienced differing traumas, such as death, intimidation, abandonment, and abuse. While the town of Ruby labels the women “Bitches. More like witches” (Morrison 276), Anna Flood, the local merchant, attributes the pain the Convent women struggled to embrace as “the turbulence of females trying to bridle, without being trampled, the monsters that slavered them” (303). Anna’s comment acknowledges the Convent as a place that nourishes women whose lives are depleted by their traumatic pasts. What these women find at the Convent is a space of inclusion, a place in which each woman can negotiate the fullness of her identity. As Seongho Yoon notes, “When the wayward women end up in the Convent, it becomes a place they can return to whenever they want, a haven that protects them from the painful past that still haunts them” (74). The Convent offers a place for the construction of a community, which the women emulate through their interactions with one another and the town of Ruby. Despite the town’s utter disapproval of the Convent women, the women thrive as strangers who create a communal home.

Because the Convent women live on the fringes of Ruby with “[n]o men” (276), they are targeted as the cause of the town’s troubles, due to their deviation from patriarchal norms of femininity that demand obedience and submission to men. The fear of women without men solidifies Ruby’s ostracization of these women. Lone overhears a group of Ruby’s men planning to attack the Convent as a solution to “the ruination that was upon them—how Ruby was

changing in intolerable ways” (275) due to youthful disobedience. Yet she notes how the men seek only destruction, not “extending a hand in fellowship or love” (275). Ruby men perceive acts of youthful defiance as symptomatic of the convent women’s influence: “If they stayed to themselves, that’d be something. But they don’t. They meddle. Drawing folks out there like flies to shit and everybody who goes near them is maimed somehow and the mess is seeping back into *our* homes, *our* families” (276).

Each woman arrives unexpectedly at the Convent searching, albeit unconsciously, for what they later identify as their own identities, rather than roles imposed upon them by others. Mavis Albright, a twenty-seven-year-old mother of five, abruptly leaves her family early one morning in fear of her life. After the accidental suffocation deaths of her twins, Merle and Perle, Mavis tells her mother “They’re trying to kill me, Ma” (Morrison 31). Despite Mavis’s fears, she abandons her family and begins a new journey:

Mavis felt her stupidity close in on her head like a dry sack. A grown woman who could not cross the country. Could not make a plan that accommodated more than twenty minutes. Had to be taught how to dry herself in the weeds. Too rattle-minded to open a car’s window so babies could breathe. [. . .] Frank was right. From the very beginning he had been absolutely right about her: she was the dumbest bitch on the planet. (37)

This description demonstrates her fragile state of mind, but more importantly, her inability to identify her own strengths and weaknesses. At the Convent, however, Mavis transforms from an abused and submissive woman into an assertive woman who rejects her family to save herself. The decision to leave her family fuels Mavis’s renegotiation of her identity. Because Mavis defines herself solely by her roles as mother and wife, she fails to acknowledge her own agency as a source of strength. Despite the newfound sense of freedom Mavis experiences, she

acknowledges her positionality as a passive victim, which exacerbates the violent relationship with her husband Frank. In this moment, Mavis is finally able to understand the meaning of her self-worth. For Mavis, deserting her family is the first act of agency she consciously performs as she engages in a journey desperately searching for self. Yet, this act of agency forces Mavis to choose between her family and her sanity. The traumatic loss Mavis experiences due to the death of two children, and subsequently the loss of her family, becomes the impetus for a renegotiation of her identity.

Mavis is not the only woman to arrive at the Convent uncertain of the future. With the help of Billie Delia, the daughter of Ruby's historian Patricia Best, Pallas, a young woman from Los Angeles, arrives to the Convent mute and disheveled, unable to make sense of her life, yet keenly observant of others she encounters. Despite any hesitations that arise when she meets the women, Billie Delia reassures Pallas of the help she will find at the Convent, a place of solace and a space of healing:

This is a place where you can stay for a while. No questions. I did it once and they were nice to me. Nicer than—well, very nice. Don't be afraid. I used to be. Afraid of them, I mean. Don't see many girls like them out here. [. . .] Anyway you can collect yourself there, think things through, with nothing or nobody bothering you all the time. They'll take care of you or leave you alone—whichever way you want it. (175-76)

These descriptions speak to the inviting nature of the Convent, a place where women are free to exist while being accepted without questions about themselves. Billie Delia encourages Pallas to feel at ease at the Convent, as she did after a fight with her mother Patricia who “thought of her as a liability somehow” (203).



In stark contrast to the town of Ruby, the Convent embraces openness as a source of inspiration for the women that live and those who visit this place. The Convent serves as an example of communal autonomy because the women who live within its borders work collaboratively as a family. Although the Convent's inhabitants are strangers, they all suffer strained or severed ties with their biological families, which enables their nurturance and care for Ruby members who venture to the Convent when they have nowhere else to turn. Arnette Fleetwood's arrival at the Convent is due to her inability to deal with the ramifications of an unwanted pregnancy. It comes as no surprise then when Arnette arrives at the Convent and demands, "You have to help me," . . . "You have to. I've been raped and it's almost August" (Morrison 77). Unable to face her family and admit her pregnancy, Arnette turns to the Convent women to rectify her current dilemma so she can attend college in the fall. Although Arnette lies about the rape, she is compelled to rely on strangers to resolve her dilemma instead of the family who claims to love her. The Convent women transgress the boundaries of place by welcoming all who arrive in spite of the town's authority, which positions them as outsiders.

Given the confining nature of Ruby, citizens venture outside of town seeking respite in an unfamiliar, but welcoming place. Soane Morgan ruminates on the help she received at the Convent as an afterthought of what could have been: "Her-little girl—was it?—would be nineteen years old now if Soane had not gone to the Convent for the help sin always needed" (Morrison 102). The "sin" refers to an abortion Soane received with the aid of Connie. The association of sin with the Convent allows this place to function in defiant opposition to Ruby's self-anointed purity. Yet, it is always during moments of "sin" or shame that women turn to the Convent seeking help. Despite the help offered by the Convent women, they pose a threat to the rigidly defined masculinity of Ruby by providing assistance to those in need, and therefore

transgressing its patriarchal authority. Lone overhears Ruby men plot their attack on the Convent using the women's independence and immorality as justification for their impending violence. The men recount examples of disorder caused by the Convent women in stating: "These here sluts out there by themselves never step foot in church and I bet you a dollar to a fat nickel they ain't thinking about one either. They don't need men and they don't need God" (276). The lack of morality expressed by the Convent women draws immediate concern from Ruby members, who assume the women are "sluts" because they do not need men and they lack the noticeable signs of religious devotion. Given the town's righteous superiority, they fail to recognize that the shame cast on the Convent women originates from within the town.

The tensions that arise between the Convent and Ruby women in the novel identify larger issues of respectability associated with black womanhood. The town of Ruby prides itself on its self-sufficiency, economic independence, and security. While Ruby women benefit from the fruits and labors of the patriarchal town most noticeably through protection, they are also pitted against women who define feminine respectability as submission and adherence to male authority. The town's perceptions of the Convent women have much to do with the sexualized nature of the women's dress, which stands in stark contrast to the appearance of Ruby women. The Convent women playfully draw attention to their sexuality in ways the Ruby women cannot. Given the absence of rules and structure at the Convent, the women who arrive are free to be themselves without considering their vulnerability to the male gaze. The noted feminist scholar bell hooks has written "The Oppositional Gaze: Black Female Spectators," which positions black women as witnesses whose actions function "as a site of resistance," that occurs "when individual black women actively resist the imposition of dominant ways of knowing and looking" (128). The Convent women are presented as sexualized beings and thus embody

whores; whereas Ruby women are positioned as Madonnas. The Madonna/whore dichotomy offers an interesting framework to examine the distinctions between Ruby women and those at the Convent. As prized members of respectability, Ruby women are elevated on a pedestal as the epitome of femininity. Their alleged adversaries, the Convent women, are cast as sexualized whores whose existence disrupts and calls into question the town's pristine order.

The emphasis on the Convent women's attire and their actions calls attention to Morrison's use of a female omniscient narrator. What we gain from this scene is the ability to juxtapose the Convent women with the town, which thus cements their positioning as outsiders-within. What we learn about the Convent women is filtered through the eyes of an arguably female external bystander watching the scene unfold. For instance, the use of language including "stockings" and "decorate" indicate a woman because a male observer would unlikely acknowledge this distinction. Also, the women are not objectified by their physical attributes, but rather, the descriptions fixate solely on the women's sexuality. We gain no information about the women's beauty, but rather, their descriptions imply a certain type of disdain, as demonstrated by the phrase "go-go girls," based solely on the women's attire (Morrison 156). On one hand, the women arrive to a semi-formal event in casual attire, which implies their disrespect for the town and its members. However, their casual attire can also be attributed to the carefree lives the women lead at the Convent.

