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A Womanist Narrative Ethics of Survival: an Exploration in African American Meaning Making

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A WOMANIST NARRATIVE ETHICS OF SURVIVAL: AN EXPLORATION IN AFRICAN AMERICAN MEANING MAKING

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From Punkie.

"… the major enemy of black survival in America has been and is neither oppression nor exploitation but rather the nihilistic threat—that is, loss of hope and absence of meaning. For as long as hope remains and meaning is preserved, the possibility of overcoming oppression stays alive. The self-fulfilling prophecy of the nihilistic threat is that without hope there can be no future, that without meaning there can be no struggle."

— Cornel West, Race Matters

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ABSTRACT

This project creates a womanist narrative ethics of survival framework using literary analysis, sociological and theological comparisons, and reflections on moral dilemmas in fiction and history. Steeped in the African American woman's experiential perspective, this framework provides an alternative viewpoint through which to examine and analyze ethical issues arising in the context of marginalized bodies. Integrating the Christian faith, the history of chattel slavery in the United States, and the expanding field of African American literature and literary theory, this work posits that fiction provides a rich platform to work through thick moral dilemmas, affording a concrete ethical framework to match the concrete ethical issues faced in everyday life. Combining womanist theological ethics, narrative identity, and African American fiction, a womanist narrative ethics of survival seeks to explain and supplement the unique quandary in which marginalized bodies make decisions and make meaning.

INTRODUCTION

REFLECTIONS ON LIVED EXPERIENCES

I was raised in a home of dedication, discipline, loyalty, faith, and love. Born in the early 1950s, my parents believe in the importance of education leading to a better life, a life with little to no struggle. My father embraced me with love and sensitivity, always laughing, and never meeting a stranger. I can say I was (and continue to be) a daddy's girl, but I cannot diminish my mother's influence. In the household, my parents had a unique understanding. Assuming traditional gender roles in some respect, my mother always spoke of my father as the head of household, but whenever I wanted to go over to a friend's house or go to an event, his default answer was, 'ask your mother.' From an early age I saw there was a certain respect my father gave my mother, and that same respect translated from others outside of the house as well. My mother always has a quiet yet demanding presence about herself. Wherever she is, she is known as a woman who only speaks what needs to be heard, and people are often silent when she erects her 6'2 frame to talk. In addition to being active in local politics and community upkeep, my mother has been active in the church. Raised a Baptist, she began attending the church I would know as home in 1996, United Church of Jesus Christ of Apostolic Faith, a vibrant Pentecostal church made up of a large family with a vast majority of people living in the neighborhood. It was here, with my mother, in this church and the surrounding community of McElrath Allotment where we moved to in 1998. Here I experienced the womanist narrative in action. Surrounded by the brothers, fathers, mothers, and missionaries of the Pentecostal faith, I have been showered in womanist life, from witnessing small tokens and gestures in the neighborhood, to being on the

frontline of political and economic change amid complex decision making. From this envelopment of life and love, I experienced firsthand the ways in which Black and Brown bodies consciously, creatively, and cunningly maneuver the thick terrain needed to survive, expressing that survival through navigating moral dilemmas arising in everyday life.

Since I can remember, I have always pondered the choices people have and the decisions they make. The older I become, the more I realize the innumerable contributions to the circumstances and choices that come upon people. One of my fondest memories of church was testimony service. Although it was incredibly long sometimes (bordering an hour), it was the time when men and women would narrate their trials and tribulations, shouting to the rooftops how the lights were going to get cut off, there was no money in sight, and somehow God made a way out of no way, providing all that was needed and then some. Some of the stories did not have such a happy ending, and yet the testimony ended with praise and thanks to God for simply surviving to speak of the tragedy or trial. This narrative place and space, this illustration of faith and lived experience has deeply influenced the content of this project. The ‘saints’ of the church as we call them, were sisters, brothers, mothers, fathers, and children all looking to survive, and perhaps thrive and live a life worthy of narration. Fascinated by this mode of storytelling, I found myself viewing many conversations as ‘testimonies’, narratives filled with trials, tribulations, triumphs, and making a way out of what seemed to be no way. Little did I realize that this way of being was deeply ingrained in what it meant to be ‘Black in America,’ to survive and thrive in a space built by your ancestors for your demise. From these experiences and reflections, I became more and more intrigued in the decision-making and meaning making of those decisions of my people.

There is a direct connection between identity and decision-making. Who we are, and how we make meaning of events in our lives impacts the decisions we make. The purpose of this project is to highlight an example of this connection prevalent in the lives of African Americans (who I will subsequently interchange with the phrase Black folk) since the earliest written records of enslaved African existence in America to contemporary 21st century fictional writing. The inspiration for this project is stories and lives of Black and Brown folks, the experiences via stories of mothers, sisters, aunts, grandmothers, cousins, neighbors, midwives, and the enslaved, as an invaluable reference base from which I have personally, professionally, and spiritually been nurtured in, and serve as my primary sources. Within these written recollections, accounts of lived experiences reveal the ways Black and Brown men and women reflected on and testified to their stories, navigating moral dilemmas, contemplating freedom or bondage, isolation or family, life or death. Significant to the Black experience, the written works of Black [women] writers have been and continue to be trusted as poignantly mirroring lived Black narratives, garnering implications for all Black life. The appeal to me of womanist/Black women's perspective (other than my social location and identity) lies in the spiritual imagination integrated with concrete realities that speak to the struggles of all peoples. This combination of struggling for survival and making a way out of no way produces a womanist ethic of survival, a radical understanding and reflection on decisions that give way to meaning making within oppressed communities, lending itself to socially transformative implications. The recognition of narrating and storytelling experiences of survival as a means of ethical reflection is what I call a 'womanist narrative ethics of survival', a phrase and/or concept rooted in the womanist episteme of 'making a way out of no way,' narrative reflection, and positing moral questions. Naming this concept provides access to other meaning-making implications in multiple spaces and points to a

nuanced and transformative perspective of human life and flourishing, one focused on and hoping for more than merely survival.

The way in which Black and Brown bodies maneuver everyday situations and create options out of what appear to be ultimatums gives way to a hermeneutic that may consider the western conception of ‘a good life,’ but does not end there. The *eudaimonia,* or happiness that Aristotle and other philosophers and theorists speak of overlooks possibilities and potentials in life that marginalized bodies may not and do not have access to. There exists an unequivocal significance and substance in narratives of African American life and literature, and to not deeply explore these wells of knowledge would be a disservice to all connected studies. More than ever, people are concerned and situated around a 'story' that is told, the narrator, the mode of narration, the construction and implementation of agency, its implications on contemporary life, etc.

My intention is twofold, to explore and to construct. My first aim is to explore a particular way of living everyday life, one that is predicated on a history of misrecognition and being situated on the 'fringes' of society, a space not intended for human flourishing, relegated to what Frantz Fanon calls the ‘zone of nonbeing'. There is something to be said for a group of people who can operate in a land of ‘no space’. In a society where some aspects of identity and recognition are still relegated to the physical land and territory that one lays claim to, one must explore the formation and expression of identity by a group of people whose name is attached to no space, to no land, but rather to the ‘dry arid region’ in between, where one is not meant to lay claim/root and develop/survive. My second aim is to give structure and credence to an ethical framework developed in those same fringes, shedding light on the underlying theme connecting these movements within everyday life, survival.

The first chapter is a literary analysis of narrative in the form of a novel written by Jesmyn Ward titled *Sing, Unburied, Sing.* With a lens bent toward survival, this initial look into the novel will set up the social context and familial dynamics through brief character analysis, highlighting specific instances of decision making and moments of contemplation. Noting the motifs, scenes of significance, and specific juxtapositions, this introductory chapter provides the reader with the tenets of faith, food, and family, all central to the construction of Black identity in America, and therefore central to the decision-making frameworks they enact. As Ward used actual geographical and landmark locations for this fictional novel, her style of writing aligns with the interpretation of Black literature as mirroring in some way, shape, or fashion Black life, and as such serves as a sufficient and interesting entry point into Black identity.

Reeling off the first chapter, the second chapter takes a more in depth look at the emergence and development of Black identity from a multidisciplinary perspective. The very construction of Black identity is one that emerged amid, against, and as an eventual disruption of white/American space, and contributes to the decision making and meaning making that Black folks engage in. Every aspect of Black identity and existence in America is one that creatively sprung from environments of restraint, constraint, and limitations. Despite this, Black identity (and Black religion simultaneously) emerged, creating a unique and lasting culture and expression. Connecting some common themes from Ward's *Sing, Unburied, Sing*, I note how the fields of psychology and sociology have conceived of the construction of Black identity. I then take a narrative approach to examine three aspects of black identity and culture that substantially illuminate the creativity and persistence present amid survival. Each facet points to the distinction and difference in cultural construction and identity in a unique and transformative way. Through *food, family/kinship relations*, and *the formation of the 'Black Church',* these

aspects of Black identity point to and provide understanding for the unique relationship between Black identity and survival. Through the creation, maintenance and evolution of Black recipes and styles of cooking, the formation of kinship and alternative familial ties, and the formation and evolution of Black Christianity and the 'Black Church', these aspects demonstrate ways in which enslaved Africans and subsequent emancipated Black folks 'made a way out of no way', creating meaning and defining purpose and significance in one's life; and when viewed collectively constitute a narrative identity centered around, focused on, and born from survival.

The third chapter focuses on the theological significance of African American life and survival in the United States and Caribbean from a womanist perspective. Tracing the trajectory of the womanist narrative of 'making a way out of no way' across the 19th, 20th, and 21st centuries, the cultural/theological responses of faith formation in Black spaces serve as a paradigm for an interpretation of humanity and divinity amid the historical and contemporary context of dehumanization. Highlighting several women scholars (who may or may not identify themselves as womanist), I note important lived realities recounted and recalled that are constitutive of an identity centered around survival embodied by African Americans, and how they understood their relationship to God. Referencing the previous chapter and the centrality of women in the formation of the Black community, I outline a trajectory of womanist praxis, rooted in 'making a way out of no way', navigating moral dilemmas and struggling for survival in everyday life. From the interpretation of Christianity by enslaved Africans in the creation of the Slave Religion to the academic emergence of the womanist episteme, the expanding and evolving notions of Black theology and ethics mirror the strategic and spontaneity key to survival. The very emergence of a Black religion in general as well as a Womanist Theology and Womanist Ethics is an example of survival tactics integrated into a social group's identity. I trace

the development and advancement of womanist theology and ethics, and conclude that the womanist narrative is one that constantly asks and responds to the question, 'How are we to survive'?

The fourth chapter contains my take on the tradition of ethical theories, noting while they provide a solid foundation on which to morally deliberate, they are not constructed to center the lives and epistemes of marginalized and minoritized bodies. Paul Ricoeur and Hille Haker offer nuanced understandings of moral dilemmas and moral tragedies connected to "living a good life with others in just institutions." My construction of the womanist narrative ethics of survival framework seeks to stand on the shoulders of traditional ethical categories such as deontology, teleology, the good life, and moral responsibility by positing three claims that must be valid for the presence of the ethic: *1. There can be no narrative ethics without stories.* Henry Louis Gates and Toni Morrison beautifully detail the importance of African American literature as a sign, symbol, and spectating mirror of life. In stories we have the greatest possibilities of imaginative alternatives. Stories provide alternate universes, different and foreign lands, and most importantly, a realm in which to contemplate moral dilemmas alongside the characters. *2. There can be no narrative ethics without reflection on stories.* The telling or hearing of the stories is only one aspect. The reader and listener must then consider the context of the story, the narrator, the circumstances for the author/originator of the story as well as the context within the story itself. How does this story speak to contemporary issues, or is it a completely fantastical account? Here Morrison (much like Ward in *Sing, Unburied, Sing)* overlaps fiction and nonfiction, leading to the rise of moral questions, the third claim. *3. There can be no narrative ethics without moral questions.* These issues are connected to the tension between the normative moral and ethical claims (otherwise known as universal) with the reality of lived experiences and

the actual choices that individuals are presented with. Aside from these three claims, a womanist narrative ethics of survival is one situated within the movements of everyday life. Stemming from the womanist tradition, *Mujerista* theologian Ada Maria Isasi-Diaz captures this elegantly and poignantly in her explication of *lo cotidiano,* a re-interpretation of Michel de Certeau's *the Practice of Everyday Life.* Isasi-Diaz illustrates the moral dilemmas that can arise from one's social location and identity, and how one's identity directly contributes to one's response to such dilemmas. A womanist narrative ethics of survival framework considers moral dilemmas using the claims above in the context of everyday life.

The final chapter revisits *Sing, Unburied, Sing,* from an ethical perspective, highlighting the central moral dilemma in the novel using the womanist narrative framework similar to the moral dilemma faced in Toni Morrison's *Beloved*. After a close read of the novel, I re-state the dilemma between the two characters Riv and Richie in ethical language for an analysis. Kantian views of deontology and Thomistic views of teleology provide insufficient judgements concerning the ethicality of the character's choices in terms of a *moral tragedy*. Introduced when one is faced with contending moral obligations and the enactment of one lead to the negation of the other, a *moral tragedy* represents a specific kind of moral dilemma, one that impacts the actor/character in a negative or pervasive way. Only when the characters' identities and locations are properly considered via a womanist narrative ethic of survival is one able to adequately consider the magnitude of the moral dilemma, and better judge the validity of one's choices. Marginalized bodies may not have a clear and concise conception of the good life, but they have a strong conception of living a life not plagued by the threat of death. Noting how this framework aligns with the negative universal 'the right not to be killed' or 'the right to not have to choose between a torturous death and a merciful one,' this chapter acknowledges that

normative claims do exist, but are conceived of differently because one's life experiences. The end of the chapter speaks to the difficulties of the authors creating characters to inhabit such spaces, recalling the importance of ghosts and specters in novels that serve as haunting reminders, forcing remembrance, and fighting not to be forgotten into the horrible history of silenced and repressed bodies, searching to be recognized, surviving through memories, remembering, and storytelling.

The conclusion speaks to the importance of these and other kinds of frameworks that prioritize marginalized experiences and epistemes as valid sources of moral wisdom. The womanist tradition has already done such, placing Black and Brown women's experiences as central to understanding how decisions are made, how meaning is given, how life is conceived of in those cracks of life. The conclusion also speculates how this ethical framework would operate in alternative spaces. I am also a Clinical Ethicist, and in the context of healthcare, patients, substitute decision makers, and families are faced with difficult decisions and dilemmas frequently. I ponder how might this kind of framework translate into healthcare, perhaps helping those who experience medical mistrust and have difficulties communicating their life choices to healthcare workers. A womanist narrative ethics of survival has profound implications in bioethics, narrative medicine, and narrative bioethics, highlighting the thick narratives some people carry with them as they make decisions. This project is a culmination of my past experiences, present reality, and future aspirations for both myself, and my people.

CHAPTER ONE

SOWING THE SEEDS FOR SURVIVAL: SITUATING JESMYN WARD'S *SING, UNBURIED, SING* AS PARADIGM FOR A NARRATIVE ETHICS OF SURVIVAL

The Haunting of Narrative: African American Literature and Life

"We are powerful because we have survived, and that is what it is all about, survival and growth." ― Audre Lorde

This chapter presents the novel central to the construction of my ethical framework. Toni Morrison articulates that literary specters are the histories that cannot be silenced and must be remembered. Literature, including novels, speeches, poems, and reflections, provide texts bridging the gap between forgetting and remembering. For Morrison, the call of literature affords the "only staunch in the wasteful draining away of conscience and memory," making it possible to experience the public without coercion and without submission. In addition to character building and moral strengthening, literature "allows us - no demands of us - the experience of ourselves as multidimensional persons…as narrative its form is the principal method by which knowledge is appropriated and translated."[1] If Toni Morrison and Alice Walker define 20th century African American Women's literature, highlighting the terrain of survival through the "souls of Black folks,"[2] then the same must be said regarding Jesmyn Ward for the 21st century, for no other Black, female identified literary scholar has pierced the depths of Black existence in

[1]Toni Morrison, *The Source of Self-Regard: Selected Essays, Speeches, and Meditations*, First Vintage International edition, (New York: Vintage International, 2020).

[2]W.E.B DuBois, *Writings of W.E.B DuBois*, ed. Nathan Huggins, (Penguin Putnam, Inc., 1986).

America in such a short amount of time. Praised for her ability to poetically narrate and facilitate a rich and visceral dialogue between African American history, contemporary injustices, and identity dynamics all in the framework of American fictive literature, Ward offers her readers an intimate space to embrace, to become, or 'become along with' the characters in her novels as they simply 'survive.' Within Ward's novels, the readers embark on a pseudo-historical journey, into the lives of the characters, and into the world of the novel.

Geographically Ward situated most of her writings in her homeland, the south/southeast region of the United States, the bayous and swamps of Mississippi and Louisiana. Taking stock of the geographical significance, the reader is introduced to the unique construction of language, tradition, and life post Katrina, a devastating hurricane that occurred in 2005 and is still negatively impacting certain communities in the region some 17 years later.[3] From an existential standpoint, Ward expresses pertinent struggles connected to the harrowing identity of being Black in America, by highlighting each intimate moment of character engagement with supplemental historical circumstances (e.g. the scene in *Sing, Unburied, Sing*, when the family is pulled over by the police). Unlike ethnographic and historical studies, engaging in literary analysis of texts like Ward's privileges the imagination, illuminating truths equal to (if not more than) factual or historical observation. When delving in literature, the constructed and imagined is as critical as the objective and credible. The literary analysis of fiction allows for the greatest breath of imagination while still tapping into the weight of memory, history, and lived

[3]In many of her interviews, Ward is explicit in how her full self shows in each of her novels, including her experience of the historical storm. Jesmyn Ward, "Jesmyn Ward: 'Black girls are silenced, misunderstood and underestimated," The Guardian, May 11th, 2018, https://www.theguardian.com/books/2018/may/11/jesmyn-ward-home-mississippi-living-with-addiction-poverty-racism.

experience, especially in Black/African American literature, where there exists a beautiful interpretation of what is real with what is historical. The life of the text, the way in which the text speaks for itself, how the reader (perhaps the author as well) journeys alongside the characters in whatever quest they embark upon, whether physically (through time or space) or dialogically, contributes to and exchanges with the reader, contributing to a more robust conception of the human experience. The importance of survival construed, displayed, enhanced (and sometimes limited) is noted across disciplines. Bettina Love's book *We Want to Do More than Survive: Abolitionist Teaching and the pursuit of educational freedom* advocates that leaders, teachers, and educators must teach students about the complex history of oppression, racial (and gender) violence, and opportunities for a sustainable future contributing to educational reform. While Love focuses on the practical notion of education, her words are more than timely regarding my understanding of survival and thriving:

> What I am describing is a life of exhaustion, a life of doubt, a life of state-sanctioned violence, and a life consumed with the objective of surviving. Survival is existing and being educated in an anti-dark world, which is not living or learning at all. It is trying to survive in, at the same time make sense of a world and its schools that are reliant on dark disposability. This existence is not truly living nor is it a life of mattering. As dark people, we are trying to survive the conditions that make the dark body, mind, and spirit breakable and disposable.[4]

The lives of Black folks in the United States have been consumed with survival. Part of this consumption is conveyed in the narratives of those survival experiences. In this chapter I provide a brief synopsis of the novel, noting how the geographical location, its features, and even one of the characters survives via intertextuality through a mix of Ward's personal experiences,

[4]Bettina Love, *We Want to do More Than Survive: abolitionist teaching and the pursuit of educational freedom*, (Boston: Beacon Press, 2019), 39.

previous novels, and research into socio-political standards of the context. I then turn to the plot, distinguishing traditional literary labels such as protagonist, antagonist, secondary characters, etc. From here I move into a more in-depth character analysis, progressing from the primary characters to the secondary or less well-known characters, with a strong focus on the relationality of the characters to one another as fundamental to the construction/maintenance of identity as well as survival. I then examine the textual motifs, some raised by previous scholars and others not so deeply explored that further illustrate the perversity of 'survival' throughout the novel. From this exposition I juxtapose three sets of characters, each alluding to a particularity of this survival narrative, an ethic which readers may find prevalent through Ward's novel of *Sing, Unburied, Sing*, as well as her previous novels of *Where the Line Bleeds* (2008), *Salvage the Bones* (2011), and *Men We Reaped* (2013). I conclude the chapter by noting Ward is one of many African American women identified scholars to convey the motif of survival through a rich hermeneutic that appears visceral to those who identify as Black in America, and I too take a subsequent deeper look into African American meaning making via those 3 areas of existence.

Survival: The Literary Antecedent of Flourishing

I chose Jesmyn Ward and her novel as she epitomizes the vibrant and beautiful synergy of two competing identities in the 21st century United States, and her work is truly an expression of how she navigates those identities: American Literary Scholar/Professor/Writer, and Black Woman/Mother/Sister/Cousin. For many, Ward's direct connection to Hurricane Katrina and subsequent focus on the 'hauntings of the gulf coast,' invoke both a spirit of memory and haunting of remembrance. Using the most intimate and vulnerable pieces of her life, she crafts the story of 'every Black and Brown body in the deep south.' Not only must we not forget those who have come and gone before us, but in many ways, we are forced to remember, as a

cautionary tale of the tragedies witnessed to, we are surrounded in the trapped lives and deaths of those who contribute to our identities, to our meaning making. In addition to contributing to and continuing this well-heeled history of African American literature, Jesmyn introduces her own unique style of writing, reminding the reader of a Faulkner type diversion from the linear narrative from the events she tells, but one that sheds light on multiple stories and narratives that collectively provide a fuller picture into the historical narrative of the United States. Ward blends the ebonical nuances of the deep south with repetition, alliteration, and a savory style that can shock at first, but transitions to palatable, and at times highly anticipated. Ward confronts both the literary tradition of the United States as well as the history of those who have died unnatural deaths, and as a result have not yet passed on, still haunting the memories and histories of others. This literary analysis points to some preliminary facets of African American literature indispensable to identity formation and ethical reflection for minoritized bodies. Within the literary constellation of *Sing, Unburied, Sing*, death is not the end of life, survival may very well be a death with dignity, and the survival of a narrative that allows for those unburied, those not resting, to exist, to survive, to sing.

African American literature as a robust source of expression is the starting point for my journey into a narrative ethics of survival. For me, the site of African American (what I use interchangeably in this context with Black) storytelling provides a unique position and opportunity to delve into the methods of meaning making, the underlying contexts of options available, and the diverse expression of Black identity (albeit creatively constructed or factual). Ever since its public inception and dispensation, the history of African American literature in general and fiction supports the notion that within the perceived monolith of Black life, various creative and spontaneous interpretations of life exist. I am fully aware of the breadth of survival,

and how vaguely it can be interpreted, and to a certain extent, that is my intention, to illustrate the multitude of contexts, options, and decisions that contribute to seeking a good life, if able to live a life at all. How one interprets survival is by no means limited to mere existence but must be considered in the total historical and social location that both the reader and the character find themselves in and must take seriously how the person who is seeking to survive defines/expresses it.

Situating Sing, Unburied, Sing

Jesmyn Ward's *Sing, Unburied, Sing* (2017)[5] is a culminating novel paradigmatic of the 21st century hermeneutic of survival pervasive through African American movement and meaning making in the United States. Furthermore, Ward's novel directly responds to Toni Morrison's take on literary othering and *Narrating the Other,* as 'Narrative fiction provides a controlled wilderness, an opportunity to be and to become the Other. The stranger.'[6] As Morrison sees 'Beloved' the girl as the ultimate Other, I see Richie and Mam through Leonie as the ultimate survivors. I claim that African American literature is one of the greatest expressions of the ethical framework grounded in a survival narrative. Rooted in African American meaning-making, thought processes and action, both authors (Morrison and Ward) and subjects (Richie, Leonie, Pop) of African American literature are deeply entangled in the question of survival, and what it means to live a good life, if a life at all. This concept of survival originates from the same forging of the African American identity via the Transatlantic Slave Trade and subsequent chattel slavery and continues consciously and sub-consciously today. I also claim that through

[5]Subsequently referred to as *SUS.*

[6]Toni Morrison, *The Origin of Others,* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2017), 91.

literary analysis, with particular attention to dichotomous interactions and moments of decision-making among Blacks, the methodological framework of survival revealed in African American fiction in fact exists in every aspect of African American life. What I allude to directly and indirectly in this chapter is what I subsequently dive into, in the subsequent chapters, explicating the social formation of identity, the interplay of theology and ethics through a womanist lens, and narrative as a medium for and of ethics, all navigating one another amid real-time lived experiences in a narrative ethics of survival. By engaging a well-known fictional text by a prominent African American woman scholar, I provide a literary analysis that both points to the favorable and recurring themes I and other scholars notice and acknowledging these themes are sourced from a more rudimentary motif, a narrative of survival. This concept of survival is diverse, one that adapts and molds to the character and context it finds itself in.

The story of *Sing, Unburied, Sing* written by Jesmyn Ward casts a unique historical and innovative perspective on several traditional American literary views, including navigating the road trip and the ideation of mobility, the incarceration system, race, caste, religious and spiritual beliefs, and the general umph of survival.[7] The story centers around Leonie, a black mother with a drug problem, looking to take her two biracial children on a trip to pick up their white father from the penitentiary in early 2000s Mississippi. The reader is invited to journey with the family through a few short days, but the day itself is filled with a multitude of decision filled instances and life impacting moments. Through the weaving of chapters through point of view shifts in character narrations, one can join JoJo, Leonie, Richie, Pa, Michael, and others as a glimpse into

[7]These categories originate from journal articles centered around Ward's novel through a variety of interpretations and conversation partners. While many look to compare Ward to the likes of Alice Walker, Toni Morrison, and other prominent Black women writers, there exists a parallel vein of comparison to great American authors including William Faulkner, Henry David Thoreau and more.

the life of interracial love and family survival in the deep south bears forth an array of interactions, identity confrontations, moral dilemmas, and instances gauging the interpretation of one's life choices. Set in post Katrina Bois Sauvage Mississippi, Ward interweaves characters from her previous works and her personal life into the characters and context of the novel.

Plot

Sing, Unburied, Sing tells the story of survival, through ghostly hauntings, through spiritual rituals and religious incantations, and most thoroughly and eloquently through the everyday decision-making of Black and Brown bodies. While the title most directly relates to the 'phantom-like' encounters that take place throughout the novel, there also exists unburied mourning, grief, anger, confusion, and a host of emotions clinging to the fringes of memory and experience. Many of those who've reviewed the novel refer to it in Ward's echo of 'a continuation of William Faulkner's exploration of American landscape via the novel'. However, the identity of the characters (racial and geographically) points to the influence of historical imperialism, capitalism, the integration of many religious and spiritual affiliations, and the continued struggle for recognition, or the attempt to engage and be successful in survival. In each of Ward's novels, she elegantly provides her readers with smooth integrations of historical reality and literary imagination (e.g., while the characters in *SUS* are fictional, Parchman Penitentiary and 'Bois Sauvage' are real, or based on real concepts).[8] Each character in the novel is representative of a particular group in the Black community and some of the challenges faced by each group.

[8]The town Bois Sauvage does not exist, but it is meant to represent Ward's hometown area of De Lisle Mississippi.

Set in 21st century Gulf Coast Mississippi, the novel begins with the main character Jojo's 13th birthday. The perspectives shift each chapter between Jojo, his mother Leonie, and a haunting specter Richie. Though Jojo renders his mother mostly absent, she is 'present' for his birthday celebration in some sense. She has purchased him an ill-fitting baby shower cake for her 13th year old son and can barely hold it long enough to sing 'happy birthday' before she runs to the ringing phone. Michael, the father of Jojo and Michaela relays he is getting out of prison, to which Leonie responds by volunteering to pick him up. The rest of the novel details the preparation for, duration of, and impacts afterwards of the trip to Parchman Prison. The story shifts to the perspective of Leonie, in anticipation of her trip to pick up Michael from Parchman, she reminisces over her and his relationship. We are introduced to the tainted history of her and Michael's relationship (Leonie's brother Given was killed by Michael's cousin in an alleged hunting accident). Leonie also reveals she has become addicted to meth, trying the drug for the first time after working at a local hangout with her best friend Misty, who is white. When Leonie is high, she sees her dead brother, except he is not her brother, but rather a ghost. A "Given-Not-Given" as she calls him, appears throughout the novel, and at some point, is seen by more than just Leonie. More of the spiritual and supernatural elements of the novel are discussed below, as they play an important role in both the narrative and my ethics of survival.

Alongside the narrative of the family trip is the narrative Riv (called Pop by Jojo) tells Jojo about Riv's own experience at Parchman. The reader learns of Pop's past, including his grandmother's story of crossing the Atlantic during the Middle Passage, the significance of the land and water as symbols of life and death, and how he ended up at Parchman at all. Wrongly convicted of a crime and sentenced to the Penitentiary with his brother, Riv's narrative told to Richie in pieces adds to the tense and complex narrative of Parchman (as well as provides the

central moral dilemma on which I base my ethical framework). The family dynamics revealed in the novel mirror some of the intricate family dynamics lived by Black families in the United States. Leonie is the mother of two biracial children, with a drug habit, the father of her children is incarcerated, unable to support herself and her children therefore living with her parents. We see the strong connection Jojo has with his maternal grandfather, Pop, and the significance of the oral tradition in their relationship as well as its contribution to the richness of the novel. Pop is clearly the fatherly figure to Jojo and Kayla, and starting to fill a quasi-maternal role as Leonie is inconsistent, and her mother, Mam, has fallen ill to cancer making her immobile.

The actual road trip unveils many aspects of historical and contemporary life for Black folks in the south and United States overall. The group encounters a traffic stop after picking up Michael, exposing the harsh realities of racial tension still prevalent, even in the 21st century. On a personal level, the true limitations of Leonie's parenting and the codependent bond between her children often ignite bouts of jealousy from Leonie, which is seen during the traffic stop incident among other scenes in the novel. In her narrations, Leonie often reflects on her relationship with Michael as central to her happiness. She reminisces about her brother, her inconsistent desire to effectively mother her children, and most importantly, she desires a life free of worry for her and Michael. All these desires as well as her drug habit impair her from being able to respond adequately to her children in their moment of need, something her mother later apologizes to Jojo for. Picking up Michael and an additional passenger (via Richie, the second specter of the novel), histories past and present collide into one, as Ward intertwines the in-moment experiences of multiple perspectives with remnants of moments past. The climax and ending of the story after the road trip to Parchman presents both stark and subtle points of clarity and awe for the reader. For the sake of the project, I will hold details of the plot until the final

chapter. I would like to detail the characters at this point, as aspects of each of their lives enriches my conception of Black identity in the United States, and how that identity contributes to meaning making.

Character Analyses

Jojo

Ward introduces the reader to the primary character Jojo on the eve of his 13th birthday, assisting his maternal grandfather 'Pop' in the slaughter of one of the animals for his birthday celebratory meal. Jojo (along with his younger sister Michaela) is biracial, his father Michael White, and mother Leonie Black. Along with viewing the novel from the perspective of Parchman prison, the story can also be viewed as a coming-of-age tale, gaining a deeper understanding and more substance to the first statement in the novel, ''I like to think I know what death is. I like to think that it's something I can look at straight'.[9] While Jojo initially presents a wiser beyond his years expression, his true naivete and innocence is revealed at the end of the chapter, when Pop has killed the goat, 'I can't hold myself still and watch no more, then I'm out the door of the shed and I'm throwing up in the grass outside. My face is so hot, but my arms are cold'.[10] The conclusion of the novel reveals the true depth of his experience when the specter Richie says to him, "now you know death."[11] Jojo's relationship with his maternal grandparents is intimate and daily, as he lives with them. His white, paternal grandparents are all but estranged. Describing the two grandfathers he states, 'Big Joseph [who is Jojo's namesake,

[9]Ward, *Sing, Unburied, Sing,* 1.

[10]*SUS,* 6.

[11]*SUS,* 282.

real name Joseph] is my white grandpa, Pop my Black on. I've lived with Pop since I was born; I've seen my White grandpa twice. Big Joseph is round and tall and looks nothing like Pop'.[12] Throughout the novel, Jojo never laughs or produces a smile beyond a grimaced flinch. He presents in the novel as stern, composed, and non-retaliatory, but also serene, innocent, and candid.

There is a clear and inherent maturity about Jojo, I imagine quickly forged to compensate for the lack of direct parental oversight, and with that a certain complexity within Jojo's character. While he is unlike any boy his age, the one boy the reader can readily compare him to may be the doppelganger to Jojo's exceptionality, Richie. Richie (described in greater detail in a subsequent part of this chapter) is the 12-year-old boy who served time at Parchman Penitentiary with Pop when Pop was younger. Jojo's narration is interrupted (or complimented depending on one's perspective) with pieces of the story of Pop and Richie at Parchman, as Richie also becomes a narrator of the novel. Jojo reflects not only on the story of Parchman itself, but also the fact that Pop has never told him the story in its entirety, only in pieces, and never the ending. Mam confirms this as Pop's preferred method of storytelling, at one point in the novel, it is Richie who entices Jojo to pressure Pa to finish the story of Richie's life at Parchman.

The reader travels with Jojo and the family, as he and his sister are reluctantly taken on a trip to pick up Michael from prison. Based on Jojo's interpretation of his experiences with both his parents and grandparents, the reader can imply he favors his maternal grandparents (Mam and Pop are Leonie's parents). Jojo serves as the primary caregiver to his younger sister, especially since Mam became sick and bed bound. While being completely indifferent or

[12]*SUS,* 4.

pessimistically reluctant to engage either of his parents, he is wholly respectful and present to both grandparents. It is not explicitly stated but becomes evident that Jojo's father has been absent for most of Jojo's life and has not gained (or lost) his respect because of this. As a result, Jojo has a strong sibling but also parent-like bond with Michaela, and she consistently reciprocates, as time and events reveal the solidified dependency Michaela (and Jojo) have built among one another, with Kayla preferring Jojo or Pa over her mother and/or father. The care and concern of Jojo for his younger sister in the first pages set the tone for the remainder of the novel is immediately evident in the first page of the novel:

> I grab the door, so it don't slam... I don't want Mam or Kayla to wake up with none of us in the house. Better for them to sleep. Better for my little sister Kayla, to sleep, because on nights when Leonie's out working, she wake up every hour, sit straight up in the bed and scream. Better for Grandma Mam to sleep, because the chemo done dried her up and hollowed her out the way the sun and the air do water oaks.[13]

Jojo is cognizant enough to acknowledge that the dynamic between him and his mother has not always been this way. From Jojo's perspective, moment to moment, he remembers and reminds the readers of a time 'when I still called Leonie *Mama*…before all the little mean things she told me gathered and gathered and lodged like grit in a skinned knee'.[14] The reader is exposed to the constant space of tension Jojo is caught in, racially, coming of age, navigating taking on the increasing responsibility of raising a child while still being a child himself. Due to Michael and Leonie's instability fueled by a drug addiction, Jojo's reflection on his childhood reveals a 'premature' coming of age prior to his 13th birthday. In a way of describing Leonie, he

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[13]*SUS,* 1.

[14]*SUS,* 7.

often gazes back to the ages of 5-10, before Kayla was born, when, left to the devices of his strung out and selfish parents, Jojo grew to learn that neither Leonie nor Michael could provide the kind of 'parenting' he needed. Repeated histories of domestic violence, disappointment, and uncertainty became the established norm for both parents, resulting in Jojo focusing all his ability to acquire, inherit from, and simply be around Pop, sometimes to the extent of Leonie's displeasure.[15] As a couple, Jojo is accustomed to their distorted selfishness, though it seems both Michael and Leonie try at different points to reassert some parental authority, neither Jojo nor Kayla respond positively. Reflecting on moments after Michael spanks Kayla shortly after being released from prison, Jojo thinks to himself, 'All's quiet in the house, and for a stupid second I wonder why Leonie and Michael ain't arguing about him hitting Kayla. And then I remember. They don't care'.[16]

Jojo is highly attuned to the fragmentation his mother struggles to navigate. At one point during the concluding chapter, he goes so far as to say 'Sometimes, late at night…I think I understand Leonie. I think I know something about what she feels… I feel it in me, too. An itching in my hands. A kicking in my feet… an unsettling'.[17] The entire family in some way functions around a central dysfunction, that of Leonie. When Jojo signals early on in the novel the level (or lack) of responsibility normally denoted to his mother, 'It was the first time I could

[15]*SUS,* 12. In this scene, after Leonie and Michael have a fight, Jojo makes a fried potato sandwich, of which Leonie heckles and berates him for. When he responds, 'This how Pop eats them,' she snaps back, 'You got to do everything Pop do'?

[16]*SUS* 229.

[17]*SUS,* 279.

remember they were depending on Leonie to look after me.'[18] In comparison to Leonie and her lack of mothering instinct or even consistency in either Jojo or Kayla's life, Jojo is able to supplement the compassion and parenting that Leonie cannot, 'I don't want Leonie giving her that. I know that's what she think she need to do, but she ain't Mam. She ain't Pop. She ain't never healed nothing or grown nothing in her life, and she don't know,'[19] often leaving Leonie jealous of the siblings' relationship and interdependency, knowingly and unknowingly caused by her own doing.

Kayla

Michaela, named after her father Michael but given the nickname 'Kayla' is the baby, perhaps 2 or 3, and wholly dependent upon her older brother. She is the younger child of Michael and Leonie, and younger sister to Jojo. Kayla's position in the novel is interesting. There are numerous points in the novel where the almost primal nature of Kayla extends to the most sensitive and contested spaces throughout the novel (the scene where Kayla is hungry as Michael and Leonie introduce the children to their paternal grandparents). The primal interjections of her needs often jolt the reader back into this paradox between innocence and historical realities that do not provide the space for such. Her instinctual cling to her brother as comfort, as protector, provider is as strong at the beginning of the narrative as it is at the conclusion. Reflecting on the disconnect between Leonie and her children, Mam comments on Kayla's ear pulling and kneading habit, noting it as a result of Kayla never being breastfed, and

[18] *SUS,* 12.

[19] *SUS,* 107.

she lacks certain soothing techniques that would have normally been conveyed during one's breastfeeding or milk years.[20]

At certain points, Leonie attempts to assert different levels of authority/parenting with Kayla, practically all of which fail. The only significance in Leonie and Michael's interactions with Kayla are that they are the only two to call her by her full name. Whether it serves as a self-soothing tool for the parents or as a way of reinforcing the categorical reprimand/reprieve that usually stems from a parent addressing a child is not clear, or necessarily relevant. Regardless of the reason, their attempts repeatedly fall short. Despite the numerous opportunities and attempts for both Michael and Leonie to change the narrative and relationship with their children, they are unable to. A vivid example of this rests with Kayla, who calls Leonie 'Ony', and not calling Michael anything.[21] It can be interpreted that not only is Leonie incapable of providing the motherly and parental care to either of her children, she also indirectly or unknowingly contributes to their discomfort. For Kayla, this is overtly seen during her sickness on the trip. After her initial vomiting spell, Leonie forces Kayla (via Jojo) to drink Gatorade, of which she throws up again. Despite Kayla's continued vomiting, Leonie is adamant to assert her mothering, forcing Kayla to drink more, until there is no more Gatorade to give her.[22] It is Jojo who stands as comforter, as guardian, holding Kayla as she sobs and clings to him.

It is revealed early in the novel that Kayla possesses the power to see, speak with, and hear spirits and ghosts. Unlike the anxieties and presumptions that accompany adults and the

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[20]*SUS,* 25.

[21]*SUS,* 196.

[22]*SUS,* 101.

supernatural, the reader refreshingly experiences the 'hauntings' of ghostly characters through mature and immature perspectives. Although the reader misses the reflection on such interactions as would have been offered by adult characters, what one does receive is a more unmediated encounter with the supernatural presences *because* of such lack of rationality or reflection. The reader becomes aware of Kayla's visual capacity on the family's trip to Parchman to pick up Michael. Pointing out what appear as birds to her, Jojo monologues that these are prisoners, postured in a way that resembles birds pecking at the ground.[23] Kayla continues to see the birds, noting one who appears very close, revealing shortly after that this bird is actually Richie. We also see the focus on Kayla's visions at the very close of the last scene. Jojo also sees the ghosts, whom Kayla orders to, 'Go home'. The exchange Jojo witnesses between Kayla and the ghosts, between present and past, between now and then, is breathtaking, and nicely consummates the narrative. She sings, and the ghosts express 'something like relief, something like remembrance, something like ease.'[24]

Michael

Michael is the white father of Jojo and Michaela, partner of Leonie. The reader is informed that Big Joseph and Maggie are Michael's parents. Their relationship with their son is strained, and though it is not directly known why, it can be assumed it originates from the interracial children he is the father of, his ongoing drug habit, and his relationship and preference of Leonie, a black woman. Michael is a drug addict, and a part of this addiction is what makes the relationship between him and Leonie toxic. Sometimes they are focused on being

[23] *SUS,* 125.

[24] *SUS,* 284.

independent, taking care of their children, and having a happy life. There are times when they are high however, and the only thing that matters is the happy 'high' life (hence why the children and Leonie live with Leonie's parents). In addition to the love connection and children connection, there is a tragic connection between Michael and Leonie's family, as Michael's cousin killed Leonie's brother, Given, who appears to Leonie when she is high. This tragedy adds to the complexity between the two families, as the ghost of Given alerts the reader to unresolved blame or accountability regarding his death. It is through the tragic accident however that Michael introduces himself to Leonie, and they eventually fall in love and have Jojo and Kayla.

What we receive of Michael mostly comes from Leonie reminiscing on past lives of she and Michael, mainly in between the time they met in high school and dated, up until Jojo was born. Leonie often romanticizes her interactions and memories of Michael, comparing being with him to 'what it feels like to rise from a dark deep place.'[25] Unlike Leonie however, Michael voices aspirations of doing right by his family, taking head on the responsibility of father, but the culmination of this proclamation also falls short. The morning after the family has returned from Parchman and picking up Michael, he cooks breakfast for Jojo and Kayla, asking Jojo if he remembers the fishing trip he and Michael took, noting that more of those trips are what it means for Michael 'to be home'. This reminiscent moment is cut short, as Kayla throws a tantrum at the table, and Michael spanks her. Once again, we see the visceral and primal need of Kayla overshadow the aspirations and fantasizing of her parents, and the only one she responds to is Jojo's compassion and interjection. His motion of correcting Michael in addressing his sister,

[25] *SUS,* 193.

"we call her Kayla," and rescuing her from her reprimand, "swinging her up and away from Michael's hand,"[26] undermining and overriding the punishment rendered by Michael.

Given

One of the primary ghostly figures in the novel, Given is Leonie's older brother. He is deceased at the novel's narrated time. Born to Mam and Pop later in life, Given was seen as a blessing, with Leonie born a few years later. As children, Given and Leonie were teased for various reasons, and Given was often defending himself and his sister via fighting.[27] There is little information on Given's childhood, but one garners the siblings were close growing up. An overall talented athlete and avid high school football player, Given came to see Black and White as equal through his experience of sports, a sentiment not shared by many on either side, and it would cost him dearly. We learn of his tragic death via a hunting incident with some of his white peers from school. In a competitive after school event to determine who was the better hunter, one of the other boys who was Michael's cousin, deliberately turned the gun on Given and killed him. Aware of the backlash for intentionally killing a man (Black or otherwise), the group concocted and spread the killing as that of a *hunting accident.*[28]

Based on Leonie's drug habit and the recurrences of seeing Given, we can imply Leonie has not properly grieved the death of her brother and accepted his loss. Leonie often wrestles

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[26]*SUS,* 228.

[27]*SUS,* 33.

[28]I italicize this like Ward. In the telling of the story, the phrase *hunting accident* is repeated and italicized, which forces the reader to view the phrase with a hermeneutic of suspicion, keeping in mind the preceding context. I also want to instill in readers this hermeneutic of suspicion, the reading of a text (even a novel or other fictional piece) with the same level of criticism ad inquiry that one uses when engaging an academic or historical piece.

with her love for Michael and her guilt and confusion over her brother's death, as if, one constantly reminds her of the other. There are two different forms of Given. There is the historical Given, the brother of Leonie who was favored by her parents because he was given to them (hence his name), and there is Given-not-Given, who only appears in the novel as a ghost, and only appears to Leonie when she is high.[29] This Given-not-Given is described in a variety of ways, depending on Leonie's state of influence and mental status. Given's presence despite his death serves as a constant interjection, conceptualizing survival through means of spiritual and ghostly encounters. Given's most direct participation in the narrative comes as the time of Mam's passing, where both ghosts are present, Richie and Given.[30] Unlike Richie, Given leaves at the passing of Mam, and does not return.

Pop (Riv)

Pop represents the stability and grounding of the story, and the novel unfolds much in the same manner of how he tells the story of himself and Richie at Parchman, however in fragments spread throughout the novel. He is the strongest connection to the past hauntings, to the memories of those who continue to haunt the narrative with their presence, through his multiple narratives of his great-grandmother, his brother, the death of his friend at Parchman as well as the death of his son Given. Pop has experienced the most pain in the novel, yet his ability to still provide Jojo and Leonie as well (despite her inability to become and remain stable), with the mentoring, protection, is a testament to the centrality of his character, positionally and personally. Along with Mam, there is great wisdom in the stories and sayings we receive from

[29]*SUS,* 34.

[30]*SUS,* 273.