The language choices used by the omniscient narrator to describe the Convent women have more to do with the expectations of respectable womanhood than the sexualized objectification a male narrator may use. Such narrative techniques force readers to concentrate on the town's gaze of the women, which appears more threatening than the women themselves. Morrison's use of a female omniscient narrator helps to create greater transparency for the

division that exists between the Convent women and those in Ruby. In the wedding reception scene, for example, the omniscient narrator introduces the Convent women, who arrive cheerful, confident, and clearly unaware of the town's disapproval. The women "piled out of the car looking like go-go girls," which clearly signals that "[n]one of them was dressed for a wedding" (Morrison 156). Filtered through an apparently female omniscient narrator, the first image of the women implies that the Ruby members perceive the Convent women as a distraction -- a tease -- for the devoutly Christian town. The women appear in "pink shorts, skimpy tops, see-through skirts; painted eyes, no lipstick; obviously no underwear, no stockings. Jezebel's storehouse raided to decorate arms, earlobes, necks, ankles, and even a nostril" (156).

As two of Ruby's youth join together in marriage, the omniscient narrator subtly hints at how different the Ruby women are from those of the Convent. Ruby women represent modest expressions of black womanhood because they "did not powder their faces and they wore no harlot's perfume" (Morrison 143). The absence of adornment on these women underscores their positioning as submissive objects in relation to men. Typically, weddings are lavish affairs, one where participants are expected to adorn their bodies. While the women may not be privy to this use of adornment, this remark indicates how the women of Ruby shy away from physical beauty. In fact, their lack of concern for beauty makes the inclusion of outsiders who prize such physical markers nearly impossible. For example, Grace, a young woman who has renamed herself as Gigi, arrives from Alcorn, Mississippi, in "pants so tight, heels so high, earrings so large they forgot to laugh at her hair" (53), and she attracts immediate attention and disdain from Ruby's youth. Ruby women pride themselves on their abstention from modern beauty conventions. Ruby women forgo individuality and personal autonomy in favor of feminine beauty in staking their claim to paradise. Given the Ruby women's investment and maintenance of the town, they

are isolated from one another aside from religious services and they defer to Ruby men, thus providing few opportunities for the women to socialize among themselves. In contrast, the Convent welcomes Ruby citizens as they work to repair and restore a sense of themselves damaged by the stifling atmosphere of Ruby's fathers. The Convent presents another example of communal autonomy through its ability to embrace and nurture wayward travelers whose desire to belong is hinged upon the expectations dictated by Ruby's patriarchal authority. Both places represent conflicting versions of communal autonomy as the convent engages the public sphere, Ruby women find strength in the domestic realm.

Outsiders-within are defined by their alienation from larger social groups. The Convent women are literal strangers to the town of Ruby because they are not related to the town's founding fathers. The wedding of K.D. and Arnette initially signals a reconciliation of the town, or at least an end to the feud between the Morgan and Fleetwood families. The atmosphere inside the church is one of "anticipation" in which town members plan to engage in "a good time with plenty good food at Soane Morgan's house" (Morrison 143). Despite her anticipation, Soane finds herself reconsidering the "mistake of inviting Connie and the Convent girls to the wedding reception" (154). In an attempt to reach out to the Convent women, Soane later regrets her decision because she fears the town's rejection of the women she secretly invited. Although the Convent women live outside Ruby, the citizens of Ruby immediately label the women strangers.

The significance of this scene is inherent in the narrative technique Morrison uses to shift between multiple character observations to narrate a single event. As the Convent women arrive clearly out of place, the town's response to these women makes apparent the belief in Ruby's rigid, patriarchal authority. Reverend Pulliam's comments about the Convent women are quite

telling because they identify the tightly wound notions of femininity expected by the town. Pulliam stares out the window at the women, thinking he “knew about such women. Like children, always on the lookout for fun, devoted to it but always needing a break in order to have it. A lift, a hand, a five-dollar bill. Somebody to excuse or coddle them. Somebody to look down at the ground and say nothing when they disturbed the peace” (Morrison 157). From this perspective, the Convent women become an immediate threat because they mimic characteristics of children, which is considered inappropriate behavior in adults. The emphasis on “such women” demonstrates a specific type of woman, one whose only concern is fun, which inevitably leads to a disruption of Ruby’s “peace.” His remarks also comment on larger social tensions between the Civil Rights and Black Power Movements. Reverend Pulliam situates the Convent women as objects in opposition to the town’s patriarchal authority and as a disruption to Ruby’s artificial, pristine order.

As the reception continues, Ruby women chime in to provide additional observations of the Convent women’s perception by the town. As this scene progresses, the Convent women are described as “girls.” The details shared by the omniscient narrator direct attention to these “girls” who “grin and yip” as they are “rocking their own bodies” (Morrison 157). These descriptions indicate Ruby’s shock and disbelief in the Convent women’s disregard for their bodies as they attempt to enjoy the reception festivities. The women proceed to borrow bikes from children and then “ride the bikes down Central Avenue, with no regard for what the breeze does to their long flowered skirts” (158). The perceived lack of regard for superficial feminine decorum raises alarm for Ruby citizens. As Anna Flood and Kate Golightly observe the women, Kate’s aunt, Alice Pulliam, is appalled by the women’s behavior when she asks, “Have you ever in your life seen such carrying on?” (158). This question suggests the Convent women have

broken a feminine code, a patriarchal behavior model expected of women. Alice's question also identifies the rigidly defined notion of femininity expected by the town. In Ruby, women are expected to occupy submissive roles and never call attention to themselves, yet the Convent women challenge these singular versions of womanhood that confine and restrict women's access to society. The Convent women pose a threat to Ruby, as Anna Flood remarks, "Nothing like other folks' sins for distraction" (159). The distraction Anna references speaks to the town's ability to transfer its own disappointment onto the women rather than acknowledge the destruction created within it. The Convent women come to represent the evil Ruby citizens fear from outsiders, those the town believes will encroach and destroy their earthly paradise.

The Convent and the women are destroyed by a group of Ruby men whose determination to rid Ruby of evil swells to include the innocent members of the community. Communal autonomy in *Paradise* manifests as a culmination of women's efforts to respond, react, and support one another, yet the Convent women are left to fend for themselves against the attack by Ruby men. The communal aspect of the Convent derives from Consolata's willingness to share the space with random women, but more importantly, the women's efforts to aid those seeking help. Ultimately, the Convent is destroyed because paradise can only be achieved through exclusion. Despite Ruby's attempts to erect and sustain an all-black town, they also fear the influence of strangers who seek to challenge and disrupt the town's masculine authority.

Initially incapable of maintaining relationships with their biological families, the Convent women treat each other as siblings within the space of the Convent. In true sibling fashion, the women argue, fight, comfort, console, and heal with strangers they have come to love in place that comes to embody home. Although the women never refer to themselves as a family, Ruby's insistence on the Convent women as inferior fails to impact how the women perceive

themselves. Despite numerous attempts to aid Ruby's members who appear at the Convent seeking help, the town cast its own guilt and anger at these women without ever considering how and why women occupy the Convent in the middle of nowhere. Much like the maturation process from adolescence to adulthood, the women who reside in the Convent come to signify a community. Despite the usual connotations of community derived by shared interests or commonalities, what these women share is their own individual desires for survival.

The paradise Morrison envisions reveals the culmination of women's individual journeys, which foster a space of practical healing for women to cultivate self-worth as communal autonomy. Of the five women who inhabit the Convent, Consolata (Connie) is portrayed as the authoritative mother figure. Yet, the version of authority and nurturance Connie exhibits is one of inclusivity, "Consolata does hold a position of power at the Convent. However, the power she yields is inextricable from caregiving and functions as a means of encouraging the construction of a community that depends on coalition processes of combining resources to achieve specific aims and that operates through caring and accepting each other's differences" (Michael 654). Connie's authority at the Convent is used solely to empower the women, not to belittle, restrict, or demean them like so many of the people in their lives. Yet, the women's journeys reflect their rejection of family as a source of guidance and protection. The community the women come to embody is possible because of the shared space of the Convent, which promotes a sense of belonging the women utilize to establish a community. Although I situate Connie as the authority figure in the Convent, she herself struggles to embrace life after the death of her mentor Mary Magna. Unbeknownst to the women, Connie isolates herself in the Convent's basement hoping "Each night she sank into sleep determined it would be the final one, and hoped that a great hovering foot would descend and crush her like a garden pest" (Morrison 221). The desire



for death, for closure, makes the process of living unbearable. Connie's contributions to the Convent are evident by her willingness to coexist with the random women who arrive at the Convent damaged, yet not completely destroyed.