Pop. He instills nuggets and gems into Jojo whenever they are alone, we see that in a scene of the two splitting logs, 'Everything got power…my great granddaddy taught me that… said there's spirit in everything. In the trees, in the moon, in the sun, in the animals…But you need all of them, all of that spirit in everything, to have balance...a body is the same way.'[31]

Reviewers and critics of the novel often focus on Leonie's drug habit and tendency to shy away from motherhood in exchange for love and relationships. I think the survival of the past through the present into the future through Pop should not be overlooked as indicative of the power of storytelling and meaning making. Recalling the fatal moment when Pop kills Richie, for fear of what would happen to him if caught by the prison guards, Pop conveys to the reader an intimate and difficult image that he has not been able to escape, or reconcile:

> I washed my hands every day, Jojo. But that damn blood ain't never come out. Hold my hands up to my face, I can smell it under my skin. Smelled it when the warden and sergeant cam up on us, the dogs yipping and licking blood from they muzzles. They'd torn his throat out, hamstringed him. Smelled it when the warden told me I'd done good. Smelled it the day they let me out on account I'd led the dog that caught and killed Richie. Smelled it when I finally found his mama after weeks of searching, just so I could tell her Richie was dead and she could look at me with a stone face and shut the door on me. Smelled it when I made it home in the middle of the night, smelled it over the sour smell of the bayou and the salt smell of the sea, smelled it years later when I climbed into bed with Philomene, put my nose in your grandmother's neck, and breathed her in like the scent of her could wash the other away. But it didn't. When Given died, I thought I'd drown in it. Drove me blind, made me so crazy I couldn't speak. Didn't nothing come close to easing it until you came along.[32]

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[31]*SUS,* 72.

[32]*SUS, 256-7.*

Leonie

I intentionally placed Leonie at this point in the character analysis as she represents many central conflicts among those who identify as Black may face. If my analysis posits Jojo as the protagonist of the novel, then it subsequently posits Leonie as a radical antagonist [33]. One interpretation of Leonie's role and position in the family can be seen as contentious, dismissive, and often selfish. She is the daughter and youngest child of Mam and Pop. An African American woman, she falls in love with the cousin of the white man who killed her brother. Leonie has two bi-racial children with her boyfriend Michael, who is currently incarcerated at Parchman State Prison, set to be released (the trip in the novel focuses on going to pick him up). Unable to become stable enough to take care of her kids on her own, the three of them (and then four when Michael arrives home) stay with Leonie's parents. Leonie struggles with a drug habit further fueled by the death of her brother Given and incarceration of the father of her children. Although Michael introduced Leonie to coke, meth, and other drugs after the oil rig he was working on exploded,[34] Leonie continues to do drugs with her White friend and co-worker Misty.

Leonie possesses the ability to see the dead, and has several interactions with her dead brother, all of which happen when she is high, 'Last night, he smiled at me, this Given-not-

[33]Using the phrase 'radical antagonist' to point to the consideration that is told from Leonie's point of view, she would be considered the protagonist, and the strongest opposing force would be the antagonist. In this case, that would be Jojo, who more than any other character in the novel, works either neutrally not on Leonie's behalf or actively against her.

[34]*SUS, 92-3.* It is believed this event coincides with the historical 2010 BP oil spill in the Gulf Coast.

Given, this Given that's been dead fifteen years now, this Given that came to me every time I snorted a line, every time I popped a pill.'[35] Leonie identifying Given as 'Given-not-Given' clearly distinguishes that although she is under the influence of drugs most of the time he manifests, both she and the reader are aware of Given as *haunting*, noting 'other differences between the living and this chemical figment. Given-not-Given didn't breathe right. He never breathed at all.'[36] The racial dynamic between Leonie and Michael and Leonie and Misty complicates a multitude of scenarios they find themselves in as the novel unfolds, reinforcing the pervasiveness of racial difference and divide despite the biracial children and interracial relationship. While it serves as a point of great contention, it also functions as a connecting bridge. 'Her boyfriend was Black, and this loving across color lines was one of the reasons we became friends so quickly.'[37]

In several instances throughout the novel, we see Leonie inhabit what Morrison deems 'the Africanist other,'[38] a polarizing and dehumanizing identity that casts one's existential location of self into a state of 'non-being.' We often find Leonie unable to act, or unable to act in a way that benefits anyone other than herself. The times Leonie attempts to show compassion, empathy, and serenity are in her references to Michael. She has never been a failure to him, always been enough, and has never needed to do anything extra to solicit unmitigated approval

[35] *SUS,* 34.

[36] *SUS,* 34.

[37] *SUS, 35.*

[38] Morrison, *Playing in the Dark,* 16.

and affection. Separate from her parents, her children, her friends and those around her, Michael to her is her sole source of affirmation.

One of the most difficult identities to navigate in Ward's novel is Leonie as mother. A critical complexity of competing identifying narratives, Leonie presents to some either as the misplaced grieving sister and lost single mother, or the ill-fit and neglectful mother. The reader is confronted time and time again with instances allowing Leonie to break free from her cycle, to choose a different path that includes prioritizing her children and becoming authentically sympathetic. During the drive to Parchman, Michaela becomes ill and vomits multiple times in the car. Leonie describes the event as she watches Kayla cling to her brother Jojo, and how he soothes her, almost to Leonie's distaste. Even during the moment to mother her child and tend to her, her mind wanders:

> "I'm tired of this shit," I say. I don't know why I say it. Maybe because I'm tired of driving, tired of the road stretching before me endlessly, Michael always at the opposite end of it, no matter how far I go, how far I drive. Maybe because part of me wanted her to leap for me, to smear orange vomit over the front of my shirt as her little tan body sought mine, always sought mine, our hearts separated by the thin cage of our ribs, exhaling, and inhaling, our blood in sync. Maybe because I want her to burrow in me for succor instead of her brother. Maybe because Jojo doesn't even look at me, all his attention on the body in his arms, the little person he's trying to soothe, and my attention is everywhere. Even now, my devotion: inconstant.[39]

Leonie is the most complex character of the novel. Physically, she is ladened with being a black woman in post-Katrina Bois Sauvage Mississippi, the mother of two bi-racial children. Socially, she self-ostracizes as the misfit and disappointing child, in comparison to her deceased

[39]*SUS,* 98.

brother Given, the son who 'came too late and left too early'.[40]When she seems to care about something, it is usually centered around Michael how he makes her feel, the life she imagines with just the two of them without children, without the circumstances that limit her. Her life experiences are centered around the disappointment she feels in multiple areas of her life, and the disappointment she perceives from her family. The character of Leonie is central to my understanding of an ethics of survival. The reader is also privy to feeling disappointed from Leonie's actions and reflections. An example of this disappointment is shown as Leonie attempts to find some natural curative means along the side of the road to ease Kayla's upset stomach during the road trip, and her ensuing frustration over not remembering what is safe, and not having available what is needed. 'Sometimes the world don't give you what you need no matter how hard you look. Sometimes it withholds.'[41]

In relation to the struggle and demands of people of color in the United States, Leonie serves as one of the archetypes for navigating multiple identities and narrating one's life choices and circumstances as one sees fit. Her analysis, understanding, and actions may be motivated by some conception of a good life, but are expressed as moments and movements of survival and resisted existence.

Richie

In addition to Jojo and Leonie, Richie is the third narrator of the novel, and although his firsthand perspective is not introduced until chapter 6, the reader is introduced to Richie immediately through Pop's stories told to Jojo regarding his Parchman days. There existed a

[40]*SUS, 47.*

[41]*SUS,* 104.

particularly intimate relationship between Pop and Richie, and it can be inferred that such relationship and unsettled ghosts prompts the story to be told to Jojo at this time in his life, the onset of Jojo's 13th birthday. Richie is initially sent to Parchman for stealing 'salted meat.'[42] From the moment Pop introduces Richie's narrative, there is a protective undertone, 'he wasn't nothing but twelve years old,'[43] and even justifying the actions leading Richie to Parchman 'Lots of folks was in there for stealing food because everybody was poor and starving…Richie was the youngest boy I ever saw up at Parchman.'[44] Described as entering into the camp crying, with 'the kind of head seemed too big for his body: a body all bones and skin.'[45] From Richie's perspective, we trace the initial desire and goal 'to go home,' and he thoroughly and firmly believes that the telling of his story to Jojo will release him. Richie's perspective is truly unique, he is a ghost that can both be seen by and interact with the living characters in the novel. Later in the novel the reader gains knowledge that Mam, Leonie, Jojo, and Kayla all have abilities to see/interact with ghosts, each to a different degree.

In Richie we see the strongest advocacy for narrative, and the significance it holds with allowing those who are 'stuck' the ability to move forward. Richie's narration mostly comprises his memories of Parchman, his comparative thoughts between Jojo and himself, and questioning the end to his own story, as told by Riv (Pop). It is only through Pop telling Jojo the course of events centered around Pop's time at Parchman working with the dogs that we receive insight

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[42]*SUS,* 21.

[43]*SUS,* 21.

[44]*SUS,* 21.

[45]*SUS,* 23.

into personal, social, and structural conditions of both Pop and Richie's time at the penitentiary, and with one another. It is later throughout the novel that Richie is hoping to transition, to pass through the stuck domain of the living. At a certain point in the novel (notably once Richie begins to contribute to his own narrative), Jojo almost pressures Pop to finish the story of Richie and himself, the closer he seems to get to the climax, the more often he ends the story or digresses to an unrelated topic. Though he is only seen by Kayla and Jojo, with Mam seeing and speaking to him at the time of her death. We learn after Mam's passing, that Richie is not able to transition clearly as he suspected with the telling of his story, but rather his presence represented a different rite of passage experienced by both him and Jojo. We see Richie reach out to Jojo in the final chapter and speak about why he is still on earth. 'Now you understand life. Now you know. Death,'[46] bringing full circle Jojo's opening statement in the first chapter, 'I like to think I know what death is.'[47] Richie's presence, interjection and integration into the multivocal narrative of the family's story illustrates that we should never take one narrative at face-value, but rather consider the ways narratives are somehow always multi-linear, always a part of other narratives.

Mam (Philomene)

Mam, wife of Pop, mother of Leonie and Given, and grandmother of Jojo and Kayla, provides the greatest source of spirituality. We meet Mam as bedridden and ravaged by cancer, slowly eating her to the bone. Jojo references not waking Mam or Kayla while slaughtering the goat for his birthday, 'because the chemo done dried her up and hollowed her out the way the

[46]*SUS,* 282.

[47]*SUS,* 1.

sun and the air do the water oaks.' In her active days prior to the cancer, we learn of Mam's lifelong practices of root work, of spirit seeing, of listening to animals and speaking to the dead, as well as learning the importance of natural herbs, and the earth providing one with everything they need. We see the primacy of spirituality and spirit work transform with the enduring illness of Mam and the pending responsibility of Leonie when it is time for Mam to transition. The relationship between Leonie and Mam is heavily strained, as Leonie did not inherit the spiritual acuity to properly continue the gifts and tradition Mam attempted to instill in her when she was younger. The few moments when Mam is vocal, she acknowledges her daughter's inability either to mother, or to perform root work in any meaningful way. As she lies on her deathbed, she calls Jojo in and speaks to him, recalling the failure of Leonie as a mother, 'I don't know if it's something I did. Or if it's something that's in Leonie. But she ain't got the mothering instinct. I knew when you was little and we was out shopping, and she brought herself something to eat and ate it right in front of you, and you was sitting there crying hungry. I knew then'.[48] Despite the lack of mothering, Mam affirms that Leonie loves her children, 'She just don't know how to show it. And her love for herself and her love for Michael – well, it gets in the way. It confuse her.'[49]

Misty

Misty, I consider an active secondary character. She provides a significant contribution to understanding Leonie, and indirectly provides a point of contention on which to stand the racial dynamic/differences experienced by the two. Other than their interracial romances that provide

[48]*SUS, 233.*

[49]*SUS,* 234.

them a bridge of connectivity and friendship, they also engage in drug use together. Leonie admits 'She knows I like to hear outside when I get high. I know she doesn't like to get high alone, which is why she invited me over, and why she opens the windows even though the wet spring night seeps into the house like a fog'.[50] Misty serves not only as Leonie's coworker and confidant in drug use, but Misty is central in supporting Leonie on her drive to Parchman Prison. We also see Jojo's sexual curiosity peek through in his interactions with Misty, perhaps another event signifying a coming of age, as Jojo reflects during the car ride to Parchman, 'I notice Misty looking at me in the mirror attached to the back of the passenger shade while she reapplies gloss, her lips going from dry pink to glossy peach; when she sees I see her looking, she winks. I shiver'. The reader also experiences a sharp jump in maternalism during the interactions between Jojo, Misty, and Leonie. While traveling to the penitentiary, they make a stop at a gas station, and Leonie instructs Jojo to purchase items, save anything for himself. Hot and thirsty, Jojo stops and tilts his head back to catch rainwater. Once he gets back in the car, Misty comments, 'I could've got you a drink if you was that thirsty'.[51]

The reader gauges early on through Leonie's own admissions that the difference posited by race is one that she cannot reconcile in other contexts. Kayla becomes sick during the car ride, and repeatedly vomits. Misty's response is less than sympathetic, and the reader is privy to Leonie's reactional thought, '*Bitch, how you work around all those drunks and can't stand a little throw-up*?'[52] There is clear contempt on the part of Leonie, where she acknowledges the

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[50]*SUS,* 32.

[51]*SUS, 65.*

[52]*SUS, 97.*

obvious physical and societal differences between herself and her friend. Despite the many differences between the two, there exists a genuine connection on several levels. The reader learns that Misty views herself as a disappointment to her mother, in much of the same fashion that Leonie views herself as a failure.[53] While Misty is active and present before and during the trip to Parchman, she becomes of little importance the moment they arrive back to Mam and Pop's house. Essentially, the character known as Misty disappears from the text, and from the narrative, she has served her purpose.

Motifs: Spontaneous Repetitions of Survival

I focus on several motifs that best bolster my articulation of Ward's text as a survival narrative: storytelling, the notion of water, the symbol of song(s)/singing, the notion of birds, the concept of cooking/food, and the notion of 'home'.[54] With these motifs the reader is given insight into the threads of survival connecting the worldviews of the characters with historical significance crucial to the development and understanding of my work. The symbols and signifiers supporting and reinforcing this theme of narrative as survival give further credence to my claim that there is always some part of Black fiction springing from lived experience. Ward employs the method of repetition through motif that creates both a literary and experiential affect. The importance of repetition in conveying a deeper meaning of the text and referring to

[53]*SUS, 35.*

[54]This is by no means an exhaustive list, in fact other scholars have chosen to illuminate signs, symbols, metaphors and motifs that I do not reference. This does not take away from the validity of those claims, but instead will open those claims up to conversation with my own. Most notable are the haunted road trip (connected to American mobility and African American immobility through the American south), the significance of spirituality, ghosts, and phantoms throughout the novel has also been viewed through various lenses. Others, still, focus on Parchman Penitentiary, as more than just a symbol, but an actual piece of American history, and the traumatizing and stigmatizing impact the incarceration system has on all, but particularly impoverished people and people of color.

the main theme allows the reader to travel with the characters while holding in mind the overarching idea of survival. Through identifying and clarifying the above-mentioned motifs, I strengthen my thesis for the chapter of Ward's construction of a survival narrative, and what implications this has for the future construction of a narrative ethics of survival.

A Note on Storytelling

The motif of storytelling highlights not only the significance of narratives within narrative, but also carries and builds on the identity of secondary characters who are not given as strong of a direct voice. Those secondary characters survive through the recollection of main characters. The two primary examples are Given's character development through Leonie's story, and Richie's character development through Pop's recollections to Jojo. In both cases, the reader relies on the primary narrators just as much as the secondary characters for identity construction and expansion. In particular, the haunting of Richie is supported by his own belief that the telling of his story will allow him to go home.[55] Henry Louis Gates, Jr. takes a tremendous amount of time, space, and energy to articulate the underpinnings of *signification* and its centrality to African American literature and storytelling.[56]In addition to the literary importance posited through the oral telling of stories and past lives, the ritual and tradition of oral history plays a central role in crafting the character identities. For the purposes of this piece, I find it more suitable that the notion of storytelling as a motif is succumb to storytelling as a method and mode of identity construction. Ward allows for these motifs to carry the reader, much like a tune or the flow of water, throughout the novel, moving in between the moments and

[55]Ward, *SUS,* 231.

[56]Henry Louis Gates, *Black Literature and Literary Theory*, Routledge Library Editions. Literary Theory, Volume 13 (London New York: Routledge, 2017).

meanings of a person's values, issues, and the ways in which survival (or life) grip their movements.

I cannot stress enough the importance of narratives as a mode of articulating experiences through which meaning making happens. Like fictional narratives, those who express their real-life experiences through various forms of storytelling contribute to and build upon personal identity awareness and development. The way in which people tell stories about themselves is just as important as the actual stories told. Marya Schechtman explains this narrative view of the self as twofold: One is that our *sense of self* must be narrative, and the other that the *lives* of selves are narrative in structure.[57] Here she embraces the narrative approaches of Paul Ricoeur, Alasdair MacIntyre and Charles Taylor's construction of a *hermeneutical* narrative view, conceiving of selves as fundamentally self-interpreting beings.[58] Expounding my own hermeneutic narrative view of survival, I consistently note Toni Morrison's deep connection between narratives, literature, and lived experience throughout my piece so as to not underplay the centrality of narrative as the episteme of identity formation and ethical reflection for African Americans. The dynamic narratives that unfold among one another through Ward's novel are indicative of the interconnectedness of Black folks' identity in America. Storytelling as a major signifier of self-constitution implies that through storytelling, reflection on life experiences intertwined with imagination created meaning, identity, values, and frames of reference for future decision making. Through the telling of stories, the narrating of life events, there is an intimacy established, a recognition, an encounter between the character and the reader, the

[57]Marya Schechtman, *The Narrative Self* (Oxford University Press, 2011), https://doi.org/10.1093/oxfordhb/9780199548019.003.0018. 394.

[58]Schechtman, *The Narrative Self*, 395.

narrator and the audience, between the person and the world, an identity somehow steeped in forged conditions as well as relationality/responsiveness. Ward's capacity to engage in storytelling, and the amplification she brings to her characters' voices is paramount to emanating the power of fiction in both the construction and expression of identity and meaning making. Like the agency the characters enact, storytelling is an enactment of agency with powerful implications.

Singing/Use of Song

The title of the novel presages the reader to be cognizant of the ways singing and the song carries the reader and are carried through the text. The reader first encounters any form of singing via Jojo and Kayla one morning at the introductory part of the novel. The tone of singing and that of the song are set as calming and centering responses among the siblings. This establishes the use of song in a context of familiarity and serenity, Jojo notes, 'Like I love to hear Pop tell stories, she loves to hear me sing.'[59] Within the inaugural interaction between Jojo and Kayla consists of him tending to her most primal needs, but also providing a comforting companion through soothing cadence. Contrasting Kayla's experience and connection with song, the scene shifts to Jojo's recollection of singing via his birthday. Reminiscent of a previous, more happy time when he enjoyed the occasion of his birthday and the family gathering in song, the present reality granted a different view, 'usually, the singing is my favorite part of my birthday…I think it's Kayla's favorite part,'[60] he thinks to himself. His memory paints a backdrop of a livelier time, a more innocent time marked by the passing of time and the

[59]*SUS,* 19.

[60]*SUS,* 27.

gathering of family. With his grandmother dying of cancer, and his mother preoccupied with her own shortcomings and desires, all that survives is the attempt to sing from Leonie and Kayla, and a baby shower cake picked up last minute.'…but this year, the song is not my favorite part of my birthday.'[61]

Throughout the text, we see singing come to signify other important elements and motifs. Leonie reflects on a lesson Mam attempted to teach her when she was younger, and Mam briefly commented on 'hearing what the world sings' in asking Leonie if she had ever heard voices or seen anything that others did not.[62] The most in-depth account of singing comes from the ghost Richie. Towards the end of the novel, we see Richie actively seeking the story or action that will allow him to transition. From Richie's narrative emerges a labyrinth understanding of songs and water. 'And I sing songs without words. The songs come to me out of the same air that brings the sounds of the waters: I open my mouth, and I hear the rushing of the waves.'[63] Two of the most powerful scenes culminate with singing, and song. The first is during the passing of Mam. At the moment she 'bucks and goes still', everyone in the room 'wails' and 'cries in chorus.'

Singing in the African American community originates back to the slave spirituals of the late seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. Said to be a combination of African melodies and with European language and Christian sentiments, singing has long represented expressions of lament, of joy and praise, and holds strategic survival and spiritual value:

> For the slaves, the spiritual proved to be an ingenious tool used to counter senseless brutality and the denial of personhood. In order to survive emotionally, resilience was critical. In the spirituals, slaves sang out their struggle, weariness,

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[61]*SUS, 27.*

[62]*SUS,* 42.

[63]*SUS,* 240.

> loneliness, sorrow, hope and determination for a new and better life. Yet these are not songs of anger. They are songs of survival that voice an unwavering belief in their own humanity and attest to an abiding faith in the ultimate triumph of good over systemic evil.[64]

Some scholars believe the hymns (and hums) of slave songs can reach out to the spiritual world.[65] From a survival standpoint, during attempts to escape slavery via the underground railroad, slaves would embed directions, signs, and 'stations' within the songs. Just as West African tribes used drums, music and song to communicate across villages and lands, so too did slaves use spirituals to communicate across plantations, churches, and regions, announcing meetings, sending warnings, and sharing messages. Reflective on how the novel demonstrates life after slavery, song making and singing were instruments to build resilience and solidarity.

Water

Water is one of the strongest motifs in the text and appears in a myriad of ways. There is water in reference to large bodies of water (i.e., when Pop tells the story of his grandmother crossing the middle passage), as well as water to represent the variety in fluid movement, within the body, concerning energy shared and exchanged between another, Pop (Riv) produces some of the most vivid depictions of bodies of water, usually in his storytelling to one of the boys (Jojo or Richie). Water here not only represents freedom but begins to construct Richie's understanding and desire to go home. Ward is intentional in italicizing those phrases and words she wants to echo behind the readers, to follow them. To haunt them. In this same scene, a snake

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[64]Cox, Donna M. "The Power of a Song in a Strange Land." *The Conversation,* 13 Feb. 2020, https://theconversation.com/the-power-of-a-song-in-a-strange-land-129969.