Toni Morrison's *Paradise* calls attention to the politics of place that manifest in the novel, more specifically, the Convent. In this space, women inhabit an unfamiliar place to construct and renegotiate their identities in an effort to make sense of their lives. Although *Paradise* is filled with places and spaces characters inhabit, the Convent is the only such place in the novel that encourages women's growth and healing. Abused and neglected by their families, each woman must work to redefine the contours of their respective identities to establish self-worth. Here, place encourages the creation of a community of outsiders, as the women work alongside one another in defiance of the patriarchal authority that controls the town of Ruby. My examinations of these women as a community speaks to their ability to assist, comfort, and heal each other through their relation to place, which is the one space they can be unapologetically whole.

## CHAPTER 5

### “A freedom to be, to do”: TRANSFORMING THE SELF THROUGH COMMUNITY IN *PURPLE HIBISCUS*

Community in Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie’s *Purple Hibiscus* (2003) manifests through the protagonist Kambili, who experiences conflicting versions of home and family, which both challenge and nurture her emerging identity. Adichie contests traditional views of community defined by physical location to posit community as the response of women’s familial responsibilities to and for one another. Although the home generally represents a source of nurturing, understanding, and protection for the family, it also can function as an authoritative space of control that unleashes violence and commands obedience to its rules. Adichie’s *Purple Hibiscus* challenges the singularity of home by positing multiple familial dwellings as viable sources of experience that inform female identity formation. By isolating my analysis to the sense of community created within familial homes,<sup>45</sup> I examine how Adichie uses place to explore the possibilities of women-centered community that influence women’s identity formation.

I seek to examine specific versions of home represented in the novel by juxtaposing the Achike home in Enugu and Auntie Ifeoma’s home in Nsukka. Adichie posits two equally influential sites of home as conflicting, but congenial places that enable Kambili’s identity maturation as she learns to question religion, gender, and family in what becomes a quest for her identity. Both homes provide vital lessons that inform Kambili’s understanding of womanhood,

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<sup>45</sup> While my term “familial home” is not specific to any one location, it encompasses numerous home places individuals navigate within a family.

which she negotiates to gain a voice. While the family can and does function as a communal microcosm of the larger society, I explore how female family members constitute a community through their efforts to support, aid, and defend one another. My argument examines how Adichie utilizes the home as a place for constructing community amidst competing versions of womanhood. By situating my analysis within the realm of the home, I explore the function of physical places as sites of violence and trauma, but also as sources of consciousness, autonomy, and healing.

The critical dialogue on *Purple Hibiscus* falls into specific categories including Adichie's prose style, the postcolonial condition, and identity politics. Susan Z. Andrade's "Adichie's Genealogies: National and Feminine Novels" (2011) connects Adichie's novel with Tsitsi Dangarembga's *Nervous Conditions* (1988) to explore the history of women's literary representations.<sup>46</sup> Such representations, she argues, "illustrate the relationship between gender and politics as represented through the interaction of domestic and national spheres" (99). This comparative approach enables Andrade to trace the public and private spheres of Nigerian life as they manifest in the domestic and national realms of the novel. In addition, Daria Tunca's article, "Ideology in Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie's *Purple Hibiscus*," traces Kambili's first-person narration to decipher how ideology informs her perception of events, but also impedes her maturation. Tunca's emphasis on narrative style will inform my examination of community by reinforcing patriarchy, religion and materialism as ideological systems that contribute to Kambili's understanding of the world.

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<sup>46</sup> In *The Nation Writ Small: African Fictions and Feminisms, 1958-1988* (2011), Andrade examines the work of first-generation, post-independence writers, primarily novelists.

The postcolonial condition refers to a physical location and to individuals who occupy positions that were freed from colonial rule and continue to live with the legacy of colonialism.<sup>47</sup> It remains a contested site of individual and national identity in African diasporic women's literature, yet its function in Chimamanda Adichie's *Purple Hibiscus* elevates the conversation to explore the realities of Nigerian women's postcolonial existence. Tanya Dalziel's "Coming-of-Age, Coming to Mourning: *Purple Hibiscus*, *Lucy*, and *Nervous Conditions*" (2010) traces the bildungsroman tradition of black diasporic women writers to ascertain the role of mourning as a process of the postcolonial condition to create new options for resistance and change. Dalziel argues that *Purple Hibiscus* situates mourning as "loss and intersubjectivity, rather than fulfillment of independence," as a prominent feature of many "postcolonial women's rites-of-passage writings" (Dalziel 245). I agree with Dalziel that mourning and loss cannot be simply explained by old paradigms, and she makes an astute argument about the need for additional frameworks to tease out nuances of loss that occur along the postcolonial spectrum. Additionally, Susan Strehle's "The Decolonized Home: Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie's *Purple Hibiscus*" (2009) asserts the claim that Adichie utilizes the private spaces of the home to examine the crisis of the nation. Her analysis of *Purple Hibiscus* explores the dialectics of private (domestic) and public (nation) spaces as conflicting sites of allegorical turmoil. While Strehle explores the decolonized home in order to examine themes of nation and national identity, my chapter will explore scenes in homes involving religion, materialism, and patriarchy, and discuss how they catalyze the construction of communal autonomy for women.

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<sup>47</sup> See Bill Ashcroft's *The Empire Write Back: Theory and Practice in Post-Colonial Literatures* (London: Routledge, 1989. Print.); Homi Bhabha's *The Location of Culture* (London: Routledge, 1994. Print.); Ella Shohat's "Notes on the Post-Colonial" (*Social Text* 31/32 (1992): 99-113. Print.); and Sara Suleri's "Woman Skin Deep: Feminism and the Postcolonial Condition" (*Critical Inquiry* 18.4 (1992): 756-769. Print.).

The postcolonial home is one of the most influential and oppressive institutions black diasporic women encounter within the familial unit. For women, the home is centrally located as the source of inherent wisdom, encouragement, and resolve women utilize when establishing an identity. Western representations of family portray idyllic roles of the family as a loving, nurturing, and inclusive environment equally responsive to each member, yet such realities are difficult to fathom for all women, especially women outside Western borders. In Igboland, the use of local beliefs, imported gender roles, and political institutions influence both the appearance and control of the home. A brief look into familial roles of the postcolonial home will elucidate the actualities of Nigerian life that arise and influence character actions in *Purple Hibiscus*.

To conceptualize the function of the family in postcolonial society, it is necessary to consider different roles associated with the family. In a compelling examination of the Nigerian family, Nkiru Uwechia Nzegwu's *Family Matters: Feminist Concepts in African Philosophy of Culture* (2006) explores the role of colonialism in disrupting the home and the creation of gender roles imposed upon citizens.<sup>48</sup> Prior to colonial rule beginning in the nineteenth century, women in Igbo society played an integral role within the home and the community. Western conceptions of gender were unknown in Igboland as "... Igbo women as wives and daughters participated in political activities and established political groupings both in the family and the community at large. The existence of their political, religious, spiritual, and economic powers meant that they were not excluded from the sphere of civil society" (Nzegwu 44). The inclusion of women in both the domestic and political spheres of life portrays a celebrated image of women that

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<sup>48</sup> Nkiru Uwechia Nzegwu, *Family Matters: Feminist Concepts in African Philosophy of Culture* (Albany: State U of New York P, 2006. Print.). Nzegwu's study focuses on the Onitsha community located in the southern region of Igboland. Although the study highlights a particular community, the family politics espoused in this work speak to commonalities shared by members throughout Igboland.

contrasts with the assumptions of inferiority imposed by colonial powers. Ultimately, Nigerian women were thrust into roles of submission and obedience to support male dominance, which disrupted familial notions of consanguinity that regulated society.<sup>49</sup>