[65]*African American Spirituals,* Web, https://www.loc.gov/item/ihas.200197495/

appears to the ghost of Richie and instructs him to follow Jojo, as 'he will show you.' The snake then turns to a bird on his shoulder, before flying away.[66]

One night during Riv and Richie's stay at Parchman, Richie notes he begins to understand home when Riv told him about the ocean:

> We got so much water where I'm from. It come down from the north in rivers. Pool in bayous. Rush out to the ocean, and that stretch to the ends of the earth that you can see. It changes colors, he said, like a little lizard. Sometimes stormy blue. Sometimes cool gray. In the early mornings, silver. You could look at that and know there's a God…Maybe one day, when you and me get out of here, you could come down and see it.[67]

We see water symbolize the inherent dispositions within humanity that one cannot control, whether 'good or bad', straddling between surging moments of uncertainty and peaceful calms of serenity, as Pop describes the contention with his brother, Stag. '*There's things that move a man. Like currents of water on the inside. Things he can't help*'[68]

Birds

The imagery of animals in general, and birds in particular is a peculiar undertaking by Ward. Readers are introduced to birds via Jojo's description of his mother and father's initial conversation regarding Michael's pending release from prison. Watching and listening to Leonie's responses, Jojo mentally recalls, 'I know what he is saying, like the birds I hear honking and flying south in the winter, like any other animal. I'm coming home.'[69] The primary

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[66]*SUS,* 191.

[67]*SUS,* 190.

[68]*SUS.,* 68.

[69]*SUS,* 30.

symbol of birds presented takes its foremost shape through Kayla. Initially she sees the men at Parchman penitentiary presenting as birds upon arrival. Often, Jojo and others are not apprised to see what Kayla sees but participates to some extent in the experience. While Jojo did not see all the birds, he does look across a field and see 'men bent at the waist, row after row of them, picking at the ground, looking like a great murder of crows landed and chattering and picking for bugs in the ground. One, shorter than the rest, stands and looks straight at me.'[70]

There is hinting towards and speculation that Jojo has sensitivity towards communicating with animals, nature, and the dead. There is some mutual acknowledgement between him and his surroundings, and Jojo often finds solace in the woods, around animals and nature. From the survival theme - in a very visceral and embodied way, the motifs of water and food provide a strong recurring sounding of the very real and tangible moments of survival, those that cannot be reflected or wished away, but are very present and very real in the cries and wails of Kayla asking for food, in the belly rumbling and dry mouth of Jojo, in the jaw clenching and dry swallowing of old cake by Leonie. Richie himself manifests as a bird, either a gray or black bird (most likely a crow).[71] The concluding chapter of the novel is rich with the imagery of singing birds, reiterating the title and the crux of the novel.

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[70]*SUS,* 125.

[71]Sankofa is an Akan word from Ghana that means "go back and fetch it". It is a symbol of a bird with its head turned backward, carrying an egg in its mouth, representing the idea of looking back at our past to learn from it and move forward. For more information see AYEEKO. "Sankofa: Embracing Past Lessons for a Brighter Future," AYEEKO., https://ayeeko.africa/blogs/blog/sankofa-sankofa-symbol-and-meaning.

Food/Cooking

Like water, the motif of food, meals, and cooking is vital, especially for Kayla and Jojo. Intrinsic to survival, their nourishment, sustenance, and 'input' are monumental to their day-to-day activities. There are correlating relationships and affinities for those who can/or volunteer to provide sustenance to either Kayla, Jojo, or both. The introductory meal to the narrative begins as Pop prepares the livestock to be slaughtered for Jojo's birthday meal, a celebratory occasion. Not only does the process provide an occasion for Jojo and Pop to bond, but there is love, care, concern, and ritual within the slaughter and preparation, that when compared to other meals consumed by the children, do not provide nearly as much. If one pays attention to the duration of the novel, the reader never witnesses Leonie prepare a meal for her children. The closest sentiment to extending nourishment to her children is when Leonie gives JoJo money to get Gatorade and snacks for Kayla who is sick in the car. JoJo correlates food to safety, comfort, and security, that of his home with his grandparents. Similarly, Kayla associates support and sustenance, food and feeding with her brother, and he has assumed the role of provider due to his mother's diversion. 'When Kayla was a baby, she got so used to me coming in the middle of the night with her bottle. So I sleep on the floor next to Leonie's bed, and most nights Kayla ends up on my pallet with me, since Leonie's mostly gone.'[72] Contrary to the nourishment and fulfillment provided by Jojo and Pop for Kayla, Leonie experiences a literal catharsis of Kayla, as her vomiting spell despite anything Leonie gives her can be metaphorical for Leonie's inability to pour into her children, it is immediately expelled or rejected.

[72]*SUS,* 19.

I explore the emergence and connotation of soul food in the subsequent chapter, but I do want to briefly note the meal for JoJo's birthday. Pop's meal and other remnants of Jojo and Kayla's meal can be associated with what is called 'soul food'. Historically, the scene of slaughter with Pop is eerily remnant of slave and newly freed people butchering customs. The inception of slaves in the New World cultivated a new dietary routine, integrating European customs, transferred crops, and cooking and procurement methods the slaves brought with them, in addition their shared encounters with the Native Americans. Adapting to circumstances with survival tactics and innovative methods, food in the African American community came to symbolize a myriad of values, traditions, and occasions. Marriages, birthdays (such as JoJo) and reunions with family members (such as Michael's release from the penitentiary) are all examples of occasions when such a meal as the slaughter and preparation of the entire animal appropriate the commencement. Unless serving as a sharecropper or outright owning land and farm animals (which a notable number did indeed possess), the meat of an entire animal was rare for African Americans to obtain, and was expensive if available, reiterating the perceived importance of the celebration.

Home/Homecoming

Home is a dominant symbol, depicting many things for different characters. While the place of home was clear to many (JoJo, Kayla, Mam, Pop), it was not so much so for others (Leonie and Michael). Most of the novel resides around Michael being released from prison to come home, indeed the very dialogue of revealing this interrupts the present occasion of Jojo's 13th birthday. The family is in the middle of singing happy birthday to Jojo when Leonie abruptly goes to answer the ringing phone. Readers are not privy to the conversation, but here both the symbol of birds and of home are introduced into the text. Upon picking Michael up from

Parchman and returning to Leonie's parents' house, Michael immediately speaks of getting a separate place for himself, Leonie and the kids as a family unit, citing discomfort at going back to her parents' house. Readers come to learn that Jojo and Kayla's association of home is one where the presence of Leonie is inconsistent and therefore insignificant. We witness the greatest unfolding of family dynamics at homes/houses: The fallout of Michael and his parents their home, the dynamics of Jojo, Kayla and Leonie at Pop and Mam's home. Home symbolizes a final resting place for the spirits that appear throughout the text, but also a place of serenity and stability for all in the novel. Going or coming home presents itself as a central motif, either as an end point or as a transition from one space to another. During the fateful night of Pop's mercy killing towards Richie after he escaped from Parchman, he tells Richie that he is 'taking him home'. Subsequently, we are told that Richie is looking 'to go home'. In this instance, home is a defined, physical location, a release from the spiritual incarceration he now faces into one's space of belonging. Later, the reader is acquainted with an alternate conception of home. Reminiscing on his mother, his life, and his resting place, Richie (as ghost) is convinced that the telling of his story to Jojo will allow him to fully transition, to go home. Recalling the stories Riv would tell him at night at Parchman, Richie believes at one point he begins to understand home.[73] We are left at the conclusion of the text with Kayla telling the ghosts in the trees to go, and they echo back to her, *home, home.*[74]

[73]*SUS,* 190.

[74]*SUS,* 285.

Juxtapositions

This section highlights key juxtapositions that hint at the particularities of those threads, each of which I develop more fully later:

Identity as Relationality

The concept of identity as relationality presents itself in a solid fashion when considering the comparison of sibling relationships among Leonie/Given and Jojo/Kayla. In the relationship of Leonie and Given, there appears a one-way dependency, stemming from Leonie to Given (as Given was older and played the big brother role well). Much of how Leonie views herself and understands others view her is in comparison to her brother, with her often falling short. In addition to conceding the label of parents' favorite to her brother, Leonie is soft to the appearances of her brother when she is under the influence, and even when she tries to ignore him, the burden of his life (and death) lingers, it survives. Leonie also displays and monologues moments of envy regarding her children's sibling relationship and interdependence, most likely stemming from her inability to properly grieve Given's death. The relationality between Jojo and Kayla in the construction of identity is very much centered around a caregiver/protector/ older sibling-younger sibling dynamic. In many ways, this aspect of the sibling relation may mirror what Leonie experienced with Given as a child, although Jojo and Kayla's is not by choice, which makes a grave difference. Kayla may have a different conception of identifying, as she knows that Jojo is her brother, but she also identifies him as the source of her protection, her comfort, her survival.

Survival for African Americans from slavery up into present day is constitutive of relationality and commonality. Developing relationality through fictive kinship ties in addition to the preservation of newly formed families (via births of children and marriages) not only served

emotional interests and personal desires but were fundamental in creating immediate and extended family ties, extending beyond one's own living space. Despite the hostile circumstances and intense restrictions, Blacks created, maintained, and expanded kinship social ties that eventually contributed to Black contemporary understanding of family.[75]

The womanist 'ebb and flow' of Oral Transmission

The interplay of spirituality, womanist ideology, and the challenge of rituals surviving oral transmission through generations cultivates itself ever so well between the triumvirate of Mam, Leonie and Kayla. Calling attention to African and Creole spirituality, the interplay of natural, supernatural, and trans natural rituals, and the ability/openness to connect with the past/beyond. White there exists a fracture in this transmission between Mam and Leonie (reasons alleged but not verified – Mam blames Leonie's love of self and love of Michael for clouding her true vision/judgment), there exists a simultaneous resurgence of the interplay between Leonie (who tries unsuccessfully to cure Kayla's nausea with plants) and Kayla (who already is attune to her ability to see and speak to the non-living). It is only when Leonie ushers in the welcoming of death do we see a glimpse of repair between generations.

Oral traditions were the first and continue to be the strongest method of African American historical and traditional transmission. Every aspect of storytelling, from character embodiment, to voice changing, to slight modifications of these stories based on contextual circumstances in the African American community serve to substantiate their personal identity and build upon a common social identity rooted in a shared memory.[76] Proving to be an

[75]I explore the notion of kinship further in chapter 2.

[76]Emilie Townes looking at Toni Morrison's "proceedings too terrible to relate" in *Womanist Ethics and the Cultural Production of Evil.*

irreplaceable source for Black culture, religion/theology and ethics, oral traditions as a form of generational transmission affords a rich repository both raw and mediated experiences. The very embodied nature of oral traditions as signification, as expression, and as performance provides in itself an experience written tradition can neither imitate nor emulate.

Coming of Age/Rite of Passage

The gravity of coming of age/rite of passage narratives of Jojo and Richie cannot be overlooked, as they point to narratives standing as both mediums for and mediums of reflection and meaning making. In my analysis, these paralleling stories serve as narrative complementarities. Both boys are at the age where rites of passage in American culture take place, transitioning into teenage years (which may or may not be coupled with the onset of puberty). We find the narrative of one is dependent on the narrative of the other, with the development/progression/transition of Richie constrained, impacted, and intertwined with the development/progression/transition of Jojo. Only when Jojo hears the full story of Richie, and experiences death for himself does he 'come of age', and Richie believes that Jojo must hear his story for Richie to transition from a ghost on earth through 'the door' to the other side of the natural world. The closing of the novel leaves the reader with Kayla coming to a certain rite of passage, as she sings to the ghosts in the trees and tells them to 'Go Home'. While certain rites of passage commemorate expected liturgical occurrences (birthdays, entering child rearing age, and graduations) others acknowledge more spontaneous and ominous appearing events (deaths of loved ones, appearances of ghostly figures, communicating with spirits, etc.). It is here the phrase 'coming of age' more accurately depicts the formation taking place among the characters (and the readers as a result of walking alongside the characters in their journey).

Significant Scenes

Focusing on the many ways to understand and interpret survival through literary analysis, I would be remiss to not draw attention to the two major death scenes in the novel.

The Passing of Mam

The scene of Leonie preparing for Mam's passing promotes 3 primary concepts fundamental to my analysis of survival in the novel: faith, family, and personal identity. As Leonie gathers the necessary items to call on the spirit of death for Mam, she herself is confused, angry, and totally obedient for the event. For this specific instance, it is not so much that Mam passes, but what is revealed in her passing, or what survives after her passing that is illuminating. At no other point do we see Leonie more in touch and in tune with her heritage, her history, or her family than the moments leading up to and during Mam's transition. In the time of such preparation, we witness Leonie recollect the naturalistic and herbal remedies passed down in this moment, and we witness Leonie grasp at the fleeting nature of those tender moments. The reader is somehow flooded with relief, as Leonie's preparation and presence for the passing is the closest semblance of her finding redemption, even if momentarily, with her mother (or parents one could argue, as Pop witnessed). This scene is also nostalgic as it represents the first time the entire family has been together in the entire novel and also be the last time they are all together including Mam. From the earliest points of the novel, the narrative is one of reuniting and homegoing, both of which the reader finally experiences. The convening of the family at the time of mam's passing is ironic, as the family struggled throughout the novel to do just that. The image of the family together at the time of transition will outlive the actual moment of Mam's passing, it will survive.

Richie's Ending at Parchman

The scene where Pop finishes Richie's story for Jojo also carries indescribable weight for the reader and for Pop (Riv). The ending to Pop's time at Parchman is told, and what I call the 'moral tragedy' is experienced. Here, more than anywhere else, the true power of narrative is experienced on a visceral level. This scene is critical to my understanding of survival, perhaps more so than the previous. This touches on survival not so much in the sense of existing physically or corporeally, but rather the survival of one's life memory with dignity intact. The closer the reader moves to the inevitable scene, the tension and anxiety over the preceding events becomes almost unbearable. Once the reader incurs the fateful moment between Richie and Pop, the weight of anticipation and grief of relief overcome the reader simultaneously. The mercy killing of Richie by Pop, and even the ensuing decimation of his body by the dogs at Riv's command was, for Pop, a way to enact what little agency he found for both himself and Richie, to save the boy from suffering at the hands of those who had no concern for his life. To die, however, at the hands of one who cares about you, for fear of the known alternative, and salvaging the ending of the narrative by assuming control of ultimatum, disrupts the natural course of expected events.[77] The drawback of such a sacrifice is most evident in the impending guilt that Pop shoulders, the constant regret and weight of death he carries around, expressed in his often inability to finish the story of Richie. There is both a release of and a clinging onto the story after telling Jojo, like that of Richie being unable to transition, even after the telling of his story, but also no longer able to hold the same space as before among the living.

[77]Toni Morrison follows a similar storyline in the novel *Beloved,* where the mother kills her baby to avoid it being sold into slavery, and enduring a life worse than death at the hands of those who care nothing about one's humanity.

Although Richie dies before the time of the novel, his ghost remains, and the story of his life and death survives, through Pop, through Jojo, and through Kayla. This scene will serve as the center of my ethical analysis in chapter 5.

Survival Beyond the Textual Narrative

In an essay titled 'God's Language', Toni Morrison speaks on the importance of excavating and highlighting the writings and works of slaves and other disenfranchised groups in American history. Through this excavation, one can gain a more authentic and intimate understanding of the identity of the authors, as 'no slave society in the history of the world wrote more - or more thoughtfully - about its own enslavement [than African slaves in the New World].'[78] As a writer and scholar interested in Americanism [and Afro-Americanism] through literature, her job was how to 'rip that veil drawn over proceedings too terrible to relate' to tap into the 'interior lives' of those forgotten, dismissed, and marginalized. Memories recollected from self and others do not provide total access into the totality of this interior life. For Morrison (and myself), only the act of imagination can help.[79] Similar to my interest in African American identity and ethical reflection, I too am charged with unmasking proceedings 'too terrible to relate' in hopes of unearthing a memory and history that gives greater meaning to identity for Black folks, and I too lean on imaginative acts in the form of fiction to bring about a certain truth. The novel of *Sing, Unburied, Sing* could be replaced with several other prominent African American novels before its time: *The Color Purple, A Raisin in the Sun, Their Eyes Were Watching God, Native Son, Invisible Man, Beloved,* all of which are paradigmatic texts for

[78]Toni Morrison, "God's Language" in *The Source of Self-Regard: selected essays, speeches,* 2019, 236.

[79]Morrison, *Source of Self-Regard,* 238.

understanding both Afro/African American literature and life. Of the 21st century, however, Ward is the most current, most relevant, and more pertinent to my contribution.

Charles Taylor provides an extraordinary contribution regarding the significance of narrative, history and meaning making in *The Language Animal* (2016). In *The Language Animal,* Taylor purports that language is far more than notions of empirical and rational tradition, but rather language transmits meaning, understandings, and contributes to the very shaping of human thought, individually and socially. Responding to the view of language as a tool for human use in communication, Taylor posits that language is indicative of experience, as it is the medium through 'the full capacity of human existence' has its greatest potential. Relevant to my work is his section on "How Narrative Makes Meaning" where in the field of language he specifically focuses on the story - defending the idea that 'stories give us an understanding of life, people, and what happens to them which is peculiar, and also unsubstitutable.'[80] It can also open out alternatives ontologies, a gamut of different ways of being human, offering different insights about human life in general.[81] It is the very story and stories of human life that provide the greatest insight into possibilities of human life outside of familiar and assumed notions. Within the grasping of meaning in human narrative, we are confronted with a certain *truth*[82] that can only be confronted through narrative. (Expand more)

[80]Charles Taylor, *The Language Animal*, Cambridge: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2016, 291.

[81]Taylor, *The Language Animal*, 292.

[82]Remembering the distinction Toni Morrison made between truth and fact, fact does not require human intelligence, truth does.

To explain what I mean by the phrase 'narrative ethics of survival' I chose a novel as an example of narrative indicative of an ethics of survival. The novel illustrates how narrative serves as what Hille Haker defines as a 'medium of and for ethical reflection' [and identity formation].[83] The novel as narrative is both an example of and an instrument in itself of self-constitution through survival tactics expressed in a creative manner. By beginning with the imaginative creation of fiction narrative, I posit that I am not so concerned with facts, as Morrison rightly points out, "facts can exist without human intelligence, but truth cannot".[84] I simply begin with the truth, rather than the fact of African American experience, in hopes to explain how such a group makes meaning, and decisions. My exposition of *Sing, Unburied, Sing* focuses heavily on the theme of survival. It is through the lens of survival that I have provided an in-depth look at characters individually, in relation to one another, and in the larger scheme of African American literature and literary fiction. By looking at this novel, I infer that analyzing any aspect of African American life will produce a vibrant expression of survival through endless means, modes, and methods. Literature and literary devices present but one way to do so. I also chose this text for its accessibility to those both within and outside of the academy. It should not be taken lightly one's ability to find one's own strand of survival weaved in, out, and through literary works, historical fiction, and creative expressions of existence. The next chapters look more closely at these aspects of survival, how they are inextricable to African American identity, and the impact on decision making and ethical reflection for this group's 'narrative

[83]Hille Haker, "Recognition and Responsibility." Religions 12, no. 7 (June 2021): 467.

[84]Morrison, *Source of Self-Regard*, 239.

ethics of survival.' The final chapter returns the ethical analysis of the novel, paying close attention to the decision-making and meaning making of Pop in the moments of survival.

CHAPTER TWO

BEFORE WE BECOME, WE SURVIVE – WRESTLING WITH THE NARRATIVE OF BLACK IDENTITY

My introductory chapter highlighted an example of African American lives amid death and survival narrated through the novel as a form of storytelling. Jesmyn Ward intimately weaves historical facts with narrative imagination, resulting in an authentic immersion into another, a world beyond that known to the reader, but that of the characters, and the world they represent. My understanding of the text as a medium of ethical reflection (through critical literary analysis in ethical terms), and of the creation and sustenance of Black identity and life has led me to connect the text to the historical realities she draws from. It is necessary to link Ward's novel directly to the lived realities of Black identity to accentuate the significance of African American literature as a valid and substantial source of ethical reflection, especially as it relates to African Americans in the 21st century. One of Ward's strongest literary motifs is the haunting, or the ghostly memories of past lives and past loved ones. Not only must we not forget the history and stories from before, but the present is both metaphorically and literally haunted by former narratives untold.

I wrestle with my identity, or who I am, at some point during every day of my existence. Some moments are more explicit than others, but the longer I live, the more I discern the happenings of the 'me' that I inhabit. I recall that others made my identity matter before I did. My first recollection of race being something that made others uncomfortable for me was in

middle school, maybe 6th or 7th grade.[1] I attended a Catholic school in a different city from where I lived, and I was the only Black child in the grade. I'm also not Catholic. It was black history month, and the class watched the movie 'Ruby Bridges'. I remember a classmate (white boy) making a comment, of what I don't remember exactly, but I remember the entire class turning and looking at me, and at that moment, I realized that I was the only one to whom that comment applied. Although the connection had been made (unspoken) that the Black children on screen related to only one student in the classroom, the tension was simultaneously built and cut with the student's comment. The unspoken had been [mis]recognized, the rituals and realities that I had designated and delineated between home and school had come crashing up against each other in an uncomfortable way. I had known I was Black for quite some time, but there were few instances in school that it mattered, until now. The revelation of that moment stuck with me, through the rest of middle school, into high school and beyond. I realized in that moment that my identity, the Black identity, disrupted the (white) space I occupied. That my existence and experience stood in contrast, in tension, in dispute with those around me, to the point of discomfort. That the very things I embodied and embraced, stood as an outlier, as an exception to that of my peers.

Toni Morrison points out how Afro-American presence 'spoken or otherwise' has shaped the choices, the language, the structure -- the meaning of so much American literature[2] (and I add culture, as the two developed simultaneously, American culture and African American culture),

[1]St. Patrick School in Kent, Ohio.

[2]Toni Morrison, *The Source of Self Regard*, 172.

therefore defining Black identity directly impacts how American identity is defined and understood. Black identity continues to be an important topic to dialogue because it functions as inextricable from the question of survival. Even in the 21st century United States, to identify with Black is to immediately identify with a group of debated existence. The history of racialized identity is far from neutral, and much of that racial baggage expresses itself in all facets of contemporary Black life. Despite the numerous achievements and accolades afforded to members of the identity group, the general consensus remains that the Black body is a contested space, that its existence and prosperity is problematic, that its quest for survival and perhaps something beyond survival, albeit some similitude of a 'good life' is possible and achievable through social transformation. While social transformation is not the direct aim of this contribution, my hope is to provide more accurate language that may orient towards a more transformative intra-group and inter-group relations. To reach this possibility and strive for a 'good life' past relegated survival, one must recognize the historical and contemporary way of being (or ontology) that Black bodies inhabit. Only by recognizing that Black identity *still* operates through a mode of survival can any authentic reorientation of identity and humanity take place.

American theories of Black identity construction and development have sought to define what is meant by the 'Black self' and explain the diversity of selves encompassed by the phrase Black identity. Several fields have given specific focus to the development of Black identity including sociological, psychological (psychosocial), and anthropological standpoints. Shortly after the turn of the 20th century, studies attempted to explain the Black body, the Black person,

the Black being (fueled by ulterior motives and beyond)[3] in the United States and abroad. Theories of identity development took on a particularly racial (and sometimes skewed) lens in inquiring and determining the depths and origins of Black attitudes, behaviors, and dispositions. Despite the myriad of explanations and justifications imposed on Black bodies, a common thread amid all theories remained, the thread of survival. What no scholar could escape when studying Black identity is its rootedness (and continued operation) in survival. Sociologists such as E. Franklin Frazier and Melville Herskovits contended whether the culture, identity and religion created by Blacks held remnants of their previous 'Africanalities', or whether Black/African American culture represented a novel entity, entirely void of pre-constructed values, tendencies, and beliefs.