A further look into the socially organized roles of the family unit in Nigerian society will illustrate the gendered options available to women. While western models of family place men as the authoritative head of the family, women in Igboland were just as revered for their capability as “producers of family wealth” and “social regeneration,” which situates women on an equal level with their male counterparts (Nzegwu 51). The Igbo community acknowledged the importance of motherhood as a central component of a healthy and stable family. In addition, Igbo marriage customs were designed to support women in the home while reassuring their autonomy: “The Igbo marriage contract preserved the personal autonomy of daughters, who had to give their consent to the marriage, and who, as wives, retained autonomy over their sexuality” (Nzegwu 43). Women are seen as vital contributors of society and the family, which contradicts western models that align power solely with the father. Despite the importation of patriarchal ideology that privileges men, Igboland provided positive examples of women’s positioning in the postcolonial society. Interestingly enough, men in Igboland were seen first as “primarily a son and a brother, basically a member of a lineage” (Nzegwu 56). Instead of requiring women to occupy subjugated roles, pre-colonial Nigerian society invested more worth in mothers than fathers. Colonialism transformed these societal attitudes and beliefs about women’s roles to support its efforts of patriarchal ideology, which demands women’s

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<sup>49</sup> Nkiru Uwechia Nzegwu, “Family Politics: Making Patriarchy in a Patrilineal Society,” *Family Matters: Feminist Concepts in African Philosophy of Culture* (Albany: State U of New York P, 2006: 23-62. Print.). The concept of “consanguinity” refers to a specific familial structure that privileges kinship over parentage. Nzegwu contends that consanguinity “fosters a consciousness” among family members considered “siblings regardless of who their mothers or fathers were...” (32). Understanding the historical notions of family in Igboland helps to determine how and in what ways colonialism transformed Nigerian life.

subordination to men. The family communities portrayed in *Purple Hibiscus* juxtapose competing realities of family as catalysts for and against women's identity formation.

Within homes, women forge bonds and work together to combat the conflicts in their lives. Clenora Hudson-Weems, a noted scholar of Africana women's literature, examines 'genuine sisterhood' as a major component of Africana Womanism: "This sisterly bond is a reciprocal one, one in which each gives and receives equally. In this community of women, all read out in support of each other, demonstrating a tremendous sense of responsibility for each other by looking out for one another" (65).<sup>50</sup> The concept of genuine sisterhood provides a theoretical framework to examine the women-centered bonds that constitute community among female characters in *Purple Hibiscus*. Auntie Ifeoma is Eugene Achike's widowed sister who lives in Nsukka, Nigeria, with her three children. Her character embodies the trait of genuine sisterhood through her unrelenting efforts to aid her extended family. Young women who find the home an impenetrable space for cultivating a sense of self often turn to extended family relatives to fill the void of nurturance. By emphasizing the relationships between women, Adichie demonstrates how the bonds of femininity work to strengthen the desire for individual identity.

As the novel's protagonist and narrator, Kambili Achike, a fifteen-year-old female, experiences adolescence through her privileged home where she and her family are confined by "compound walls, topped by coiled electric fences" (Adichie 9). Such descriptions imply safety and security. With a yard "wide enough to hold a hundred people" (9), Kambili and her family enjoy material comforts of the upwardly mobile including a "vendor [who] delivered the major

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<sup>50</sup> Clenora Hudson-Weems, "The Agenda of the Africana Womanist" *Africana Womanism: Reclaiming Ourselves* (Troy, MI: Bedford Publishers, 1995. 65-66. Print.). Hudson-Weems' emphasis here on 'genuine sisterhood' is one of eighteen characteristics she outlines as attributes of Africana womanism. Each attribute of Africana womanism delves into the multifaceted realities of black diasporic women whose lives model an insider/outsider paradigm of experience.

papers every morning, four copies each” (25). The Achike Christmas home in Abba Town, with “the spurting fountain in front” (55), and “high gates” (58), resembles similar luxurious and safety features of their home in Enugu. Their vast Christmas home, however, feels “like a hotel,” even though the family only occupies the “ground floor and first floor; the other two were last used years ago” (58). The lush splendor of the Achike Christmas home is only one example of the privileged existence Kambili occupies. In addition, Kambili and Jaja enjoy the privileges of private education at “Daughters of the Immaculate Heart and St. Nicholas,” (39) where the family’s driver Kevin “always had the Peugeot 55 parked at the school gates right after the bells rang” (51). Kambili’s awareness of her privileged life is normalized by the degree of control her father enacts over the family. Paternal protection itself does not constitute control, yet when coupled with Eugene Achike’s propensity for violence, safety ceases to exist. Kambili’s safety is defined by her exclusion from the outside world, yet she soon learns her greatest fears come from within the home, namely her father.

Patriarchal control of the family can include and rely upon intimidation to elicit fear, which consequently establishes and maintains order. As a young girl raised in an authoritative household, Kambili never learns to develop a sense of self. In fact, her relationship with her father makes real her consciousness of self. Fearful of his disapproval, Kambili strives to exceed her father’s expectations. Labeled a “backyard snob” (Adichie 52) by her peers, Kambili is determined to succeed academically in order to make her father proud. However, her world remains “stained by failure” (39) when she comes second in her class. Despite her high ranking, her father Eugene remarks, “You came second because you chose to” (42). His emphasis on the verb “chose” implies that Kambili willingly made a concerted effort to earn second place among her peers. For such an impressionable adolescent, her father’s remarks only feed her desire for



approval and for “him to smile at me” (39). In an attempt to ward off “Deep and sad” (42) disapproving stares, Kambili resigns herself to secure her father’s approval. After all, this is all she knows.

Despite the Achikes’ bountiful lifestyle, episodes of violence initiated by the patriarch and father Eugene erupt in the home on numerous occasions, which caution readers to question whether or not this home is really a safe one for the children and mother, from the “black purple color of an overripe avocado” (Adichie 11), a phrase Kambili used to describe her mother, Beatrice’s eye to multiple “accident[s],” (34) which cause Beatrice to miscarry. Traumatic episodes of violence fill Kambili’s life as a result of her father’s exacting control over the family. As a silent witness to her mother’s domestic abuse, Kambili can fathom no other decision than to condone her father’s actions. She states, “I did not think, I did not even think to think, what Mama needed to be forgiven for” (36). Because Kambili is indoctrinated into the patriarchal, religious home, she willingly complies with her father’s commands. Instead of questioning why her mother requires prayer, she acquiesces to him.

Adichie commands vivid scenes of physical violence in the novel to question the conditions for constructing female identity formation within the patriarchal home. When Eugene learns that Kambili remained silent about Papa-Nnukwu’s stay at Auntie Ifeoma’s house, he becomes enraged. To Eugene, such an act of blatant disobedience requires severe punishment. Given Papa Nnukwu’s traditional faith that requires “worshiping gods of wood and stone” (47) and his unwillingness to embrace Catholicism, which his son Eugene perceives as a threat, he is forbidden from visiting Eugene’s home. Adichie isolates this violence to demonstrate the lack of options available to young women and the repercussions for disobeying the father:

You should strive for perfection. You should not see sin and walk right into it. [. . .] He poured the hot water on my feet, slowly, as if he were conducting an experiment and wanted to see what would happen. He was crying now, tears streaming down his face. I saw the moist steam before I saw the water. I watched the water leave the kettle, flowing almost in slow motion in an arc to my feet. The pain of contact was so pure, so scalding, I felt nothing for a second. And then I screamed. (Adichie 194)

When members of the patriarchal home choose disobedience over compliance, they openly challenge patriarchal authority. To make such a declaration, whether conscious or not, demonstrates women's ability to resist patriarchal authority, despite the consequences such resistance provokes. Although mild in appearance, Kambili's disobedience can be read as an act of resistance, despite her naïve positioning in the novel. While allegiance to the patriarchal father offers temporary rewards of protection and security to members of the Achike family, these same episodes present the choice of defiance. Through such defiance, young women begin to acknowledge their identities.

Kambili's journey in *Purple Hibiscus* mimics the bildungsroman tradition in her attempts to assert an identity as a process of maturation.<sup>51</sup> Children are not the only victims of domestic violence in the Achike home. Mothers rear their daughters with sentiments of domestic responsibility, which reinforce feminine roles of compliance towards patriarchal authority. Thus, the dutiful, obedient wife Beatrice is left with little to offer her family except her own survival. For example, Eugene erupts in violence when Beatrice allows Kambili to break the Eucharist fast to ease her menstrual discomfort:

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<sup>51</sup> Julia A. Tigner, "Home is Nowhere": Negotiating Identities in Colonized Worlds." Master's Thesis, University of Georgia, 2007. Tigner's thesis examines the bildungsroman in *Purple Hibiscus* to discern the complexities the protagonist faces when negotiating hybrid identities.

He unbuckled his belt slowly. It was a heavy belt made of layers of brown leather with a sedate leather-covered buckle. It landed on Jaja [Kambili's brother] first, across his shoulder. Then Mama raised her hands as it landed on her upper arm, which was covered by the puffy sequined sleeve of her church blouse. I put the bowl down just as the belt landed on my back. . . . We did not move more than two steps away from the leather belt that swished through the air. (Adichie 102)

As a mother, Beatrice is unable to protect her children from their father's violent outbursts. In her silence, she too becomes a victim of patriarchal violence. Silence imposes a degree of conscious obedience in the patriarchal home, whereas resistance signals insubordination that can only be corrected through punishment. The Achike family relinquishes control to the father who erodes the secure sense of parental protection considered vital to the family structure. For Kambili, the home becomes a site of conflict as she unconsciously accepts her father's violence as a method of sustaining control over the family.

Along with patriarchy, Adichie identifies religion, specifically Catholicism, as a problematic element of women's identity formation. She has stated that "Religion is such a huge force, so easily corruptible and yet still capable of doing incredible good. The streak of intolerance I see masquerading itself as faith and the way we create an image of God that suits us, are things I am interested in questioning" (Anyia 1). In the novel, Adichie critiques the blind faith of Catholicism embodied by Eugene Achike, who exclaims "I would be nothing today but for the priests and sisters at the mission" (Adichie 47). For Eugene, Catholicism is the backbone of his identity. Those who deviate from this path are automatically deemed sinners and not worthy of his respect. Adichie critiques Catholicism to better understand how interpretations of organized religion support and fuel patriarchal authority and women's subordination. Despite

the physical, emotional, and psychological violence Kambili and her family withstand, Adichie challenges rigid definitions of Catholicism that impose male authority over women's lives.

In fact, to combat the conservative western Catholicism Eugene enforces,<sup>52</sup> Auntie Ifeoma and her family practice a more inclusive version of Catholicism, which respects and incorporates traditional customs and rituals. Even the decision to question Catholic rituals is considered ordinary behavior in Auntie Ifeoma's home. For example, Amaka, Kambili's cousin questions Father Amadi, a local priest, on her refusal to take a confirmation name. As she exclaims, "When the missionaries first came, they didn't think Igbo names were good enough. They insisted that people take English names to be baptized. Shouldn't we be moving ahead?" (272). Amaka contests the Church's requirement for baptism, because "the church is saying that only an English name will make your confirmation valid" when in fact her Igbo name "'Chiamaka' says God is beautiful. 'Chima' says God knows best" (272). Amaka's outright defiance of Catholicism is due to the environment in which she has grown and learned to openly challenge the world around her. Kambili remains silent during this specific scene as she watches her cousin openly challenge the faith she has grown to idolize through her father's twisted interpretations that grant him sole power and control over the family. Adichie provides conflicting versions of Catholicism to examine how Nigerian society both upholds western standards and combines elements of the old world with the new to capture a diverse and inclusive faith.

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<sup>52</sup> David Nowell Power's *Mission, Ministry, Order: Reading the Tradition in the Present Context* calls for more open discussions to change the patriarchal atmosphere of Catholicism, "If small communities are to become even more vital to the Church and its mission, and if new services and ministries are to take shape in this context, including a reshaping of ordained ministry, some things need to come into open discussion. On a human and cultural level, there needs to be some critique of traditional family and social structures, especially with regard to the place of women in family, society, and Church, so as not to let the patriarchal elements in African life dominate" (New York: Continuum, 2008. 44). Also see the essay collection edited by Adrian Hastings titled *Modern Catholicism: Vatican II and After* (London: SPCK, 1991. Print.).

In the novel, Eugene Achike plays a prominent role at St. Agnes through his generosity, which represents a version of piety, which other church members are encouraged to emulate. As the novel opens, Kambili remarks on her father's role in the church, saying, "He was the first to receive communion" (Adichie 4) to identify his elevated status. Kambili's perceptions of her father are confirmed by the priest: "During his sermons, Father Benedict usually referred to the pope, Papa, and Jesus—in that order. He used Papa to illustrate the gospels" (Adichie 4). Eugene is a respected member of the Catholic Church; yet the appearance of his violent episodes in the novel compels one to question the motivation for religious faith. Eugene rationalizes the violence enacted upon his family as a means of asserting his authority, which is granted by his religious faith. On the surface, violence and faith can appear at odds, yet the history of organized religion across the globe is infused with violence as means of solidifying control. From Eugene's perspective, faith and violence are compatible because they work in tandem to gain and sustain control over others. Eugene Achike's character enables readers to examine the consequences of pious responsibility and devotion that demand total allegiance to the father.

As a member of the Achike household, Kambili participates in a more conservative form of western Catholicism, which adheres to a specific set of rules governing religious worship and order. Religion institutes a system of order upon the Achike family with Eugene as the authoritative figure. In this home place, Kambili grows accustomed to more traditional forms of daily worship and prayer, which demonstrate her obedience to her faith. Kambili notes how the Church resembles western forms of worship: "Father Benedict had changed things in the parish, such as insisting that the Credo and kyrie be recited only in Latin; Igbo was not acceptable. Also, hand clapping was to be kept at a minimum, lest the solemnity of Mass be compromised" (Adichie 4). At St. Agnes, Kambili is indoctrinated into a western version of Catholicism that

requires adherence to traditional rituals and beliefs that dismiss aspects of Igbo culture. Her father confirms this belief: “He hardly spoke Igbo, and although Jaja and I spoke it with Mama at home, he did not like us to speak it in public. We had to sound civilized in public, he told us; we had to speak English” (Adichie 13). Although Kambili speaks fluent Igbo and English, her preference for the latter helps to explain how religion sets her in opposition to her linguistic and cultural heritage. Because Eugene equates English with civilization, Kambili subliminally learns to deny her cultural heritage in favor of assimilation. Because the Church and her father reinforce the superiority of the English language, Kambili views her linguistic heritage from the margins, which she reassesses upon visiting Aunty Ifeoma.

Although Aunty Ifeoma actively practices Catholicism with her family, she introduces an alternate version that combines aspects of traditional Igbo culture with western Catholicism. When the family members gather after dinner to recite the rosary, their sudden departure from the norm appalls Kambili: “*No!* I told him, with a tight blink. It was not right. You did not break into song in the middle of the rosary. I did not join in the singing, and neither did Jaja. Amaka broke into song at the end of each decade, uplifting Igbo songs that made Aunty Ifeoma sing in echoes, like an opera singer drawing the words from the pit of her stomach” (Adichie 125). Here, the use of Igbo songs is blasphemous to Kambili. She feels conflicted by the use of Igbo songs with the traditional religious prayer rituals. In the home, Kambili is initially cautious towards her extended family because Igbo cultural signifiers accompany their Christian rituals. Although she finds life much more ordinary, Kambili’s stay in Nsukka leads her to question the world of normalcy that her father demands. Susan Strehle says that Aunty Ifeoma “wears her Catholic faith differently, finding a dimension of respect for all life and thus divine love for African people and traditions. While Kambili has been told that flesh must be covered and that it

is sinful to look on nakedness, Ifeoma accepts the body as part of the natural world” (Strehle 113). For Kambili, Aunt Ifeoma’s home embodies a rich sense of Igbo pride, which Kambili’s own home lacks. The site of home, then, offers two competing versions of religion whereby Kambili begins to question the secrecy behind her cultural identity.

The first visit to Nsukka introduces Kambili and Jaja to an alternatively efficient and loving home atmosphere. In recalling this phase in her life, Kambili laments, “Nsukka started it all” (Adichie 16). In an attempt to create a comfortable environment for Kambili and Jaja, Aunt Ifeoma tells her children “we’ll treat Kambili and Jaja as guests, but from tomorrow they will be family and join in the work” (119). Adichie makes a distinction between “guests” and “family” here to signal shifting positions Kambili will renegotiate during her stay. As guests, they are treated to “Chicken and soft drinks” (119), while their role as family requires their participatory involvement: “Aunt Ifeoma included Jaja and me in the plate-washing schedule” (140). Aunt Ifeoma’s class positioning informs her desire to create an inclusive home place, but her statement also acknowledges her niece and nephew’s unfamiliarity with the domestic chores and familial responsibilities that she cultivates in her own children. Kambili’s naiveté becomes most pronounced during this visit. In venturing beyond her father’s grasp, Kambili becomes aware that her own reality remains quite different from that of her extended family because she has never stopped to think for herself, whereas her cousins are rewarded for such behavior.