Through food, family/kinship relations, and the formation of the 'Black Church', I argue that these exemplary characters of Black identity (along with others not mentioned) point to and provide understanding for the indistinguishability of Black identity and survival. Through the creation, maintenance and evolution of Black recipes and styles of cooking, the formation of kinship and alternative familial ties, and the formation and evolution of Black Christianity and the 'Black Church', I claim that each of these aspects separately emulate ways in which African slaves and subsequent emancipated Black folks 'made a way out of no way', creating meaning and defining purpose and significance in one's life; and how these tenants collectively constitute

[3]During the Eugenics movement, much of the studies of Blacks and Negroes were used for implicative and speculative measures in reference to Whites' perceived superiority and non-Whites perceived inferiority. For an interesting history on African Americans and medical experimentation and eugenics see Harriet A. Washington, *Medical Apartheid: The Dark History of Medical Experimentation on Black Americans from Colonial Times to the Present*. Harlem Moon, 2006, and Dorothy E. Roberts, *Fatal Invention: How Science, Politics, and Big Business Re-Create Race in the Twenty-First Century*. New Press, 2011.

a narrative identity centered around, focused on, and born from survival. Each facet illuminates the distinction and difference in cultural construction and identity in a unique and transformative way. What makes up Black identity, and why are those things significant? For Blacks, even the encounter with the English language as a form of communication was structured [for most] in a bifurcated way both stemming from and resulting in survival: either Black slaves were taught the English language by sympathetic slave owners or missionaries who also wanted to teach the Bible [in hopes of increasing one's chances of success (or survival)], or slave owners refused to teach their slaves or allow them contact with literacy or English communication [perhaps for their own self-preservation or survival, the perception that keeping the slaves illiterate decreased their likelihood of revolt or dissent].[4] Before I begin my narrative exposition of Black identity through the above mentioned facets, I briefly review a couple leading theories on Black identity that emerged in the 20th century and give way to my own account of Black identity, finishing with scholarly contributions on Black identity in the 21st century.

A Psychological Approach to Black Identity

William E. Cross critiques the dominant methods of Black/African American Negro identity theory construction produced from the 1930s to the 1980s as a whole and divides the trajectory of the studies into two chronological periods, the 1930s to the 1960s and the 1960s to the 1980s. As the originating conception of Black identity theory emerged in the American academy, it was narrowly based on an unfounded proposition that deep seated within Blacks is

[4]Albert Raboteau provides a detailed history of the slaves' varied inception of Christianity in his myriad of texts surrounding the creation/emergence of African American religion. Such works include *Slave Religion: the invisible institution in the Antebellum South, A fire in the bones: reflections on African American religious history, Canaan Land: a religious history of African Americans,* and *Religion and the slave family in the Antebellum South.*

the notion of 'self-hatred', and from this notion the concept of the self (SC) is created in an ultimately negative way. It is from the Lewin understanding[5] that scholars imposed (without a multivariate research approach) a damning monolithic conception of the entire group of Blacks, a conception riddled with fallacies. Pointing out everything from skewed proportions to exaggerated and nearly fabricated claims, Cross accurately reveals that not only is the 'self-hatred' montage attached to Black identity incorrect, but Black identity occurs on a spectrum, in a variety and myriad of ways. Some notable finds for Cross: he is careful to note both white AND Black scholars miscategorized and mislabeled the Black identity as one engulfed in simultaneous low feelings of personal self-esteem and RGO[6] or group esteem, as well as noting the actual subjects studied were preschool and school age children, while the results were implications about adults and the 'race' as a collective. The curiosity of Black psychological development was temporarily stifled by genuine yet fallacious research conclusions. He also notes the historical significance of the Black Social Movements occurring in the 1960s and the

[5]The epistemological origin of black self-hatred resides in the Jewish self-hatred studies conducted by psychologist Kurt Lewin in the early 20th century. Remembering how socially and culturally influential circumstances can be, Lewin was born in Germany, and conducted these studies during the time between the first and second world wars. For more information on Lewin and his studies, see Miriam Lewin Papanek 'Psychological Aspects of Minority Group Membership: The Concepts of Kurt Lewin,' in *Jewish Social Studies* Vol. 36, No. 1 (Jan 1974), pp. 72-79.

[6]Reference Group Orientation - in psychology, this refers to the values, beliefs and social systems upheld by a collective, also identified as a 'group identity'. Stemming from the equation SC (self-concept) = PI (Personal Identity) + RGO (Reference Group Orientation). For an alternative analysis and expansion of Cross' theory, see Patrick S. De Walt, "Discourse on African American/Black Identity: engaging the expanded nigrescence theory with a diasporic consciousness." *SpringerPlus* vol. 2,1 233. 24 May. 2013, doi:10.1186/2193-1801-2-233

simultaneous change in Black identity, or *nigrescence* that takes place. This *nigrescence* is central to Cross' own construction of a theory demonstrating the change in Black identity.[7]

A Sociological Approach to Black Identity

A pioneer in 20th century sociology concerning African Americans, E. Franklin Frazier posited that the identity of African Americans as something completely new and unique to the new world.[8] Frazier's analysis on the development of the 'Negro' identity in the United States was rooted in the understanding that certain proclivities during chattel slavery and emancipation gave birth to the present-day middle-class Blacks who have assimilated so well into dominant culture. Concerning the family of slaves and African Americans, Frazier concluded that slavery had designated the woman as the 'mistress of the slave cabin' and subsequent 'protectress of the children' and the household. *The Negro Family in the United States*, Frazier's primary piece on the Black family, is broken into five parts, representing distinctions in the type of social organization under which the African/African American family was formed/influenced/encountered. They were: "In the House of the Master," "In the House of the Mother," "In the House of the Father," "In the City of Destruction," and "In the City of Rebirth." These topics represented the broad societal levels of social organization that affected

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[7]William E. Cross Jr., *Shades of Black: Diversity in African American Identity,* Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1991, 200. The culmination of Cross' theory of Black identity relevant to my project is his five stages of Black identity development: *Pre-encounter* (stage 1) depicts the identity to be changed, *Encounter* (stage 2) isolates the point at which the person feels compelled to change, *Immersion-Emerson* (stage 3) describes the vortex of identity change; and *Internalization* and *Internalization-Commitment* (stages 4 and 5) describe the habituation and internalization of the new identity. I view my project as an attempt to display Cross' five stages through a narrative of survival.

[8]Although many scholars disagree with Frazier's analysis of the black family as contingent upon negative or demeaning characteristics of the 'negro' family, his contribution to the sociological development of black identity and Black religion must be taken into consideration.

the Black family through historical time, which included slavery, emancipation; post-slavery, rural life; migration, and urbanization.[9]

A Survival Approach to Black Identity

Cross defined African American identity in terms of their psyche, or perceived feelings and dispositions held by the group, and Frazier analyzed the creation of Black identity in terms of social encounter. I look to define Black identity through a narrative lens, a lens that takes both feelings and encounters into consideration with the larger contextual history, bringing to life Jesmyn Ward and Toni Morrison's understanding of literature as an extended reflection of reality.

Food for Thought

Food is not only necessary for sustenance, but also a primary locus for cultural and social signifiers. Studying the ways food has been viewed, procured, consumed, and disposed of provides rich cultural, economic, and social insights into groups and group relations. The control and distribution of food are indicators of power structures, control, and status.[10] The lives and culture of African slaves and African Americans is no exception. Studying the diets and foodways of African Americans is an important avenue to understanding the construction of identity and the complex relationships of people living under the conditions of slavery and into

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[9]Clovis E. Semmes, "E. Franklin Frazier's Theory of the Black Family: Vindication and Sociological Insight" in *The Journal of Sociology and Social Welfare*, Vol. 28, Issue 2, Article 2, June 2001, Eastern Michigan University, 14-15.

[10]Herbert C. Covey and Dwight Eisnach, *What the Slaves Ate: recollection of African American foods and foodways from the slave narratives*, Santa Barbara: ABC-CLIO, 2009, 1.

today's society.[11] As occurred with Africans holding onto aspects of their religions, oral traditions, musical and dance behavior, and even material culture despite the traumas of initial capture, so, too, they held onto much of their African culinary past.[12] From the very inception of the transatlantic slave trade, the struggle over food reflected the socioeconomic power dynamics in play. During their journey through the middle passage, African captives would refuse to eat as an act of self-defiance and control.[13] Africans taken from their homeland and brought to North America arrived with their old cultural ways and survival skills learned in transit and soon blended them with what they encountered in the colonies as Europeans were building a new nation.[14] This blend would evolve into a constitutive aspect of African American cultural and social identity, termed 'soul food'.

Soul Food

Sociologist William Whit views soul food as a cultural creation, adapting Tony Whitehead's definition of culture as 'part of a larger ecological system, which is historically created, intergenerationally reproduced and moderated, and *functions to allow humans to meet basic biological needs in ways that blunt the impact of deleterious environmental agents and*

[11]Covey and Eisnach, *What the Slaves Ate*, 1.

[12]For a more recent description of what she calls "An African Atlantic Culinary Journey," see Jessica B. Harris, "Same Boat, Different Stops: An African Atlantic Culinary Journey," in *African Roots/American Cultures: Africa in the Creation of the Americas,* edited by Sheila S. Walker (New York: Rowan and Littlefield, 2001), 169-82.

[13]Covey and Eisnach, *What the Slaves Ate*, 2.

[14]Covey and Eisnach, *What the Slaves Ate*, 2.

exploit agents that sustain life and culture.[15] This definition explains the necessity of soul food as functioning to provide not only sustenance but meaning to the enslaved peoples. Through transmission, amplification, and expansion of these necessities over time, the food component of slave and subsequent Black American life became ingrained with the larger social identity. What Americans (African and otherwise) consider 'soul food', the fried chicken, greens, fried catfish, cornbread, black eyed peas, candied yams, and chitlins, originated from geographically varying available food, rationed by slave owners, and grown or procured by the slaves themselves.[16] This aspect of culture creation emerged through the food and foodways developed today's African Americans as a synthesis originating from European, African, and American cultural influences in dialectical interaction with the exigencies of the slave experience.[17] Africans brought an array of planting, growing, butchering, and cooking methods with them to the New World. The earliest narratives and traditions of 'soul food' originated in the states from slaves cooking for their masters, and then receiving either leftover portions, or time to grow and tend to their own stock and food. The delicate restaurants serving endless renditions of classics are an example of the evolution of this creative and extraordinary survival tactic.

Variations in weather and climate contributed to the southern regional variations that existed. What is considered soul food varies based on foods available and types of European

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[15]Italics imparted from original citation in *What the Slaves Ate: recollection of African american foods and foodways from the slave narratives,* for complete definition and more on Whitehead's analysis, see "In search of Soul Food and Meaning: Culture, Food and Health" in *African Americans in the South: Issues of Race, Class, and Gender,* eds. H.A Baier and Yvonne Jones, Athens: University of Georgia Press, 1982), 94-110.

[16]Covey and Eisnach, *What the Slaves Ate*, 20.

[17]Covey and Eisnach, *What the Slaves Ate*, 53.

influence experienced by the slaves. For example, in Louisiana, where the French colonization is most evident and rice replaced corn on many of the plantations as the primary grain, slaves created a 'creolization' of soul food, integrating African, French, and Native American customs, foodways, and flavors.[18] Some of the African slaves who came into contact with different Native American and indigenous groups incorporated some of their cooking practices and meat preparation techniques into their own culinary display. The difference in soul food constituents is as much reflective of the food and resources available as it is an indicator of the power and social dynamics within the culture.[19]

Consider the dish 'cornbread', primarily corn ground down, oil (lard or butter if available), and water (and eggs if available). Most likely introduced to the slaves through Native Americans, corn and corn meal was more available than other foods (indeed for some, it was almost the only food),[20] and became a staple ingredient for slaves. Not only did they find corn easy to cook and filling in and of itself, but cornmeal products also went along well with one pot dishes that produced a nutritious and delicious concentrated liquid or 'pot liquor' to be sopped up by the bread and enjoyed. Corn was grinded down to become corn cakes, cornbread, griddle

[18] Several social scientists have researched the regional variations in food production and consumption by slaves in America. In addition to countless others, see Clayton E. Jewett and John O. Allen, *Slavery in the South: A state-by-state history*, Westport: Greenwood, 2004, and Larry Eugene Rivers, *Slavery in Florida: Territorial Days to Emancipation*, Gainesville: University of Florida Press, 2000.

[19]Yentsch, "Excavating African American Food History" in *African American Foodways: Explorations of history & culture,* ed. Anne L. Bower, Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2009, 60

[20]Stacey Gibbons Moore, "Established and well cultivated: Afro-American foodways in early Virginia" in *Virginia Cavalcade,* (1989), 39:70-83.

cares, muffins, porridge, and 'sourings'.[21] 'Kush', a creative rendering to alter the monotony of cornmeal, was made by adding seasoning, onions, peppers and other vegetables to the meal and water, cooked in a pan lined with pork grease.[22] Slaves also used corn to make hominy (used to make grits). Slaves found the hominy and grits easier to digest than the corn product. Using every piece of available food, they also used the corn cob to make soda out of ashes.

A similar narrative can be found for the extensive use of pork in the African American diet. Historically, pork was not native to the Americas, and arguably was familiar to at least some of the Africans.[23] According to Sam Hillard, Pork was the main source of meat for the slaves, and prior to the Civil War, pork was a central meat source for both blacks and whites as it was plentiful and easy to preserve.[24] Also researched as one of the most rationed meats before and after the civil war, the meat received by the slaves was usually of poor quality and quantity.[25] Despite this, slaves used resources and imagination to create tasty and nutritious meals. Understanding the most flavor and nutritional value are held in the parts of the animal closest to the bone, slaves made the most out of ham hocks, pig's feet, ribs, and other bone in less desirable parts. Historical evidence proves slaves worked incredibly hard to extract the full

[21]Covey and Eisnach, *What the Slaves Ate*, 80.

[22]Covey and Eisnach, *What the Slaves Ate*, 81.

[23]This statement is contested however, as the large Muslim presence in West Africa led many scholars to believe that pork was avoided, and the people were therefore not as familiar with the cooking and preserving of the animal.

[24]Sam Bowers Hillard, *Hogmeat and Hoecake: Food supply in the Old South, 1840-1860,* Carbondale: Southern University Illinois Press, 1972, 62.

[25]Covey and Eisnach, *What the Slaves Ate*, 97.

nutritional and beneficial value out of each meal, participating in 'cleaving bones', one of many tedious processes to bring out all the nutrients of a tainted or less valued meal.[26] Leafy greens such as collards, mustards, and turnips were (and are still today) flavored with fatback, ham hocks, and other pieces of pork that may or may not have bone in them. The bone would be passed around to other slaves and reused to season soups and stews, reiterating supportive foodways and full use of the resources present.

Procurement and Cooking

Not only must the food a group eats be considered, but also how the group obtained and prepared the food.[27] Before arriving in the Americas, African captives faced an unimaginable three months aboard the middle passage from Africa. Many became malnourished, and some perished. Upon arrival to the new world, African slaves immediately integrated African cooking methods with the abovementioned and other culturally diverse foods. Whit writes 'virtually all Africans who came to the United States, whether before or after the formation of the Republic, came from what were food-growing societies to primarily southern states, where they were reemployed in agriculture.'[28] The recipes and methods developed by the slaves Yentsch refers to as 'scratch' cooking. As consistent supplies were rare for slaves and African Americans, recipes changed according to ingredients on hand, and were estimated, never measured.[29] Similar to other world cultures, Africans and therefore African slaves practiced the cultural tradition of full

[26]Covey and Eisnach, *What the Slaves Ate*, 97.

[27]Yentsch, *African American Foodways*, 60.

[28]Whit, "Soul Food as Cultural Creation" in *African American Foodways,* 47.

[29]Yentsch, *African American Foodways*, 77.

utilization of the entire animal. As an abundant source of protein, pigs were no exception to this tradition. Slaves were usually relegated to the less desirable parts of the animal, the whites ate roasts, steaks and chops, whereas slaves were given the ears, tail, organ meat (and non-organ meat including intestines, the raw form of chitterlings, or *chitlins)* as mentioned above.[30]

Other than procuring food through their individually grown and community gardens,[31] slaves were given rations of food weekly. Normally occurring on Saturday evenings, this allowed for a larger than normal meal on Sunday to start the week in the fields.[32] Many of the meals made by the slaves were quick, one pot meals, as lack of time, utensils or a variety of equipment limited evident options but lent itself to more space for slaves to be innovative as a necessity.[33]

Holidays, Celebrations and Symbolism

Some (not all) African slaves and emancipated blacks celebrated a variety of holidays and special occasions that integrated feasts, harvests, and special cooking techniques. This was a time when both slaves and their owners deviated from their normal diets and food routines into something custom. The Thanksgiving holiday was important for Europeans and blacks.[34] What was then a time to harvest food and prepare for the winter months is now mostly a celebration of

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[30]Whit, *African American Foodways,* 51.

[31]Community in the sense where one garden may belong to several families on a plantation or in each area.

[32]Whit, *African American Foodways,* 51.

[33]Whit, *African American Foodways,* 53.

[34]William Whit notes the English origins of the Harvest Home festival.

feasting. Like West African harvest celebrations and traditions, southerners participated in the corn shucking of early fall, ushering in harvest time. Additionally, during this time, grains would be dried and stored for later, meats would be salted, smoked, cured, and prepared for storage.[35] Generally speaking (though not absolute), harvesting and preparation duties were divided among the men and women. Men would do the hunting, butchering, and fishing, women would do the gathering and cooking. Celebrations and holidays would also be a time for slaves to interact with slaves from other plantations and the larger community.[36] A slave recounts:

> But hit warn't all bad times 'cayse us did hab plenty to eat, an' 'specially at hog killin' time. Dey wuld hab days ob hog killin' an' de slaves w'uld bake dere bread, an' cum wid pots, pepper, salt, an' atter cleanin' de hogs, dey w'uld gib us de livers, and lights, an' us wuld cook dem ober a fire out in de open an' hit sho' war good eatin'... an' at Christmas times, dey gib you extra syrup to make cakes wid an' sweet 'taters to make 'tater pone. An', Lor', dey w'uld hab big cribs ob pun'kins, hit makes my hongry to think 'bout dem good ol' pun'kin pies.[37]

If found, slaves were given sweets and candy during these times. Cooking down sorghum syrup and pulling it into a taffy like substance, slaves and whites alike enjoyed the candied version of the food, when available. Slaves were also known to have whiskey, corn liquor and other spirits when ingredients to make them when the resources presented themselves.[38] Saturday night was also a significant time, as this was usually the day for food distribution on the

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[35]Whit, *African American Foodways*, 49.

[36]Covey and Eisnach, *What the Slaves Ate*, 185.

[37]Slave narrative of Adeline Hodge, Covey and Eisnach, *What the Slaves Ate*, 185.

[38]Covey and Eisnach, *What the Slaves Ate*, 190. Generally, slave owners discouraged their slaves from consuming alcohol, but archaeological evidence and records reveal during holidays and special occasions, some owners would provide small amounts of spirits for the slaves, or they would acquire or create their own, and be allowed to drink under the supervision of the owner or another white person.

plantation. This practice gave way to larger than normal meals on Sunday, a practice that has continued to this day in black families and communities with minor modifications.[39] As the rationing happened outside the plantation at the town square or other local gathering spot, some slaves were given the opportunity to mingle during these occasions and on Saturday nights. Southerners referred to this as 'frolics.[40] Sundays were the days slaves most often had to themselves, as masters and whites would attend church. Slaves would also attend their own religious fellowship, celebrating births, marriages, deaths, all with meals. Though some slaves enjoyed the generosity and opportunities that accompanied holidays, slave owners never surrendered their higher status or control over slaves.[41]

Christmas also signaled a time of larger rations from masters, giving way to larger meals for slave families. Not only were there additional rations and special foods, but Christmas time meant additional time off from the fields.[42] Eating with one another during these times built solidarity among the slaves and social cohesion and support, necessary tools to make it through the subsequent week on the field or in the big house.[43] Symbolically, food and foodways factor into identity formation, and holidays present a special time to highlight the food and fellowship. They are cultural products that illuminate one of many aspects of identity. The study of African

[39]Whit, *African American Foodways*, 50.

[40]Covey and Eisnach, *What the Slaves Ate*, 200.

[41]Covey and Eisnach, *What the Slaves Ate*, 185.

[42]Covey and Eisnach, *What the Slaves Ate*, 193.

[43]This section is not to imply that all slaves were granted access to holidays and celebrations, while some slave owners used this time to display their beneficence, others did not.

American foodways requires a different understanding of food. One that is not merely for sustenance, but when studied for the representations they illustrate, provides unique insight and irreplaceable knowledge into the identity of a group. The creation of soul food through chattel slavery is a prime example of the evolution of survival tactics. A rich culinary tradition was born out of necessity and innovation.[44] Referencing back to the opening scene of the novel, we see the importance of procurement, cooking, and feasting on special occasions (celebrating Jojo's 13th birthday). The farm on the family's property represents self-sufficiency, the process of butchering the meat, and the adolescent (Jojo) alongside the elder (Pop) as the process ensues.

Previously relegated to the slave quarters and subsequent houses, juke joints, and back-alley shacks where authentic 'Black' food was made, contemporary 21st century aspects of soul food have been popularized and Black chefs are some of the most accomplished in the world, utilizing ancestral traditions from both sides of the Atlantic. Soul food is no longer a strategic way to survive using what is given but has become an apt reflection of the richness and fullness that is Black life.[45]

Family/Kinship

I discerned food as one of the motifs of the novel. Now we can see how it is embedded in the food culture of Black social identity. Against the totalizing entity of slavery that gave birth to African Americans, this section details the rich narratives and social developments of black

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[44]Yentsch, *African American Foodways*, 86.

[45]For contemporary books on soul food see Christopher Carter, *The Spirit of Soul Food: Race, Faith, and Food Justice* (Urbana, Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 2021), and Bryant Terry and Oriana Koren, eds., *Black Food: Stories, Art, and Essays*, First edition. (California; New York: Ten Speed Press, 2021).

identity that emerged through marriage, children, understandings of sexuality and social morality, and the importance of the extended community.