Aunt Ifeoma’s home in Nsukka reveals a place of communal respect and responsibility that enables Kambili to question her own privileged existence. The visual arrangement of Aunt Ifeoma’s home anticipates a turning point in Kambili’s growth. While visiting her extended family, Kambili gains an awareness of her life and Nigerian society that transforms her perceptions of the world and her place in it. When Kambili and her brother Jaja visit Aunt

Ifeoma's home, the difference in place is fully apparent to readers. Kambili notices "a tall bland building" (Adichie 112) and the interior that smells of "pungent fumes of kerosene smoke mixed with the aroma of curry and nutmeg" (113). Such vivid images suggest that Kambili's awareness of place is limited to material comforts. Before Kambili can assess her extended family, her observations highlight the inferior accommodations of Auntie Ifeoma's home. The meager accommodations of Auntie Ifeoma's home include a sofa whose "seams of the cushions were frayed and slipping apart" (114), and a bathroom "so narrow I could touch both walls if I stretched out my hands" (121). Kambili's perceptions of Auntie Ifeoma's home reveal her naive apprehension towards poverty. Because she can only fathom home as a place of illusory safety, even as it offers an unlimited supply of space, food, and order, her initial "bewildered" (116) response seems inevitable. What Kambili struggles to grasp is how to function within a temporary home without "Papa's schedule," and one governed by Auntie Ifeoma's "own rules" (124).

Given Kambili's sheltered life experiences in Enugu, she is taken aback by her female cousin Amaka, whose independence and assertiveness challenge Kambili's worldview. When Kambili and Amaka share a room, one might safely assume that they will see each other undress, yet this episode causes alarm for Kambili when she observes Amaka "put the comb down and pulled her dress over her head. In her white lacy bra and light blue underwear, she looked like a Hausa goat: brown, long and lean. I quickly avert my gaze. I had never seen anyone undress; it was sinful to look upon another person's nakedness" (Adichie 117). At first, Kambili's surprise seems awkward; yet, upon closer examination, we can see that her response emanates from her own lack of experience. With a bedroom in Enugu all to herself, Kambili has yet to experience the innocence of undressing in front of others. Her response to Amaka does not originate simply



from surprise, but also from the absence of sharing intimate spaces with other women.

Therefore, attributing sin to Amaka's actions seems a viable way for Kambili to rationalize her cousin's behavior. Kambili's religious beliefs are challenged during her stay in Nsukka as she contemplates this new reality, which shakes the foundation of her own moral compass. To adapt and process her new surroundings, Kambili learns to negotiate Auntie Ifeoma's home as a temporary awakening. It is in Auntie Ifeoma's home that Kambili first begins to question her father Eugene. This awakening furnishes Kambili with a new consciousness as she begins to assess and evaluate the conflicting versions of family and home during a short stay with her extended family.

The absence of space in Auntie Ifeoma's home forces Kambili to question the privileged comforts of her lifestyle. Even common situations like family meals, for example, take on a different significance for Kambili, who reveals, "We always spoke with a purpose back home, especially at the table" (Adichie 120). Yet, her experience at Auntie Ifeoma's home leaves her feeling alienated: "I had felt as if I were not there, that I was just observing a table where you could say anything at any time to anyone, where the air was free for you to breathe as you wished" (120). The alienation Kambili experiences at the dinner table results from the lack of freedom she experiences in her own home where her father spends "twenty minutes" praying only to have "sounds of forks meeting plates, of serving spoons meeting platters," (96). The methodical structure of meals provides one example of the rigid life Kambili accepts as normal. Given the absence of choices she receives as a child, Kambili has few options to make autonomous decisions about the daily actions in her life. The freedom that manifests in conversations modeled by Auntie Ifeoma's family exposes Kambili to alternative family relationships, one that accepts and encourages participatory engagement from all members. Such

examples demonstrate how the home can become a place of belonging, a source of communal autonomy.

The competing versions of womanhood expressed in the novel reference the complexities Nigerian women encounter when constructing an identity. Kambili's introduction to the virtues of womanhood are influenced by the behaviors, attitudes, and roles embodied by the female role models in her life. As a teenager, Kambili's most direct influence comes from her mother Beatrice and Auntie Ifeoma, who represent differing modes of womanhood as a result of patriarchal authority. As the wife of Eugene Achike, Beatrice occupies a submissive role in the margins of the patriarchal family. Her duties as mother exist within the limits of support for her children, especially since their servant, Sisi, performs the housework. In contrast, Auntie Ifeoma, a widow, occupies a central position in her home as she struggles to create a life of independent means, which starkly contrasts with her brother's home. Kambili recalls a conversation between her mother and Auntie Ifeoma in which they debate women's roles:

Six girls in my first-year seminar class are married, their husbands visit in Mercedes and Lexus cars every weekend, their husbands buy them stereos and textbooks and refrigerators, and when they graduate, the husbands own them and their degrees. . . .  
Mama shook her head. "University talk again. A husband crowns a woman's life, Ifeoma. It is what they want." (Adichie 75)

Beatrice disagrees with Auntie Ifeoma's assertion of women's dependence on men for their happiness because she privileges the material comforts women can potentially secure from marriage as the epitome of womanhood. For Beatrice, a woman's life desires are fulfilled or "crowned" by the husband, which implies that women have no other function than their responsibilities as wives.

Aunty Ifeoma's dissatisfaction with marriage as the only viable role for women demonstrates her belief in women's autonomy. By rejecting marriage as the epitome of womanhood, Aunty Ifeoma questions the power of women's autonomy as a tool of survival. Although Kambili refrains from commenting on this conversation, this instance reveals how ideals of womanhood influence young girls' perceptions of self learned in the home. These competing versions of womanhood create two distinct categories of female identity formation in the novel. Beatrice's support for and adherence to patriarchal authority denies women a voice and stifles any notion of agency. In contrast, Aunty Ifeoma represents a more individualized notion of femininity that requires women to determine their own self-worth, instead of relying on patriarchal authority to assign their position in the family and society. Although these competing versions of femininity reveal different roles and functions for women in Nigerian society, they also disclose the nature of female relationships that create communities where women rely on each other to make sense of their lives. Such relationships between women provide additional nurturance and direction for young women to construct an identity.

Despite the conflicting versions of womanhood explored in the novel, Adichie casts extended female family members as community to trace Kambili's awareness of self. Through Kambili's interactions with Aunty Ifeoma and her cousin Amaka, she begins to question and explore her identity. Kambili's interactions with her extended family expose her privileged, yet submissive role within her family. The very presence of Aunty Ifeoma inspires adoration for Kambili. She idolizes on the sheer bravery of her aunt when stating, "I watched every movement she made; [. . .]. It was the fearlessness about her, about the way she gestured as she spoke, the way she smiled to show that wide gap" (Adichie 76). The "fearlessness" demonstrated by Aunty Ifeoma offers an alternative version of womanhood that contradicts the passive, meek existence

of Kambili's mother, Beatrice. Auntie Ifeoma's defiant demeanor draws a sharp contrast to the docile role Beatrice occupies as she speaks in "her usual whisper," (123) given "there was so much that she did not mind" (19). Kambili admires Auntie Ifeoma because she challenges patriarchal authority, namely her brother Eugene. Because Auntie Ifeoma refuses to surrender her voice to her brother, she causes Kambili to reassess the power women possess. Given the passive role Beatrice occupies in the home, Kambili relies on experiences with Auntie Ifeoma to gain information womanhood and identity. Kambili is forced to create community with her extended family, which she enjoys, to gain perspective on the construction of her identity.

Auntie Ifeoma challenges Kambili's understanding of gender roles because she chooses to assert her voice. Auntie Ifeoma carefully chooses when to be defiant, as "it is not a bad thing when it is used right" (Adichie 144). Auntie Ifeoma's justification for defiance "used right" identifies her belief in the use of resistance to challenge patriarchal authority. While Beatrice conveys a docile personality, Auntie Ifeoma continually challenges her brother's authority by her refusal to remain silent. For instance, Eugene rebuffs Ifeoma's suggestion to include Kambili and Jaja on the family trip, which Kambili describes in a "flippant tone" (77). The difference Kambili attributes to her father results from her father's control over her life. Although Kambili has been reared in a home where her father Eugene's dominance causes family members to view resistance as taboo, Auntie Ifeoma's remarks slowly shatter her blind admiration for him.