> Due to the separations and dislocations created by the Atlantic slave trade, more people of African descent in the Americas have lost contact with their families in Africa. Most Americans do not know from which ethnic group or from which nation their ancestors were taken. In contrast to most Africans who know their family trees for seven or more generations, many Americans of all ethnicities do not know much about their extended families or their ancestors.[46]

The unique enactment of kinship, or the construction of family models is another indication of Black identity. From the beginning of African slavery in North America, black people have understood their society in the idiom of kinship.[47] The effects of the Middle passage were a tearing away of people from their tribes and family members. For those who survived the Middle Passage, startling new identities would come into existence in the New World, defined by the interplay of unrelenting market relations and violent subjection at the hands of Europeans. Such intrusions on the capacity to understand themselves as kinfolk existed side by side with their efforts to maintain their ties to one another, and to their origins in communities, during their transport and capture.[48] Unlike certain traditional family (patriarchal) lineages in many European cultures, Black slaves and freed peoples took on a different social connectedness, establishing

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[46]James Faubion, *The Ethics of Kinship: Ethnographic Inquiries*, Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, 2001. ProQuest eBook Central, http://ebookcentral.proquest.com/lib/luc/detail.action?docID=1331681, 190.

[47]Ira Berlin and Leslie S. Rowland, eds, *Families and Freedom: a documentary history of African American kinship in the civil war era*, New York: The New York Press, 1997, 3.

[48]Jennifer Morgan, "The Division of the Captives: Commerce and Kinship in the English Americas" in *Reckoning with Slavery: Gender, Kinship and Capitalism in the Early Black Atlantic*, Duke University Press, 2021, 170.

kinship ties to those not necessarily sharing the same lineage, but sharing either geographical closeness, slave owner, father of children, etc. The language of kinship in general and that deployed by black families in particular expressed a broad range of mutual obligations.[49] Unable to relate (at least in public) via one's original language or symbols, slaves took on European familial terms and applied them to other slaves in intimate proximity and relation.

The African slave/black slave family was the most fragile of institutions during life on the plantation. The pervasive and totalitarian nature of the plantation and owner yielded little if any perceived autonomy or control to the slaves. Although much of slave movement was dictated by white slave owners, the slaves created and enforced their own moral codes (articulating values in contradiction to those of the owners or selectively appropriated the owners' values to their own advantage),[50] social acknowledgement of civil unions, and a prioritizing of communal and collective child rearing. Slaves resisted the ruling and pervasity of slave owners by entering conjugal unions and establishing families. According to scholars Berlin and Rowland, the emergence and survival of the black family 'sowed the seeds for the destruction of chattel bondage'.[51] Slaves knew, for example, that they could be sold and relocated at any time. Because of this, neighboring plantation slaves would understand that they may have to parent another's child and did so.

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[49]Morgan, 'The Division of Captive,' 170.

[50]Berlin and Rowland, *Families and Freedom*, 7.

[51]Berlin and Rowland, *Families and Freedom*, 7.

Amid and after the Civil War, newly freed black slaves had to reconstruct and redefine kinship and familial relations. One does not have to look far to see strong remnants of these foundations in many of today's black families. The constant reformulating of kinship relations and reconfigurations of familial responsibilities exhibit the survival nature of black kinship construction engrained in black existence.

The familial dynamics represented in *Sing, Unburied, Sing,* highlight some of the familiar family dynamics previously discussed, such as children being raised by family members, as well as the tension interracial relationships and children aroused between and among families. Jojo and Kayla living with their maternal grandparents is reminiscent of children often being raised by family members other than their biological parents who were present and stable, or some combination of the two. The estrangement of Jojo and Kayla to their white grandparents was also common, as white families often disowned biracial children.[52] 21st century families in the United States reveal an interesting reality: One-in-seven U.S. infants (14%) were multiracial or multiethnic in 2015, nearly triple the share in 1980, according to a Pew Research Center analysis of Census Bureau data.[53]

[52]Footnote for history of biracial children.

[53]Livingston, Gretchen. "The Rise of Multiracial and Multiethnic Babies in the U.S." *Pew Research Center* (blog). Accessed September 13, 2023. https://www.pewresearch.org/short-reads/2017/06/06/the-rise-of-multiracial-and-multiethnic-babies-in-the-u-s/.

Marriage

Courting and marriage was an interesting dynamic for slaves and later emancipated blacks. Slaves based their family life on the marriage compact.[54] Legally, however, slaves were not permitted to marry, and also had no legal authority over their children, as both they and their children were property of the plantation owners.[55] Slave owners acknowledged slave conjugal ties only when it suited their convenience.[56] Additionally, legalities and social constructs diverted parental authority to the owners, taking on the role of fictive mother and/or father, feeding, clothing, and establishing some kind of normalcy (for the benefit of plantation production) for the children. Although owners contradicted and manipulated the slave families, there was a consensus that domestic stability via kinship relations strengthened the plantation regime, and therefore was tolerated on a spectrum from place to place.[57] Though not recognized legally, they still participated in all the social aspects of courtship, marriage, and childrearing. Relationships were initiated and ended according to individual choice and interest, and once married, most slave husbands and wives valued the oath taken with lifelong faithfulness. With a marriage, a delineation of duties was established, creating the slaves own understanding of gendered domestic roles in the family unit.[58] The division of labor was not fixed however, as the

[54]Berlin and Rowland, *Families and Freedom*, 7.

[55]Berlin and Rowland, *Families and Freedom*, 4.

[56]Berlin and Rowland, *Families and Freedom*, 160.

[57]Berlin and Rowland, *Families and Freedom*, 5.

[58]Extensive research has been done on kinship and familial ties in West Africa, focusing on possible continuities and social structures between West African culture and New World black culture. See Ana Marta González, Laurie Fields DeRose, and Florence. Oloo. *Frontiers of Globalization: Kinship and Family Structures in Africa,* Trenton, N.J: Africa World Press, 2011, and Maria Usang Assim,

slave family was not an institution that could enjoy stability due to the dynamism of slave trading and other factors. Despite this, married couples did celebrate their unions and generally held steadfast to them.

This is not to paint a romanticized visual of slave marriage, as conflicts and disputes arose both during and after slavery. During the Civil War and into emancipation, many families had been split up, and as a result of emancipation, freed slaves began the joyous, bitter task of putting their kin ties back together again, family reunions of astonishing proportions.[59] While emancipation disrupted life for many, it also provided newly freed blacks the opportunity to reunite with long lost relatives, and formalize civil unions in front of clergymen and government officials.[60] This was not only a social confirmation of freedom, but granted free blacks access to recognition and property of which only a legal marriage could. Both the confirming of long-standing unions and the binding of new ones signaled different responsibilities post-civil war. Whenever families were able, they celebrated with ceremonies and feasts, embracing both one another and the newfound freedom of expression to come with emancipation. The celebration of legal marriage for slaves was not the only thing to be formalized, but also the dissolution of unwanted and undesirable unions. Those who had been matched up on the plantation for purposes of procreation, or who had been persuaded and coerced by family to conjugate with

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Understanding Kinship Care of Children in Africa: a Family Environment or an Alternative Care Option? Portland, Oregon: Eleven International Publishing, 2015.

[59]For the complete source on the transition after emancipation, see Ira Berlin, Steven f. Miller, and Leslie Rowland, "Afro-American Families in the Transition from Slavery to Freedom" in *Radical History Review* 42, 1988, 89-121.

[60]Berlin and Rowland, *Families and Freedom*, 155.

certain individuals were no longer bound to such obligations. In some cases, this however brought up the question of custody of children.[61]

Contemporary aspects of marriage and family for the United States represent a change in societal views concerning dating and marrying outside of one's race. In 1980, 7% of all newlyweds were in an intermarriage, and by 2015, that share had more than doubled to 17%, according to a recently released Pew Research Center report. Both trends are likely spurred in part by the growing racial and ethnic diversity in the U.S.[62] There is also a change in the need or necessity to partner up and marry, for a myriad of reasons, of which survival may no longer be considered. Roughly four-in-ten adults ages 25 to 54 (38%) were unpartnered – that is, neither married nor living with a partner. This is up sharply from 29% in 1990. Men are now more likely than women to be unpartnered, which wasn't the case 30 years ago.[63] Comparing the relationship and marriage of Mam and Pop to the relationship of Michael and Leonie, we see a shift in stability, a married couple v. an unmarried couple, and the relevance of a same-race relationship v. an interracial relationship.

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[61]Berlin and Rowland, *Families and Freedom*, 170.

[62]Livingston, Gretchen. "The Rise of Multiracial and Multiethnic Babies in the U.S." *Pew Research Center* (blog). Accessed September 13, 2023. https://www.pewresearch.org/short-reads/2017/06/06/the-rise-of-multiracial-and-multiethnic-babies-in-the-u-s/.

[63]Mitchell, Travis. "Rising Share of U.S. Adults Are Living Without a Spouse or Partner." *Pew Research Center's Social & Demographic Trends Project* (blog), October 5, 2021. https://www.pewresearch.org/social-trends/2021/10/05/rising-share-of-u-s-adults-are-living-without-a-spouse-or-partner/.

Children and Parent Relations

The origins of black mother child bonding in the United States are one of intention and contention. The context of childbirth for slave women was dramatically different from the context their African family and predecessors gave birth in.[64] Just as slaves had no rights to themselves or to one another, they also had no rights to their children, yet the birth of a child (as well as the union between two people) were joyous occasions that represented the hope of future generations and freedom for slaves. While pregnant, it is noted that slave women's workload decreased, but quickly increased back to the previous quota as soon as possible after the birth of the child.[65] The birth of black children during slavery was a space of contested existence. While slave owners immediately saw this as another unit of profit, slaves saw each birth as a possibility, as a chance of a future beyond the present. The struggle over children went hand in hand with the solidification and expansion of the black family.[66] Young children were often at the mercy of their masters just as their parents, but slave parents were able to control their children's after task time.[67] The discipline of slave children was highly regulated by masters/slave owners, many times causing friction between the slave child and their powerless

[64]Frazier notes the cultural differences in East and West African tribes during a woman's pregnancy, noting if these are the locations slaves derive from, their experiences of pregnancy are disconnected from their geographical place of origin. E. Franklin Frazier, *The Negro Family in the United States*, Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 2001 (1939), 46.

[65]Frazier, *The Negro Family*, 48.

[66]Dylan C. Penningroth, *The Claims of Kinfolk: African American Property and community in the Nineteenth Century South*, Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2003, 170.

[67]Penningroth, *The Claims of Kinfolk*, 84.

parent.[68] Still parents tutored and taught their children the complex etiquette necessary for survival, instilling moral and religious values and tactics for maneuvering outside the plantation. Just as owners had ways to disrupt the social cohesion built by slave families, so they too had means to reaffirm and re-establish familial bonds and kinship ties. Due to slave selling, deaths, and the general distance between plantations, many parents called on extended relatives and members of other plantations to ensure the proper raising of the children.

Against the dominating nature of chattel slavery, slave mothers expressed fierce devotion to their children, some acting in defiance over possible separation from their youth.[69] Scholars note that most slave children were born to two parent households.[70] This contradicts the stereotype that single parent households in the black community have existed since the inception of chattel slavery and the removal/emasculation of the black man. As children became older and took on more responsibility both in their household and on the plantation, they too contributed to the counter-economy and social structures built and maintained by the slaves. If the children were lucky enough to stay on the same plantation as their parents until their own maturation into adulthood, the adult children would take on the responsibilities of their parents, including tending to their health. This is not to say however that the father had no place in childrearing. Quite the contrary, up until the mid-nineteenth century, many government officials sided with the father in custody battles as being the more fit parent.[71] After the war and emancipation, some

[68]Berlin and Rowland, *Families and Freedom*, 4.

[69]Frazier, *The Negro Family*, 52.

[70]Frazier, *The Negro Family*, 8.

[71]Berlin and Rowland, *Families and Freedom*, 172.

families lost fathers and male contributors, leading to marriages and unions with children from previous relationships, creating blended families and 'stepchildren'.

Many children, children were not fortunate enough to be raised by their parents for their entire childhood, and instead were also sold from one owner to the next. As such, they were taken in by the corresponding slave family and neighboring plantation slaves. Some were fortunate enough to be taken in by known relatives, grandparents, great aunts/uncles, and those of distant relation. This type of adoption furthered the naming of fictive kin as 'auntie', 'uncle', and 'cousin' and ensured that 'no child was without a family/home.[72] In addition to taking on family members (children and adults alike), slaves participated in acts of generational transfers through older members gifting younger members with anything given value, regardless the size or significance. The acquisition of property was central to the creation and maintenance of social ties in the slave community and after emancipation.[73] Small utensils and cooking tools, pieces of cloth and clothing, perhaps lucky rocks and sticks, anything that denoted value and continuity in identity and enormous emotional value.[74] Strengthening familial ties, creating and increasing family 'wealth', and increasing the family labor pool available are just some of the benefits and effects of African American kinship and family ties.

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[72]Berlin and Rowland, *Families and Freedom,* 9.

[73]Dylan Penningroth makes a significant contribution to the study of slave life through the lens of African studies, making the statement that kinship and property were and are closely related. See *The Claims of Kinfolk: African American Property and community in the Nineteenth Century South*, Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2003.

[74]Berlin and Rowland, *Families and Freedom,* 9.

Sing, Unburied, Sing's illustration of strong family ties is most directly seen between Jojo and Pop, and Jojo and Mam. While Leonie is the biological mother of Jojo and Kayla, it is Mam and Pop who provide the parental guidance, and it is Mam and Pop who Jojo (and Leonie) reference in times of distress and discernment. Kayla's sickness and Leonie's inability to console her, as well as the anger unleashed on Jojo after Mam's death are examples of the distorted relationship between mother and children.

A Dynamic Village

Sexual Morality

Various positions on morality and sexual tolerance/deviance circulate around the impact of chattel slavery on the African American identity. Some scholars believe the slaves experienced rampant sexual promiscuity prior to and during the beginning of chattel slavery, while others believe the promiscuity lay with the group who exerted power in every other aspect of life, the slave owners.[75] Despite the conceptions, one common thread of truth remained: enslaved Africans were seen as property, not subject to any protection under the law, and as such, were completely subjected to the will of white slave owners. Defiling and degrading the female Black body, paying close attention to big breasts, buttocks, and other sexual body parts occurred in the early nineteenth century with the European obsession with a woman named Saartjie Baartman (1789-1815). Also known as "The Hottentot Venus," originally from southwest Africa, Baartman was taken from her homeland in Africa to Europe, where she was put on exhibit for public viewings in England and France from 1810 until her death. Such a

[75]E. Franklin Frazier is a major advocate of this view, positing that sexual restraint came because of encountering Europeans and the necessity to develop functional family units.

display of Baartman's body was certainly a way of "Othering" her Black body, especially compared with White European women. Exhibiting Baartman was both a way of showing various aspects of Black sexuality as well as making her a spectacle.[76]

Two different groups of sexual encounters are of significance to me: the sexual relations amongst slaves, and the sexual relations between blacks (enslaved and free) and whites. As with two sets of interactions, so apply two different sets of rules. During slavery, there was no sexual recourse for slaves and white people. As enslaved Africans were not seen as human, they could not give consent (nor deny it for that matter). There existed no form of legislation that acknowledged the humanity of blacks, thereby protecting them from sexual abuse and rape. Not only did young (and sometimes old) slave women experience rape and abuse, but their bodies were put on display for white spectators. The sexual brutality of enslaved Africans did not stop at the men and women, but often they gave birth to biracial children that equally suffered the devastating impact of chattel slavery because of rape. Rarely were children born 'mulatto' ever able to reap the benefit of being half-white, and often suffered the same fate as those of pure African ancestry or African/Native-American. Interracial sexuality went both ways according to sociologist E. Franklin Frazier, with white women as well as slave women giving birth to biracial children. Scholars such as Frazier find that until 1840, slave men heavily outnumbered slave

[76] Sadiah Qureshi, "Displaying Sara Baartman, the 'Hottentot Venus,'" *History of Science* 42, no. 2 (2004): 233–57. https://doi.org/10.1177/007327530404200204.

women, which *may* have been a contributing factor to interracial sexual relations, particularly between slave men and white women.[77]

"Black men and women were said to be animalistic in their sexual desires, particularly black men. That black women were very easy and responded enthusiastically towards any sexual advance that anyone would want to approach them."[78] To combat these stereotypes, Blacks subsequently worked diligently to establish a high sexual morality and modesty, promoting politics of respectability that seek to debunk the myths of sexual promiscuity and immodesty among Black folks. Integrating Christian values with newly constructed social norms, enslaved Africans, newly freed Blacks, and those born free constructed an unspoken yet understood sexual morality that included things such as: not having premarital sex if one is widowed or separated, and heralding those able to maintain their virginity despite the depravity that surrounded them.

Extended Accountability

Blood and a 'common experience of oppression' were not the only ways African Americans related to one another.[79] The development of the African American family during and after slavery is a direct result of their interpretation of social connection through kinship. A large importance of kinship is the fact that these social ties existed outside the immediate family. Those in proximity were not quite blood related, but often became closer and more than

[77]I italicize may as Frazier's perspectives are highly contested against those such as Melville Herskovits, Sidney Mintz and Richard Price. While I agree with Frazier on certain aspects of the black family, I am in opposition to some of his other conclusions.

[78]Chideya, Farai, Herbert Samuels, and Mireille Miller Young, "Sex Stereotypes of African Americans Have Long History," *NPR*, (May 7, 2007), sec. Race. https://www.npr.org/templates/story/story.php?storyId=10057104.

[79]Penningroth, *The Claims of Kinfolk*, 109.

neighbors. Rather than turn inward and focus attention and affection on immediate family and spouses, slaves generally looked outward and incorporated kin - grandparents, aunts, uncles, and cousins - into their understanding of family.[80] Furthermore, the boundary between household and community was fluid, one that overlapped on both sides. Through circumstance or hardship, one may become one's 'brother' or 'sister' and be considered just as much as family as those related by birth and marriage. With equal consideration came equal responsibility. Families after the war (and into today's 21st century) extended the kinship duties to elderly members of the family, taking them in when they were no longer able to care for themselves (blood related and fictive kin alike). Children who were orphaned were also taken in when the opportunity presented itself, as former slave owners and other white southerners took an interest in them as a source of cheap labor.[81]

From Historical to Contemporary Black Families

Although the constructs of slavery are incomparable, the environment gave birth to ties of kinship and community that gave African Americans not only emotional support but also the muscles needed to accumulate property and the social networks to claim it.[82] Despite the harsh realities of plantation life, the slave family reflected the basic contradiction of an institution that defined men and women as property, a contradiction that was neither romantic vision nor sentimentalist sop, but the central reality of African American life.[83] Historians have interpreted

[80]Berlin and Rowland, *Families and Freedom*, 225.

[81]Berlin and Rowland, *Families and Freedom*, 236.

[82]Berlin and Rowland, *Families and Freedom*, 185.

[83]Berlin and Rowland, *Families and Freedom*, 11.

both the slaves' economy and the history of black families and communities using two long-standing themes in African American history — the "dialectic" of accommodation and resistance and the debate over cultural "survivals" and acculturation, themes that are sometimes fused into a framework of "cultural adaptation and resistance."[84] The building of and expanding on kinship models not only provides communal support and comfort for the group, but challenges the nuclear family as an economic unit. Even today, we often see family members and friends of family taking in children (sometimes multiple siblings to avoid them being separated or being placed into foster systems).

The fabric of the African American community and family was forged through the historical constraints of enslaved Africans, surviving, and adapting to the realities imposed upon all areas of existence. Mere proximity did not equate to kinship, but active and intentional creating of bonds took place that underwent (and continues to undergo) molding to fit the needs of the time. The construction of African American families is a result of and response to the emergence of white America and white American Christianity. Slaves valued familial relations and members, fighting with slave owners to keep children with their parents and couples joined in informal unions together. Throughout history, the establishment and understanding of kinship has carried African Americans through chattel slavery, reconstruction, Jim Crow, Civil Rights, the crack epidemic, and mass incarceration. As an institution forged from and in economic, political, and social turning points in history, the notion of kinship and family ties among Black folks is steeped in tradition, struggle, solidarity, faith and survival.

[84]Penningroth, *The Claims of Kinfolk*, 7.

Today's Black families may look much different than slave families on the plantation, but many of the tenants remain: often there are intergenerational households, either with grandparents raising great nieces/nephews or grandchildren, or perhaps an elderly parent resides with one of their children and their family. Families and kinship ties serve as the central connecting point between generations. Multi-racial and multi-ethnic children are becoming more prevalent and thus normal in the United States census. Sexual morality has been redefined and expanded to include LGBTQIA people of color raising children and having families. Across religious and faith traditions, extending past ethnic origins and geographical affiliations, various versions of Black family life have not only survived, but have evolved, and this evolving notion of kinship ties is strong in today's families, a strength rooted in a resilient formation of community, solidarity, and struggle.

Preliminary Reflections on Black Faith Formation

The formation of Black religion[85] in the United States serves as the pivotal example of a unique identity from a survival context. My next chapter details the womanist ethical lens of Black theology and survival, but current purposes center around the epistemological point of Black Christianity as rooted in the social context of chattel slavery. As Albert Raboteau rightly points out, "there was something peculiar about the way African slaves were evangelized in

[85] While I denote this section Black religion, it is painstakingly obvious that I only focus on the formation of Black Christianity in the U.S context and from a predominantly male perspective. So as not to neglect the array of alternatives to Black Christianity that emerged and took root in the United States, for Black Muslims in the United States see C. Eric Lincoln, *The Black Muslims in America,* Boston: Beacon Press, 1973; for Black Judaism in the United States, see James E. Landing, *Black Judaism: A Story of an American movement,* Durham: Carolina Academic Press, 2002, for a historical take on the Gullah and Geechee religion that developed along the southern coast, see Margaret Washington Creel. *A Peculiar People: Slave Religion and Community-Culture Among the Gullahs.* New York: New York University Press, 1988.

America." Traditionally, 'preaching the gospel to all nations' meant that the Christian disciple was sent out with the gospel to the pagans. In America the reverse was the case: the pagan slave was brought (against their will after being subjected to slavery)[86] to a Christian disciple who was frequently reluctant to instruct him in the gospel.[87] Interestingly enough, Blacks used Christianity not so much as it was delivered to them…but as its truth was authenticated to them in the experience of suffering and struggle to reinforce an enculturated religious orientation and to produce an indigenous faith that emphasized dignity, freedom, and human welfare.[88]

In addition to the way in which Christianity was (re)introduced to African slaves, Black religion (specifically Christianity) is unique because it emerges *simultaneously* with Black culture as part of Black identity *in response to white American Christianity*.[89] The 'American Negro' is constructed alongside the 'Negro Christian'[90] supporting the strong connection between one's conception of self and one's conception of faith and belief and both stemming from a visceral struggle for recognition in the Black community. Wilmore's analysis of Black

[86]The forced emigration resulting from chattel slavery was coercion and subjugation.

[87]Albert Raboteau, *Slave Religion: the invisible institution in the antebellum south*, New York: Oxford University Press, 1978, 120.

[88]Gayraud S. Wilmore, *Black Religion and Black Radicalism*, Maryknoll: Orbis, 1998 (1974), 25.

[89]Just as the emergence of Black Christianity is simultaneous with the emergence of Black identity, one can assume the white American identity simultaneously emerged with the creation of white American Christianity. My use of the term is to accentuate the mutuality and inextricability of white American and white American Christian.

[90]African American emerged in the 1980s. Prior to this time, Black, Negro, and other names were used to identify the descendants of slaves now born on American soil. See Tom W. Smith, "Changing Racial Labels: from 'colored' to 'negro' to 'black' to 'African American,'" *Public opinion quarterly* 56, no. 4 (1992): 496–514.

religion reads that 'from the beginning, there existed a fusion between a highly developed and pervasive feeling about the essentially spiritual nature of historical experience, flowing from the African traditional background, and a radical secularity related both to religious sensibility and to the experience of slavery and oppression.'[91]

To better understand the peculiarity of Black religion, one must know that 'the religious beliefs and rituals of a people are inevitably and inseparably bound up with the material and psychological realities of their daily existence.'[92] In contrast to scholars E. Franklin Frazier and others, W.E.B DuBois, Gayraud Wilmore and others 'have enough evidence from various sources to establish the fact that black religion in the United States, as in the Caribbean and Latin America, was a resilient form of the Judeo-Christian faith fused to an African base.[93] From this fact we know that the creation and emergence of black religion is indeed a blend of Africanisms with European Christianity and other indigenous influences. We see these Africanisms most evident in the spiritual expression of the *ring shout*, a communal event proceeding church service where members gather in a circle, and proceed to clap, hum, sing, and shout in various forms of unison engaging in praise and divine reference while also evoking a spiritual presence. Sometimes they danced silently, sometimes they sang only the chorus, and sometimes they sang

[91]Wilmore, *Black Religion and Black Radicalism,* 24.

[92]Wilmore, *Black Religion and Black Radicalism,* 22.

[93]Gayraud Wilmore, *Black Religion and Black Radicalism*, 28. For additional information on Africanisms in the emergence of African Americans, see Gwendolyn Midlo Hall, *Slavery and African Ethnicities in the Americas Restoring the Links.* Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2005.

the entire song over and over.[94] Against the inference of white society that dancing and clapping and shouting was sinful, slaves used the ring shout as physical affirmations of spiritual feelings and sentiments.

Black Christianity and Black religion in general continue to intrigue scholars and folks looking for heritage and historical meaning, as the dimensions and definitions are ever-changing, responding to its social context, and Leon W. Watts notes a possible reason why:

> The motivations of slaves toward religion was not what their "masters" had hoped or intended. It is historically clear that black folks used the ordered language of Christianity to "turn on" a people for liberation rather than to pacify them to the condition of enslavement; to preserve a people for struggle against seemingly insurmountable odds rather than bondage that the body might wrest [survival and] liberation from the oppressors.[95]

Both the beliefs and practices within Black religion stood as 'protest against the hypocrisy of a system that expected blacks to be virtuous and obedient to those who themselves lived lives of indolence and immorality in full view of those who they purported to serve as examples.'[96] The majority of the biblical stories were transmitted through oral storytelling, relying at first on a few individuals who had either been taught the bible via recollection, or through the rare occasion knew how to read. Slaves' interpretation of biblical stories varied from that of the slave masters, as slaves interpreted stories more relevant to their context. Rather than

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[94]Eileen Southern, "The Religious Occasion" originally in *The Music of Black Americans, A history,* New York: W. W Norton & co., Inc., cited from *The Black Experience in Religion,* ed. by C. Eric Lincoln, Garden City: Anchor Books, 1974, 61.

[95]Leon w. Watts, "Caucuses and Caucasians," in *Renewal,* Vol. 10, no. 7, October-December 1970, pp. 4-6

[96]Gayraud Wilmore, *Black Religion and Black Radicalism,* 36.

appealing to the use of the bible as a justification for their enslavement, within the accounts of the miracles and narratives of the bible, they found the conviction and hope that a better life was possible for them in this world and, with even more certainty, in the world beyond.[97]

The faith of the enslaved Africans was not one of naivety or foolery. They immediately recognized the inconsistency between the theological concepts of an all-merciful God and the biblical support of perpetuating slavery and subjugation. Although they outwardly adopted the religion of the slave master, African slaves relied upon certain elemental presuppositions that gave consolation and meaning to their suffering.

For fear of falling into an ever growing historical review of Black theology and Black religion, both of which have been handled with passion, precision, and patience, I use Leon Watts' analysis of 20th century creation of black Church denominations as a continuation of 17th and 18th century creation of slave religion, to infer the essential components of Black Christianity are and symbolize Black identity.[98] He makes ten assumptions on the unchanging relationship and nature of Black Christianity (and I imply Black identity) over time:

1. *Black religion has always stood in contradistinction to white American Christianity. It is the result of racism in the church and society. Black religion is a protest to the positions of the established American Christian tradition. It is an indictment against the religious Establishment.*

[97]Gayraud Wilmore, *Black Religion and Black Radicalism*, 29.

[98]Leon Watts 'Tenant of Black Theology' in C. Eric Lincoln, *The Black Experience in Religion*, Anchor Press, 1974. his is perhaps an outdated example, but the purpose of this exposition is to highlight how many of these tenants stand true, and many of them are no longer relevant. Either way, as defining the foundational aspects of Black theology and religion, Watt's contribution providing staples of Black faith are important.

Watts denotes that Black religion by its definition is not a subset, but a totally separate entity *in contradistinction*, or distinction by opposition. By opposing the religious (and social) forces placed upon them, slaves thereby created a religion (and simultaneous identity) of their own *in opposing response* to the imposing white American (identity) Christianity (religion). Despite the divergence, denominational/cultural divide or otherwise, the origins of Black religion and identity are that of resistance, opposition, resilience, and survival against or in juxtaposition to the development of the new white society and identity group emerging in the Americas. It is also important to note the religious justifications for slavery had to be (and still are) rectified and understood in a way that provides space for Black folks to interpret and utilize the same religious sentiments with different meaning and significance.

2. *The experiences of the oppressed are qualitatively different from those who are the oppressors; therefore, the basis for religious experience (and identity formation) is different. Black religion (and identity) is articulated and demonstrated by contrasting the realities of life to the assertions of American white Christianity.*

Watts highlights the importance of qualitative experience versus quantitative. One serious event or ongoing experience affords a much more tremendous impact. The experiences of those who have suffered, struggled, and survived are extremely different from those who have had lives of privilege, power, and positive unmediated progress, leading to vastly different implications and inferences about life. These experiences heavily influence one's conception of self, one's beliefs surrounding self, others, and conceptions of divine presence. Regarding Black Christianity and Black identity, the expressions and beliefs articulated represent the experiences and meaning making emerging from those experiences fundamental to the construction of one's way of being.

3. *Since theology (and identity) are also informed by culture and history, theologizing in the Black church is necessarily different from that of the white church. Therefore, the history and culture of black people in this country must play an important role in shaping and developing a black theology. The search for our roots and the celebration of our culture is a 'sine qua non' in defining the Black church.*

Bryan Massingale elucidates an understanding of culture in relation to identity, racism, and African Americans. Positing several *poignant* observations, he notes cultures are shared realities, instilled through learned communal beliefs and values; cultures are formative, *shaping personal identities of a community's members;* and group meanings, values, and beliefs are expressed symbolically. Based on the history of African Americans in the United States, the shared common experience of 'racial prejudice, discrimination, rejection, and hostility - both subtle and overt,'[99] it is reasonable to infer how the faith established is reflective of the historical trajectory of the group, a trajectory contrasting white American Christianity. When Black Christians theologize, or reflect on this shared experience of racial prejudice, discrimination, and other detrimental societal attributes under the guides of meaning-making, it makes sense that the implications of such reflection result in a radical take on Christianity in America.

4. *The roots of the Black Church are in protest and liberation. The explication of the Gospel of Jesus the Christ is in terms of God's liberating activities in the world vis-a-vis the oppressed community. Thus, the central theme of the Black Church is black liberation.*

Here Watts highlights the epistemology of Christianity for Black folks. Following his logic from his third assumption of history and culture as indicative of Black religion, and the history is one of 'rejection, hostility (and enslavement)', it is reasonable that the origins and goals of the institution of Black Church are twofold: protesting and opposing the situation of

[99]Bryan Massingale, *Racial Justice and the Catholic Church,* Maryknoll: Orbis, 2010, 19.

struggle and striving toward freedom and acknowledgement through liberation. It is also reasonable to assert that Black religion was not formed through spontaneous choice, but a strategic response to the totalizing and oppressive circumstances they found themselves in.

5. *As a product of an oppressed community, the Black Church has a different relationship to its community than does the white Christian Establishment. While the church in the white community is simply an institution alongside many others, the Black Church IS the MAJOR institution in the Black community. Indeed, the black community and black religion are inseparable.*

The creation of modern Protestant and Catholic churches in the New World emerged alongside other institutions fundamental to the United States. Cultural, ethnic, and religious affiliations and practices were already in place upon the emanation of white America. In contrast, the rituals, practices, and beliefs carried by African slaves were meticulously and systematically obliterated (or severe attempts at such were constant). Despite the persistent attack on livelihood and implementing inhumane control over the African slaves, the Black Church developed into *the* foundation of social structure in Black communities. Housing mutual aid networks, community asylums, childcare and elderly support, the Black Church both metaphorically and literally functioned as 'the glue bonding the community together,' serving as a tangible signifier of being and faith of Black folks.

6. *The Black Church can be and often is prophetic. American white Christianity is so inextricably bound to Americanism that white Christians can speak of God, Flag and Country as if they were synonymous terms. The propagation, perpetuation, and preservation of "the American way of life" is not a goal of the Black Church. Therefore, the Black Church does not confuse 'nationalism' with 'mission'.*

Unlike the confusion and conflation of American nationalism and white identity for white Americans, Black Americans are keenly aware that one's religious affiliation is gravely different from one's nationality. As a Black American, folks are ever so cognizant that the religion and

faith stands in protest and contrast to the nationality/cultural identity. Although Black identity and Black religion are inextricably bound, there is a stark contrast between the link of Black identity and religion, and white identity and religion, based on each respective experience. Because of this, the message, method, and means of Black church are not only prophetic, but critical and liberating on a very visceral level.

7. *Since the datum for black religion is the black experience, the Black Church is the only place in American society where the black experience can be celebrated with impunity. That experience bears little, if any, relationship to the experience held in common by white churchmen.*

It is wholly because of the Black experience that the notion/construct of Black Church exists. Some scholars believe the Black Church existed before Black Theology. I belong to the group of thought that believes Black Theology existed before the recognition of Black Church. As such, the Black Church depends on Black folks and their experiences, to sustain the Church with purpose, and serve as a constant 'check and balance' to the Black community. Due to the sensitive nature of Black experience, the locus of the Black Church as a center for unmediated reflection on experience and meaning making reinforces the centrality of the Black Church as a safe space for spiritual support (as well as economic, communal, and visceral) in identity formation and development, as well as a site of protest for dominant (white) culture.

8. *By virtue of its history and the culture of its people, the Black Church understands that rationality must be informed by emotional content and that there are literally no absolute values. Life is emotional as well as rational and logical; dialectical as well as normative. In the final analysis values are appropriate. The question for black religion is not normative ethics but rather, what it is a moral being?*

Historical theories of identity, of being, and of being good are often coated with philosophical ideas posited by a hegemonic, dominant (white) ideal. Such philosophical theories

do not consider alterity, or those on the margins whose ways of existence cannot comply with the compartmentalized approach to human identity. Being vigilant of falling victim to abstract western theories of reason, autonomy, enlightenment or progress, the components of Black religion are not relegated to either ecstatic claims of spiritual enlightenment or the intellectual standards of mainstream educational rigor, but rather represent a delicate dance of all aspects of human life and experience. Emphasizing inherent human dignity and worth, community as vital to survival, and the needs for social, political, and economic liberation rooted in an experiential understanding of the gospel of Jesus Christ and of the Christian faith.

9. *Black religion is not based upon a notion of "rugged individualism" but rather its focus and drive are toward preserving the people of an oppressed community for struggle.*

Continuing from the previous statement about rationality, in contrast to the values heralded in both American nationalism and Christianity, *voluntariness, choice, individuality;* Black Christianity inhabits a communal approach to identity and faith more in line with West African Religious Traditions than with European Christianity. As such, Black religion stands in contrast to the dominant ideology of American Christianity, western modernity, and therefore white America. This communal approach is further evidenced in Black folks' conception and centrality of kinship ties.

10. *The Black Church does not experience a distinction between "sacred" and "secular" worlds. There is a merger of sacred and secular in the Black Church, since black religion and the black community are inseparable. Neither one can be defined without the other. Black ecumenicity, then, embraces the total black community. Black religion, in contradistinction to American white Christianity, is inclusive rather than exclusive.*

Part of this merger was the creation of faith amid a very real and visceral historical event. Belief and development of concepts such as liberation, salvation, and eschatology were directly

connected to the social, political, economic, and existential status Blacks found themselves in. This is why the Black Church cannot ignore the reality and struggles of Black people or any marginal group. Gayraud Wilmore states, 'the overarching question was one of survival - mental and physical - and whatever slaves could appropriate from the conjurer, or later from the charismatic Chrisitan preacher, to deal with the aleatory quality of their situation and to ward off the evil influences around them…provided some means of preserving health and sanity in the midst of their plight.'[100]

The faith formation of enslaved Africans in the New World that culminated into Black religion both is and signifies a metamorphic hermeneutic and life expression, of which has not been paralleled in modern history. The social, political, and economic realities of the 17th century and beyond gave way to the 'birth' of a carefully constructed and mindfully manufactured duality of identity and religion of a subjugated and enslaved group. Any religion (Christian or otherwise) formed or adapted by the enslaved Africans in the New World was a reorientation to belief and identity considering historical circumstances. The *problem, paradox, and irony* of African American religion, specifically Christianity, is that belief in and expression of faith used to justify their dehumanization also humanized them, providing space for the 'strangers in a strange land' to make sense of their peculiar situation in a way that promoted positive and uplifting outlooks on life (and the afterlife). To understand the origins, developments and present state of Black religion is to gain insight into the heart of the people. The practices, rituals and ideologies of Black religion are the most evident examples and

[100]Wilmore, *Black Religion and Black Radicalism,* 33.

expressions of the soul/spirit of Black identity: one of fortitude, persistence, creativity, compassion, rebellion, and survival, one of life.

A Narrative Formation of Black Identity through Survival

Until this point, I have tried to articulate a few tenants of black identity, highlighting in each the overarching theme of survival. Scholars contend that to best understand a group, a society, an ethnic affiliation is to study their social habits, developments and articulations of meaning, and relations with surrounding groups. Considering the food, family and faith relations of enslaved Africans and subsequent Black indigenous groups reinforces my supposition that Black identity is an identity founded in, operated from, and referencing to survival. Each section (supplemented with primary narratives of African slaves and Black folks) details the origins and circumstances of how holidays were celebrated, meals were made, relationships were formed and dissolved, and how these moments evolved into a transmitted culture rooted in the simple goal of survival. Before concluding the chapter, I want to note the essence of identity as formed through and by narrative (a notion I take up in a subsequent chapter). I briefly highlight two scholars illustrating the solid connection between narrative (autobiographical, biographical and autofiction) and identity formation, inferring that the narrative of African Americans existence is one that demonstrates a narrative identity of survival.

Philosopher Marya Schechtman investigates the narrative approach to self from philosophical and other related disciplines. She provides a rudimentary explanation of narrative identity pertinent to how I come to understand the preceding information of African Americans (food, family, faith) as constitutive of a narrative identity. Examining a range of narrative perspectives in identity constitution, Schechtman references Alasdair MacIntyre, Paul Ricoeur,

and Charles Taylor as major contributors to this view, categorizing the three scholars' as hermeneutical approaches, referring to the fact that the self is a fundamentally self-interpreting being.[101] She further explains these approaches by showing the connection between narrative, agency, and selfhood. As agents, one's actions must make sense and be intelligible to us and to others. The 'making sense' and 'making meaning' of actions is precisely the judgment that biological terminology and natural sciences cannot afford nor adequately articulate. Schechtman notes a few commonalities within the range of narrative views that I would be remiss to forego mentioning. A common thread in the narrative approach is the thought that human life and meaning making cannot be done through biological or mechanical ways.[102] Another common thread in narrative approaches is that the creation and maintenance of selfhood must involve some level of standard or point of reference against which to value actions, status, and thoughts. Schechtman names this normativity, and for the hermeneutical lens of narrative, that normativity is a quest for the *good.*[103] The final commonality noted is that of social embeddedness. In some form or another, the normativity developed against which selfhood is evaluated is derived from the social context. Selves are embodied, historical and social beings, emerging in community with other beings. Selves must be interpreted as interacting with other selves.

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[101]Marya Schechtman, "The Narrative Self" in *The Oxford Handbook on the Self*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011, 395.

[102]Marya Schechtman, "The Narrative Self", 402.

[103]Marya Schechtman, "The Narrative Self", 403. I address the concept of the 'good' and the 'good life' in chapters 4 and 5. While I agree that an adequate narrative approach regarding selfhood involve some level of reflecting and judgment, the central point of my project is that for African Americans, both historically and contemporarily speaking, the construction and creation of identity was NOT geared towards the good life, but was geared towards, steeped in, and has metamorphosed from survival, a concept that comes into contention with the good life.

I want to cite Charles Taylor's work in *The Language Animal* and Paul Ricoeur' s *The Course of Recognition,* and Ricoeur' s *Oneself as Another*, to integrate a European understanding of language, experience, identity and narrative to better explicate how the history, language and experience of African Americans as constitutive to a narrative identity of survival, eventually noting how these methods fall short, or perhaps do not go far enough in speaking to the constitution of the self (moral and overall) when the self has been minoritized, or when the environment of constitution is deemed a 'zone of non-being'.[104] Referring back to Charles Taylor and *The Language Animal* from the previous chapter, Taylor's contribution to the linguistic capacity of human beings in relation to narrative and meaning-making connects the significance of narrative to the creation of meaning, and in my analysis in this chapter, the creation of identity. As stories open the possibility to other ways of being, and being human in the world, stories and narratives provide the gateway to limitless identity constructions. Differentiating between narratives via novels, history, and telling of life stories, I briefly comment on Taylor's understanding of narrative via telling (life) stories and self-reflection as inherent to *becoming* a self and gaining insight into one's experiences.

Defining how narrative makes meaning, and the power of language in constructing preceding thoughts and proceeding reflections surrounding actions, Taylor defends the idea that stories give us an understanding of life, people, and what happens to them which is peculiar, and also non substitutable.[105] Stories can provide explanation to how things came to be, taking note

[104]Frantz Fanon, *Black Skin, White Masks*, Pluto Press, 2008, 2.

[105]Charles Taylor, *Language Animal*, 291.

of the ‘great many factors’ involved in the particular event or moment. When involving human beings, stories can also shed light on the human condition, promoting human motivations, actions, affinities, and a diverse and vast list of characteristics.[106] Taylor traces the significance garnered from a novel or story through the diachronic process, or in German literature, the *Bildungsroman*, or the formation of a character or subject over time, across events, articulated and reflected through narrative.

This process of character/subject formation or the process of *becoming,* takes place both in the actual experience(s) of the subject, character, person, as well as in the story itself. The narrative form presented depicts a certain truth, or truth-telling within a narrative containing human relations/motivations. While substantial reliance on stories as timeless truths may not appeal as valid and indispensable to natural sciences or history, the same cannot be said for human interactions and encounters. The primary emphasis of narrative resides in its necessity for proper self-reflection and identity. Through contemplation (shaped by language), one comes to understand the self, or the other, depending on the nature of the narrative. ‘Making sense of our lives is something we need to do and strive to recover where this is threatened or lost.’[107] It is both the process of and result of making sense of lives and selves that the identity is created. For Taylor, narrative is a necessity to both *become* and *understand* who one is. For Black folks, the way in which they narrate their life experiences, the conceptions of beliefs, the declarations of imperatives, the contemplatives of actions and thoughts, both the language and the construction

[106]Taylor, *Language Animal*, 295.

[107]Taylor, *Language Animal*, 318.

of that language through narrative via storytelling is momentous to Black identity and must be seriously considered.

Paul Ricoeur takes up a similar notion of narrative and the self in *The Course of Recognition* and much more thoroughly in *Oneself as Another.* Taking up the linguistic construction of recognition and its personal and social implications, Ricoeur understands the verb '*to recognize'* as inextricably linked to personal and social identity. Focusing on the section "Recognizing oneself", he posits three positions of a phenomenology of a 'capable human being', the third of which is relationship between personal identity and narrative, a problematic and proposed solution he labels 'narrative identity'.[108] I note only two observations of Ricoeur' s work that have influenced and supported my understanding of narrative identity, leaving a more thorough examination of hermeneutics and ethical implications for chapter 4: his conception of narrative identity, and how personal identity translates into social identity through mutual recognition. Using reflective agency and action to ground his conception of the capable human being, Ricoeur contends that an indispensable constant for narrating oneself is the temporal dimension in which agency and actions take place. When narrating oneself or another, it cannot be lost that both the speaker and the agent have a unique history.[109] It is by the nature of personal identity occurring over a temporal period that *personal identity* is *narrative identity.*

To better elucidate narrative identity, Ricoeur highlights the dialectical relationship between two distinct identities, that of the *idem,* immutable and fixed identity and ipse, the self-subject to change in its historical condition. This dialectic can arise (and in fact is present) in any

[108]Paul Ricœur, *Oneself as Another* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1992), *147.*

[109]Ricoeur, *Oneself as Another,* 163.

setting, from fiction, to history, to the movements of everyday life decision making, where sameness is confronted with otherness and must decide to act (or not). This dialectic takes place on a personal level as well as a social level. At the social level, Ricoeur connects recognition and collective identities through 'making more precise the tie between the collective capacity to make history and the form of identity that are at stake in the instituting of the social bond,'[110] bridging the divide between individual recognition and responsibility and mutual recognition and social identity integrates Ricoeur' s claim of living a good life in with other in just institutions.

Both Taylor and Ricoeur pay adequate attention to the avenues through which personal identity is narrative identity, and as such human beings are narrative beings. Through reflecting on the capacity and capability of human language, both scholars hold that meaning making and reflecting on the self is important both for personal as well as social identity constructions, by means of experience and linguistic interpretation. The way in which humanity experiences itself, understands itself and one another is conceived of in narrative terms. Not only is narration important, but it is central to being a rational, social, communicative being in a temporal existence of intersectional contexts. Schechtman concludes her introduction to the narrative self with this promising insight, 'the complexity of selves is to be found in the multiple perspective on our lives that we negotiate in living them, a complexity best understood in narrative terms.'[111]

[110]Ricoeur, *Oneself as Another,* 176.