Heather Hewett explores Kambili's new consciousness of her own authority: "With other people, the narrator often struggles because she does not know what she would say, or how she would say it, if she could say anything. She does not know what she feels or who she is; her subjectivity is too wrapped up in pleasing her father" (86). By deciding to defend her father, even silently, Kambili hopes to garner his support and love. Yet, Adichie calls such parental

admiration into question because it requires allegiance to authority without nurturing individual growth.

Aunty Ifeoma's family portrays a participatory dynamic that enables Kambili to become cognizant of her privilege and the restrictions on her subjectivity. The relationship she shares with her cousin Amaka proves the most instrumental element in Kambili's identity development. Amaka, strong-willed and defiantly inquisitive, is the complete opposite of Kambili's character. Yet, the condescending tone of Amaka's comments ultimately propels Kambili's exploration of her own life. Due to the the ordinary routine of Aunty Ifeoma's home, Kambili attempts to fade into the background. However, Amaka's "thin, patronizing smile" (Adichie 117) leaves Kambili somewhat uneasy, as she inhabits a space where she must participate in household labor and exercise caution with household resources. Amaka jokingly makes a deliberate critique of Kambili's class position when she states, "rich people can't decide what to do day by day, they need a schedule to tell them" (124). Amaka challenges the privileged life Kambili lives without her self-awareness. By continually teasing Kambili about her lifestyle comforts, Amaka attempts to provoke a defensive response from Kambili. Her assumptions about the privileged life Kambili and her family live are correct in their assertion of material wealth and comfort. Although Amaka assumes Kambili has full access to the spoils of her privileged life, she is oblivious to the violence Kambili and her family endure. While social class in Nigeria can allow certain material comforts -- such as the Achikes domestic maid, Sisi, and the driver, Kevin -- the physical descriptions Kambili uses to describe her home resemble those of a prison, sheltered from the outside world. The illusion of safety Eugene Achike provides for his family erects boundaries to exclude outside intruders. Eugene repeatedly enacts violence upon his family to maintain his control and also to create a fearful atmosphere that destroys the family's spirit.

As Kambili embarks on the participatory atmosphere of Auntie Ifeoma's home, she becomes conscious of her sheltered life experience. The relationship Kambili and Amaka share resembles a sibling rivalry, yet Amaka's playful and inquisitive demeanor makes Kambili aware of her passivity towards her father. Amaka delivers honest, yet critical, critiques of Kambili's behavior, with comments such as "You lower your voice when you speak. You talk in whispers" (Adichie 117). Although this comment surprises Kambili, it also marks the first time she considers her own voice. The reference to "whispers" indicates the silent existence Kambili cultivates in her father's home. The whispering here is also similar to Beatrice's, suggesting that Kambili has become codependent rather than autonomous at home. As a child reared in a patriarchal home, Kambili is never encouraged nor expected to use her voice until she visits Auntie Ifeoma. The jovial environment of Auntie Ifeoma's home where laughter "always rang out" (140) represents a new way of being for Kambili. With two positive models of femininity at her disposal, Kambili soon grows to appreciate the "companionship" and "comfortable silence" (247) she shares with Amaka during visits to Enugu. During these experiences, Kambili learns to step outside the shadows of her father's ideal image so that she can begin the process of becoming her own person. Even Auntie Ifeoma encourages Kambili to assert herself when arguing with Amaka: "Kambili, have you no mouth? Talk back to her!" (170). Auntie Ifeoma challenges Kambili to assert her voice and stand up to her cousin. In this scene we witness Auntie Ifeoma assert a motherly role by challenging Kambili to defend herself.

Given Eugene Achike's control over his family, Kambili has little interaction with her peers, let alone her extended family. The trips to Enugu for vacation and escape teach both Kambili and her brother Jaja the benefits of family as community. Given the violence they witness and experience at home, Kambili and Jaja find respite with their extended family. This

place, an alternative home, serves as an oasis, a new beginning for Kambili to cultivate an autonomous voice. Despite the communal atmosphere of Auntie Ifeoma's home, Kambili questions the parental encouragement she bestows on her children, since her own father uses fear and physical punishment to instill discipline and order on his family. Given the close-knit, inclusive environment of Auntie Ifeoma's family and home, Kambili admires the expectations Auntie Ifeoma issues to her children as a means of empowerment by

setting higher and higher jumps for them in the way she talked to them, in what she expected of them. She did it all the time believing they would scale the rod. And they did. It was different for Jaja and me. We did not scale the rod because we believed we could, we scaled it because we were terrified that we couldn't. (Adichie 226)

Kambili acknowledges the fear created by her father's demands that propel her success. The terror she experiences results not from her failure, but from the trauma she experiences throughout her life living in fear of Eugene's violent retribution. Instead of dictating demands to her children, Auntie Ifeoma creates an open environment in which she sets reasonable expectations for her children to encourage their growth. In this scene, Adichie casts the extended family as a community for developing self-awareness. Given the sheltered life of Kambili's childhood, the trips to Nsukka enable Kambili to fathom the possibility of choices available in the construction of identity. Adichie makes a salient point about the power of extended family as community and its potential to introduce and engage women in new ways of being. The examples of female power, which Kambili witnesses through her interactions with Auntie Ifeoma, serve as a catalyst for her own awakening. Auntie Ifeoma becomes more than merely an aunt, but also a surrogate mother for Kambili. Her role as a surrogate mother helps to solidify the bonds of women-centered community that take shape in the novel. Although Auntie Ifeoma

has her own life and family to run, she continually demonstrates her responsibility to her extended family.

While mothers have the responsibility of encouraging feminine identity by setting examples and training daughters in appropriate cultural behaviors and responsibilities of the domestic and public spheres in society, Beatrice can only offer her own survival. Violence erupts in the home as Kambili recalls,

[Eugene] started to kick me. The metal buckles of his slippers stung like bites from giant mosquitoes. He talked nonstop, out of control, in a mix of Igbo and English, like soft meat and thorny bones. Godlessness. Heathen worship. Hellfire. [. . .] More stings. More slaps. A salty wetness warmed my mouth. I closed my eyes and slipped away into quiet. (210-11)

As a mother, Beatrice cannot protect her children from their father's violent outbursts. She, too, becomes a victim of patriarchal violence in the home. Therefore, the home becomes a site of conflict as Kambili accepts her father's violence as a method of protection from sin for the family.

In sheer panic, Auntie Ifeoma arrives with Father Amadi, a local Nsukka priest, to assess the situation. Although Auntie Ifeoma is aware of Beatrice's frequent abuse by her brother Eugene, she considers Kambili an innocent victim of Eugene's violence. Auntie Ifeoma assumes control of this situation by stating, "'This cannot go on, *nwuyne m*,' . . . 'When a house is on fire, you run out before the roof collapses on your head'" (Adichie 213). Auntie Ifeoma uses a traditional Igbo phrase to communicate with Beatrice. This linguistic choice is significant because it speaks to Auntie Ifeoma's appreciation for Igbo culture and her respect for Beatrice as Eugene's wife. Since Beatrice has little resolve to help herself after years of abuse, Auntie



Ifeoma warns this abuse cannot continue. Auntie Ifeoma instructs Beatrice to leave her husband, while taking responsibility for her niece and nephew: “I want Kambili and Jaja to stay with us, at least until Easter. Pack your own things and come to Nsukka. It will be easier for you to leave when they are not there” (Adichie 214). The decision for Beatrice to leave Eugene comes not from Beatrice, but from Auntie Ifeoma, who realizes that her *zwuyne m*<sup>53</sup> cannot survive in such conditions. In confronting Beatrice, Auntie Ifeoma demonstrates an impeccable degree of agency in agreeing to care for and protect her extended family. Beatrice initially stays in her home with Eugene as the children travel to Nsukka to stay with Auntie Ifeoma’s family. However, Beatrice arrives at Auntie Ifeoma’s house a short time later to escape Eugene’s violence, which resulted in a miscarriage. Auntie Ifeoma’s agency lies in her ability to devise a means of helping her extended family escape her brother’s wrath. Such attempts demonstrate the resilience of Nigerian women, whose lives intertwine with their families. Community no longer becomes a matter of familial support, but obligations women have for one another when they exercise their power to protect the lives of other women.

The search for identity in *Purple Hibiscus* is fraught with boundaries imposed by the patriarchal father. Although Kambili learns to embrace her rich Igbo cultural heritage during her time with Auntie Ifeoma’s family, she struggles to locate a middle ground between the authoritative rule of her father’s home and the nurturing, participatory environment provided by Auntie Ifeoma’s family. Given the degree of physical and psychological trauma Kambili experiences, it comes as no surprise that she finds it difficult to navigate the interior spaces of the home to achieve her father’s approval. In *Purple Hibiscus*, communal autonomy manifests in the homes of extended family. Kambili only becomes aware of her own autonomy when she has the

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<sup>53</sup> Adichie translates *nwuyne m* as “my wife” (73). See G. Egemba Igwe’s *Igbo-English Dictionary* (Ibadan: UP Plc, 1999. Print.), which defines the term “nwuyne m” as a noun defined as wife or female” (550). In *Purple Hibiscus*, the term is used as a traditional greeting between women.

space, time, and encouragement to assess her life. By the novel's end, Kambili is definitiely more assertive, but also struggling to aid her mother Beatrice, whose poisoning of Eugene has caused the family to destruct. As Kambili and Beatrice visit Jaja in jail, she remarks: "I am laughing. I reach out and place my arm around Mama's shoulder and she leans toward me and smiles" (Adichie 307). What this scene reveals is the role-reversal Beatrice and Kambili assume after Jaja heads to prison for Eugene's death to protect his mother. Given her mother's fragile state, it is Kambili who asserts herself to support her mother as she attempts to wrestle with the imprisonment of her brother who "tried always to protect me the best he could. He will never think that he did enough, and he will never understand that I do not think he should have done more" (305). Kambili's awakening as a young woman is only beginning, but the novel shows she exhibits the autonomy necessary to care for her family. Although Kambili's identity is still in process, she does finally possess the self-worth necessary to define a self. Adichie's portrayal of communal autonomy as the reciprocal relationship of female relatives plays as an important and essential role in the construction and realization of women's identities.

## CHAPTER 6

### CONCLUSION

In my examination of African diasporic women's literature, women rely on multiple communities simultaneously to challenge societal norms that dictate their inferior status in society. Communal autonomy differs for African diasporic women because they encounter and navigate gender and racial boundaries that confine women's spaces to the private sphere. A defining feature of communal autonomy is community, which can be arranged by place, circumstance, or choice to support individual interests. The reliance on community to negotiate women's identity is the impetus behind communal autonomy as inspiration and motivation for developing a self. The process of identity formation for African diasporic women is fraught with rigid expectations of femininity that leave little space for autonomy, while also relegating these women to outsider positions due to their race. In order to create some semblance of an identity, African diasporic women rely on each other as community to facilitate the necessary courage and power to enact transgressive acts that encourage women's autonomy. How communities are formed and what they mean for individual women will vary, but their power as a source of affirmation remains a constant thread in the construction of identity.

For example, Ellen Kuzwayo's *Call Me Woman* finds community rooted in different places depending on the narrator's exposure to the larger society. Kuzwayo portrays localized acts of communal autonomy through her engagement with black women as the impetus for her future identity. As a child, community is comprised of the family and neighbors, as Kuzwayo learns values such as cooperation and compassion for others that inform her future solidarity with the larger black community. As a student, Kuzwayo bonds with her female peers to

motivate her intellectual pursuits while surrounded by a community of equally minded young women who encourage her growth. These moments from Kuzwayo's life reveal community rooted in specific places, but more importantly, her investment in the people who occupy these communities. These scenes also convey Kuzwayo's subjectivity as a process of engaging other women who nurture and inspire the creation of self using her recuperative narrative. Given the range of experiences that encompasses the African diaspora, black women construct their identities through their interactions with communities that encourage transgressive acts as a method of self-discovery.

In the succeeding chapter, communal autonomy represents the conscious efforts of African diasporic women to forge relationships with other women as a source of defining one's subjectivity. For example, in *Breath, Eyes, Memory*, Danticat challenges the role of the home defined as a single place as an influential element in Haitian women's lives. While the protagonist Sophie is encouraged to abide by familial and cultural expectations of femininity, she is ultimately compelled to move beyond these borders to negotiate an identity. For Danticat, communal autonomy manifests in the culmination of interior home spaces where women engage with and invest in communities providing compassion to assist women healing from traumatic experiences. The home occupies a central aspect in women's identity formation because it provides different examples of womanhood that women use to emulate and cultivate their own identities. In addition, communities composed of strangers like the trauma support group help women come to terms with traumatic experiences in supportive environments. Transgressive acts of defiance in the novel demonstrate the emergence of female agency, which signals an awareness of self.

In Toni Morrison's *Paradise*, communal autonomy manifests in the surrogate community of women who live and thrive at the Convent. While African diasporic women often look to the home and family as sources of inspiration for creating identity, others build community outside such locations due to their positioning as outsiders-within. Morrison casts community as both a nurturing but repressive environment while also conjuring a woman-centered space that nurtures through reciprocal relationships that encourage women to cultivate their autonomy. In constructing two opposing types of community, Morrison challenges the assumption of a single community women utilize to fashion an identity by asserting the power of women-centered spaces that aid and facilitate women's growth. Female characters in *Paradise* negotiate the patriarchal borders of Ruby while also resisting the gender expectations of society to cultivate their own space of belonging that facilitates their growth and the development of their identities.

Finally, in Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie's *Purple Hibiscus*, communal autonomy manifests in the home places Kambili navigates. For Adichie, community culminates in the participatory kinship relations that exist between female family members. Aunty Ifeoma and Beatrice offer conflicting versions of motherhood and womanhood, but their approaches to family provide the greatest impact on Kambili. Adichie challenges the notion of immediate family as the sole source of support and protection for women. While privileging the family as the motivation for women's identities, she also critiques the nation at large in its failure to support Nigerian citizens. The extended family serves as a guiding force of communal autonomy in *Purple Hibiscus* because female characters learn to challenge and embrace the many aspects of self that come to embody who they become as women.

Confronted with competing versions of womanhood, African diasporic women navigate different types of community to establish identities. What these works have in common is their

ability to convey the often tumultuous, caring, divisive, and loving relationships that exist among African diasporic women. Whether arranged by kinship ties, race, family, or representations of home, women-centered communities play an active role in the development of women's autonomy, which they use to create identities. While men also emulate similar relationships in the socialization of masculinity, they do not experience and navigate the world as gendered subjects in the way women do. Women are considered inferior due to their presumably weaker sex, yet it is the cultural assumptions, expectations, and roles ascribed to women that impose boundaries on their lives. For African diasporic women, the trials of everyday life are compounded by race and gender, which limit the choices available for agency. Reliance upon women-centered communities does not undermine African diasporic women's commitment to larger black communities, but it does indicate the value black women bestow upon such experiences in the formation of identity.

These texts share a common theme of communal autonomy as a source of African diasporic women's identity formation. Whether community is situated as a nation, home, family, or strangers, gender necessitates that African diasporic women develop alternative means of acquiring knowledge to negotiate who they become as women. For women like Ellen Kuzwayo, the decision to cultivate an identity is directly tied to one's racial identity. Kuzwayo chooses to elevate both her gender and race to challenge the inferior conditions black South African women navigate to survive. While Danticat challenges conflicting maternal representations of the home women traverse, Morrison ushers forth an organic space women retreat to in creating and celebrating the self. For Adichie, communal autonomy springs forth in the homes of the family as women learn to question and challenge definitions of femininity that require their allegiance to the father. The element of communal autonomy ties these works together because it is people,

primarily women, who inhabit the communities through which African diasporic women begin to construct a self. Identity is forged by the bonds and relationships women share with other women as they travel to discover and negotiate their identities.

Each of the texts in my dissertation study examines communal autonomy as a process of consciousness whereby women become aware of their power to define their identities. While identity cannot be defined by a single moment or event, the journeys women pursue reveal a commitment to larger communities as a decisive element in the construction of subjectivity. Therefore, communal autonomy reflects the culmination of experiences women engage throughout their lives as they alter, grow, and transform the self. Identity is not an individual journey because we do not exist in the world without connections to larger communities. Whether communities are perceived as affirming or destructive lies with the individual, but their presence and influence upon African diasporic women's lives is evident. Upon closer examination, women-centered communities have a tendency to manifest within the interior spaces of the home. Given the expectations of femininity thrust upon women to embody characteristics of docility, submission, and piety, it comes as no surprise that women find the private places ideal locations to learn, challenge, and question their identities. Without full access to the public spaces in society, African diasporic women utilize the places they engage to foster and build communities with other women. It is through such acts of spontaneous subversion that African diasporic women create communities to inform and fuel their journeys to identity.

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