[111]Schechtman, "The Narrative Self", 415.

Family, Faith, and Food: Tenants of Identity forged through Survival

In attempts to further spell out what it is I mean when I refer to a 'narrative ethics of survival', this chapter expounds on the *survival* part of the phrase, articulating how the very constitution and maintenance of identity for Black folks is one of surviving, simultaneously engaging in and laying the foundation for the episteme of ethical reflection among the group. I argue that looking at any aspect of Black identity (though I narrowly chose only three areas) illuminates the dominant thread of resisting a hostile existence doomed for denigration. Under the searing heat of slavery and other forms of social and systemic oppression, African Americans created institutions and practices — families, religion, and, in some places, an informal economy — that helped them resist their oppression and carve out "a measure of autonomy."[112] To understand how one comes to make decisions and make meaning of events and experiences, it is important to know how one understands self, personhood, and social identity. I hope to have intelligibly formulated the episteme of Black identity and subsequent Black ethical reflection through the lens of literal survival.

Psychologists such as William Cross have attempted to define Black identity in terms of the diverse perceptions and ideological formations that take place within an individual and amongst the group.[113] Sociological articulations of Black identity (of which I am more drawn to,

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[112]Penningroth makes these claims based upon his research of Kenneth Stampp and Eugene Genovese's work on framing the slave culture as one of 'resistance'. See Kenneth Stampp's *Peculiar Institution: Slavery in the Ante-Bellum South,* Vintage Books ed., Vintage Books, 1989. and Genovese's *The Political Economy of Slavery: Studies in the Economy & Society of the Slave South*. 2nd ed. with a new introduction, 1st Wesleyan ed., Wesleyan University Press, 1989.

[113]There exists a vast array of psychological approaches to Black identity. For fear of completely neglecting the breadth of research in the area and for the sake of not diverting too much to its overview, please see Richard L. Allen, *The Concept of Self: A Study of Black Identity and Self-Esteem.* Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 2001, and Wade A. Boykin, Anderson J. Franklin, J. Frank Yates, and J.

as it highlights the importance of the historical context in the formation of African American identity) vary greatly, with schools of thought such as E. Franklin Frazier arguing that the food and foodways, religious creations, and creation of slave/Black social structures that emerged during the slave times were completely devoid of African remnants, and totally new formations. Other sociologists such as DuBois and Herskovits would declare that within these new formalities traces of Africanisms not only existed, but survived the middle passage and were integrated into Black culture. The interconnectedness cannot be stressed enough among Black culture and Black religion (and the same can be said for white America and white American Christianity, which contributes to the constant need of defining what it means to be both 'Black' or 'African' and 'American').

Distinct from sociological and psychological approaches to Black identity, I employed a narrative approach, one that used the very stories told and knowledge collected from embodied beings to demarcate the continual thread of survival stringing the multitude of experiences under the umbrella 'Black'. Regardless of if Frazier or Herskovits was more accurate in their analysis of Black identity and culture, the identity of Black people demonstrates the manner in which, in the face of unfavorable social conditions, slaves and subsequent Blacks involved themselves collectively in creating a new ontological reality that addressed problems of chattel slavery in the steadfast pursuit for mutual human recognition. The same reality which today defies human odds in terms of survival and success, continues to create new pathways and methods of being and doing in the world. The ways and processes through which slaves and African Americans

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Frank (Jacques Frank) Yates. *Research Directions of Black Psychologists.* New York: Russell Sage Foundation, 1979.

defined their moral, social, and spiritual standards and interpretations has significant implications for understanding the meaning making methods and reflection framework associated with African American identity, and heavily impacts the self-identifying and interactions of contemporary Blacks both in the United States and members of other countries subjected to the same subjugation.[114]

Not only is the actual food symbolic of nourishment and sustenance, but the rituals surrounding the gathering, preparation and feasting also became symbolic, garnering their own standing as inextricable from what is now known as 'Black culture' or 'Black identity.' Recognizing the origins of popular soul food as emanating from the daily struggles and strategies of enslaved Africans to nourish themselves for the grueling work of chattel slavery, the historical as well as contemporary significance of food and foodways in the Black community emphasizes the creativity and innovation wrapped up in the most simple and mundane of tasks. From transferring customs and practices from their African homeland, to growing their own food and maintaining personal gardens, to mingling with Native Americans and indigenous folks to integrate different procurement and preparation techniques, enslaved Africans blended and created a multitude of traditions, practices, and rituals to create the diverse variants of 'soul food' we come to know today.

The process of building, rebuilding, and maintaining social kinship ties stands as another pivotal feature of Black identity emerging from the entrenchment in the daily pilotage of slavery.

[114]This fact highlights that less than 10% of the total enslaved population from Africa during chattel slavery ended up in the New World. The majority of those enslaved were taken to Central America, South America, and the neighboring islands.

Not only were conjugal agreements informally honored until legally permissible, but the rearing of children, the taking in of the sick and elderly, and the extended accountability of family members across plantations when the enslaved were sold from one plantation to another embellished harsh circumstances with familial and social constructions of hope, security, and a communal sense of self. The historical disruption (and long-awaited turning) of the Civil War created a deep rift in the familial structures previously operating on the plantations. Post-Civil War reconstruction of social kinship ties proved difficult but fruitful, as newly freed Blacks pursued legal recognition of their informal conjugations. Even today, the extended, blended and amended biproducts of Black kinship social ties speaks to the lengths taken to ensure structures erected amid survival not only lasted, but evolved into complex and diverse networks fueled by mutual recognition of struggle, and tactful strategies adaptable to any contextual circumstance.

If the actions (food and foodways) and words (identifying who is family/kin) in the Black community does not evidence the degree of survivability tactics and frameworks engrained in this group's identity, then the beliefs surrounding the Christian religion interpreted by enslaved Africans and Black Americans authentically serves as both a sign and symbol of Black Atlantic thought.[115]The religious beliefs and practices the enslaved Africans encountered was critiqued, re-interpreted, and re-imagined to be a religion not for the docility of enslaved but for the uplifting and the encouraging of the marginalized. Part of the *problem, paradox,* and *irony* of African American Christianity is its contentious position: a religion of the slave-master

[115]I borrow the phrase 'Black Atlantic' from Joseph Drexler-Dreis in his understanding of modernity, Christianity, capitalism, and slavery. For a more detailed exposition, see *Decolonial Love: Salvation in Colonial Modernity*. Fordham University Press, 2019.

was also a religion of the slave; the same beliefs which were distorted to justify enslavement became the same mechanism to dismantle and disprove the status of any being as relegated to enslavement. For Africans to integrate the religion of the white Europeans with 'Africanisms' proves their ingenuity and dexterity to positively alter what appeared to be an absolutely damning situation. A slave religion was not only 'born' in the moment, but the invisible institution expanded and unfolded into a diverse array of beliefs, practices, and truths, all stemming from an almost transcendent response to a visceral and dehumanizing place of existence.

Careful not to undermine the centrality of narratives/first-hand recollections in the construction of identity, it was important to include primary documents and direct recollections as integral to surviving the horrors of chattel slavery while simultaneously creating Black identity and Black religion. These primary accounts set the context for the emergence and development of what we know as 'Black identity' and posit the subject of my 'narrative ethics of survival'. There is no closer encounter with formerly enslaved than to engage in firsthand recounts of their experiences. Focusing on the *survival* aspect of my phrase as the episteme of Black meaning-making and decision-making, chapter 3 will look more closely at the framework of belief in Black religion from a womanist perspective. Drawing from the social constructions highlighted in this current chapter, my conception of Black religion (specifically Christianity) from a womanist perspective will further elucidate understanding the identity of 'Black' as one of survival, and subsequent actions, decisions and reflections are based in that very mode of survival.

CHAPTER THREE

WOMANIST ETHICS AND THEOLOGY: A PRAXIS OF SURVIVAL

The first chapter introduced my concept of a 'narrative ethics of survival' through a strategic literary analysis of a contemporary Black novel *Sing, Unburied, Sing.* During this analysis I illuminated the focal point of Black (and specifically Black women's) literature as a medium of and for ethical reflection on Black identity.[1] Chapter 2 expounded this focal point, focusing on three concepts central to the construction, development and evolution of Black identity from a sociological standpoint: faith, food, and family, all of which have emerged from and operate amid a hermeneutic of survival and are constitutive of the robust and multi-faceted expression of Black life. Made apparent in the acknowledgement of the forged 'identity' construction of Blacks in modern America is the simultaneous construction of Black American Christianity.[2] The emergence of both identities in the same context implies similar concepts and theories that will appear in Black Christianity; there is something to be said regarding the nature of Black Christianity's emergence, evolution, and current trajectory.

The hermeneutical responses of African Americans serve as ethical and theological paradigms to view humanity and divinity amid the context of dehumanizing oppression in everyday life. Rather than survey the entire history of Black Christianity and concurrent religions

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[1]Hille Haker, "Recognition and Responsibility," *Religions* 12, no. 7 (June 25, 2021): 467, https://doi.org/10.3390/rel12070467, 12.

[2]This needs to be qualified with the presence of African Christians in MULTIPLE parts of the world prior to the transatlantic slave trade. The difference with this version of Christianity is steeped in the proprietors of the faith, the slave owners.

to develop this thought, which has been beautifully articulated by E. Franklin Frazier, Gayraud Wilmore, Albert Raboteau, James Cone, C. Eric Lincoln, Henry Louis Gates, Jr, Albert Cleage, and countless others, embodying my social identity as a womanist, theologian, and ethicist. I explore facets of Black Christianity intertwined in Black identity through a womanist lens. I must note this pursuit has also been active for more than 40 years, producing great works and generations of womanist scholars such as Jacquelyn Grant, Delores Williams, Katie Cannon, Karen Baker-Fletcher, M. Shawn Copeland, Cheryl Townsend-Gilkes, Emilie Townes, Renita Weems, Traci C. West, and Monica Coleman among others. Each of these scholars has provided a slightly nuanced perspective on the significance of Black women's experience. I hope to focus on the *praxis* of the womanist experience, the unique combination of theories or beliefs with actions and practices, which may or may not directly align with the Christian understanding, but nevertheless posits a theo-ethical hermeneutic of life and contributes to womanist thought. *The praxis, or integrative beliefs and practices emanating from womanist theological ethics, originating in 'making a way out of no way', constantly emerging from and steeped in a transformative framework of survival, is most aptly expressed as identity and the movements of everyday life.*

This chapter takes a closer look at the reflection on womanist praxis of survival in Black Theology using the perspective coined by Alice Walker[3] and theologically solidified by Delores Williams, Emilie Townes, and Katie G. Cannon.[4] By *praxis* I mean the articulation of one's

[3]Alice Walker, *In Search of Our Mothers' Gardens: Womanist Prose,* 1st ed (Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1983).

[4]Delores Williams, *Sisters in the Wilderness: the challenge of womanist God-talk*, (Orbis: Maryknoll, 1993).

presence in the world, consisting of one's beliefs and the manifestation of those beliefs via life movement. It is the combination of practices, beliefs, and the reflection on the relationship between the two. For example, a Liberation Theology praxis would be the connection of Liberationist theories and Christian beliefs with action in the world aimed at social transformation and justice for the oppressed.[5] Within the unique origins of Black Christianity, the particular 'womanist'[6] experience and its articulation has provided not only a space among women that did not exist among the African American race, but also a space that did not exist in the modern fight for women's rights (also known as the feminist movement since the late 1800s). The womanist perspective as a lens for Christian Theology and Ethics firmly 'flips the dominant social patriarchal order on its head' by signifying the importance of Black women's' voices.[7]

Following the trajectory of the womanist experience from nineteenth century free persons and slave narratives to 21st century theological and ethical reflections and critiques of such, I point out important features of Black women's praxis, constitutive of an identity embodied by African Americans overall. Both womanist theology and womanist ethics combine the existential situation of the black woman in the United States with an array of biblical exegesis and theological investigations for the purposes of critical engagement, meaning making, and

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[5]For a more in-depth analysis on *praxis* and its significance in theological reflection, see Gustavo Gutiérrez, *A Theology of Liberation: History, Politics, and Salvation* (Maryknoll, N.Y: Orbis Books, 1988). Gutierrez integrates biblical exegesis and Christian tradition with a Marxist based understanding of social justice, one that draws from the ground up, and enriches faith to focus on and fight for those marginalized and oppressed in the South American context.

[6]Drawing directly from Alice Walker's original 1983 four-part definition of womanism.

[7]Emilie Townes presents womanist ethics as the inter-structured analysis employing class, gender, and race.

reflection. For this reason, rather than focusing on concepts and themes of womanist thought, I highlight figures from each period that embody such concepts, kneading the continual threads from place and time, focusing on the combination of their lived experience and the reflection on those experiences via autobiography and integrated academic contributions. Tracing the history of womanist praxis in theology and ethics, I note running themes of 'making a way out of no way', a genuine concern for uplifting the community, a devout (and sometimes critical reception) of Christianity, and an unwavering will to survive and more, this chapter unfolds in three parts.

The first section pays homage to the 'seeds of womanist praxis', illuminating key figures across of a spectrum of lived experiences whose autobiographical works and peened acts of resistance represent the emergence of a praxis and hermeneutic which until the 18th century had been deemed unworthy of recognition due to the status of inferiority or being *less than human.* Noting memories of joy, moments of pain, grief, loss, resistance, hope, and love, all amid a contested context, the lives of African-American women such as Harriet Jacobs, Jarena Lee, Anna Julia Coopers and others forged a path of existence as resistance, leaving the legacies of their written experiences of themselves and those around them as the foundation of a womanist praxis, and the repository of invaluable resources for understanding the theological, ethical, sociological and philosophical substance and significance, or the value of Black life.

The second section illustrates the intellectual manifestation of the womanist praxis via Womanist Theologians and Womanist Ethicists. Again, epitomizing but a few scholars constitutive to the academic fields of Womanist Theology and Womanist Ethics that sufficiently represent the fields and frameworks employed. Alice Walker, Delores Williams, Katie G. Cannon, M. Shawn Copeland, and Emilie Townes are my chosen representatives of the *second*

generation of womanist scholars, the first academic generation of womanist praxis, following the seeds sown by the first pre-generation of womanist scholars and evidence of womanist praxis. Again, both their lived experiences and the written articulation of said experiences continues the womanist tradition of embodying and reflecting upon the necessary decisions and movements needed to affirm and defend the humanity and dignity of the African American woman and the African American people.

The third section is dedicated to those considered part of the "third wave of womanist thought", or those Black, African, and Indigenous women scholars serving as contemporaries to third wave feminists[8] who use Walker's definition as either a starting or departing point of their participation in the conversation on womanist praxis. These scholars possess the advantage of access to the academic contributions of the second wave womanist scholars, thus having these elegant and brilliant conversation partners with whom they engage. Again, I choose three figures (of many from whom I could've chosen) that best exemplify the lived experience and academic reflection on such through a womanist praxis, emanating from survival, striving to bring meaning to everyday life. Presenting the conceptions of third wave womanist thought as conceived by Stacey Floyd-Thomas and Monica Coleman, I conclude the section by highlighting queer womanist theologian Pamela Lightsey, and her take on the intersectionality of race, class, gender, and sexual orientation through a womanist hermeneutic.

[8]Though the exact delineation between first, second, and third waves are debatable, womanist theological scholar Monica Coleman distinguishes the third wave chronologically as ensuing around the mid-1990s. Monica A. Coleman, ed., *Ain't I a Womanist, Too? Third-Wave Womanist Religious Thought* (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 2013), 9.

The conclusionary section highlights what specifically and generally all these womanist scholars contribute to my ethical framework, a narrative ethics of survival. The fourth chapter provides an explicit example of how praxis and academic frameworks from a womanist perspective can be translated and aptly used for all marginalized bodies seeking to do more than survive.

Seeds of Womanist Praxis

Harriet Jacobs

Best known as the first woman to write a fugitive slave narrative in the United States,[9] Harriet Jacobs (1813-1897) serves as a prominent figure in 19th century womanist praxis. Born a slave in the coastal city of Edenton, North Carolina, Jacobs' life story contributes not only to the canon of slave narratives in chattel slavery United States, but also to what would be later known as womanist praxis, a combination of Womanist Theology and Womanist Ethics.[10] In her life, Jacobs experiences and writes of instances whose themes subsequently shaped the academic discipline and spiritual vocation of Womanism.[11] Reflecting on her experiences of familiar love and guidance, loss and grief, sexual exploitation and opportunities of resistance, community and isolation, and her journey to eventual freedom, Jacobs' *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl* serves as both a medium of and for ethical praxis amid daily living for herself and the reader.

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[9]William L. Andrews, ed., *Classic African American Women's Narratives* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2003), 199.

[10]Referring to both the categorizations of lived experience and reflection as well as the current academic fields of ethical theory.

[11]Pre-construction refers to the period of time before Alice Walker's formal definition of womanism and subsequent academic areas of womanist theology and womanist ethics emerged in 1983.

Her life can be viewed as a paradigmatic expression of Delores Williams' understanding of womanism as 'making a way out of no way,' a life story consisting of beliefs and practices entrenched in the embodiment of the everyday.

As writing was left to those privileged enough to have acquired the skill and time needed to physically compile an autobiography, Jacob's work and life speak to the irony of her existence; a Black woman born enslaved who not only gained her freedom, but also acquired the means to replicate those experiences through written storytelling to others. Slave narratives written in the 19th century vary in their illustrations of the sensibilities of living as an enslaved during American chattel slavery. Some lean towards a benevolent view, portraying either neutral or positive experiences, while others give visceral accounts of unimaginable cruelties. Jacobs' experience and recollection of such can be described as providing glimpses into both extremes. An incredibly small percentage of these narratives are written by actual slave women.[12] The first sentence of her text demonstrates the significance of fortunate home circumstances amid slavery, for Jacobs 'was born a slave; but never knew it till six years of happy childhood had passed away.[13] It was from these origins that Jacobs confronts the persistent evils her social position exposes her to. Central to the narrative of her early years are multiple instances of sexual

[12]Joanne Braxton, *Black Women Writing Autobiography: a tradition within tradition,* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1989), 23.

[13]Harriet A. Jacobs and Jennifer Fleischner, *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl: Written by Herself*, Second edition, The Bedford Series in History and Culture (Boston: Bedford/St. Martin's, Macmillan Learning, 2020), 28.

exploitation by her master and her multiple attempts at resistance,[14] including the conception and birth of her two children by a white man:

> I knew nothing would enrage Dr. Flint so much as to know that I favored another; and it was something to triumph over my tyrant even in that small way. I thought he would revenge himself by selling me, and I was sure my friend, Mr. Sands, would buy me. He was a man of more generosity and feeling than my master ,and II thought my freedom could be easily obtained by him…with all these thoughts revolving around my head and seeing no other way of escaping the doom I so much dreaded I made a headlong plunge. Pity me, and pardon me, O virtuous reader! You never knew what it is to be a slave; to be entirely unprotected by law or custom; to have the laws reduce you to the condition of a chattel, entirely subject to the will of another.[15]

Jacobs' narrative is the first of its kind to convey the extent of sexual misconduct and coercion towards the enslaved, narrated through first-hand experience. Furthermore, fewer narratives' subjects contemplate the horrendous act of rape or sexual assault alongside preserving their moral stance or remaining virtuous in some burdened way.[16] Jacobs' moral discernment and ethical reflection is explicit here and elsewhere and other places in the text, supporting the implication of Jacobs' lived experience and written expression of such experience as paradigmatic of a womanist praxis of survival. Her persistent building and defending of her moral character despite what seemed to be hopeless situations embodies the spontaneous, resilient, and creative maneuvers necessary to navigate day-to-day life. At many points throughout Jacobs' narrative, she contemplates the moral status and dilemma of slaves in general and slave women in particular, contradicting the popular held notion that slaves were either

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[14]Jean Fagan Yellin, *Harriet Jacobs: A Life* (New York: Basic Civitas Books, 2004), 23.

[15]Jacobs, *Incidents*, 80.

[16]William L. Andrews, *To Tell a Free Story: The First Century of Afro-American Autobiography, 1760-1865* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1986), 240.

amoral or strictly immoral. Jacobs suggests that the enslaved ought 'not be judged by the same standard as the average person',[17] making a normative claim, as the average person is not fighting for and in fear of their life daily with little to no control, making the practice of moral principles impossible.[18]

Jacobs' critique of Christianity also contributes to her positioning as foundational womanist theological ethics. Emphasizing the hypocritical nature of slave owners who claim to be Christian and not only own slaves but treat them harshly, Jacobs' stance is firm and impassioned in her orientation to God and the practices of the Christian religion she perceives may be contributing to her demise. She calls out those who "boasted the name and standing of a Christian, though Satan never had a truer follower,"[19] Contrary to her grandmother's perception that slavery for Black folks "is the will of God," Jacobs believes the condition of the slave contradicts the principle of morality (and questions the true will of God).[20] Advocating for the recognition of her life as dignified, living amid sexual exploitation, the humanity of other enslaved and free Africans through the telling of her story, Jacobs epitomizes a womanist praxis of survival and recognition.

[17]Andrews, *To Tell a Free Story*, 256.

[18]Andrews, *Classic African American Women's Narratives*, 244.

[19]Andrews, *Classic African American Women's Narratives*, 240.

[20]Jacobs, *Incidents,* 80.

Jarena Lee

Considered the first female preacher of the African Episcopal Methodist Church after receiving blessings from Rev. Richard Allen,[21] Jarena Lee's autobiography detailing her conversion and her call to preach the gospel lay the thematic and experiential groundwork for her contemporaries and black women who emerged during the nineteenth century. Defying both the social norms of her time by self-educating to the point of writing an autobiography, Lee also defied the historical clericalism which left little if any space for women preachers. Born in 1783 as a free person in Cape May, New Jersey, it is assumed Lee's parents may have struggled financially, as she was hired out as a servant maid at a young age.[22] Lee gives little additional detail to her childhood other than during that time she received virtually no religious training, '"yet the Spirit of the Lord never entirely forsook me, but continued mercifully striving with me, until his gracious power converted my soul."[23] Lee references a single incident during which she experienced shame 'as a sinner' for lying to her about completing a task.

The first third of Lee's autobiography entails her struggle (categorized as spiritual or mental struggle) with contemplations of ending her life, finding meaning, and experiencing fulfillment. After her conversion in 1804 and receiving sanctification (or spiritual confirmation and direction) from God a few years later, Lee responds to her call to preach the gospel. [24] Both

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[21]Andrews, *Classic African American Women's Narratives*, 33.

[22]Sue E. Houchins, ed., *Spiritual Narratives,* The Schomburg Library of Nineteenth-Century Black Women Writers (New York: Oxford University Press, 1988), 86/3.

[23]Houchins, *Spiritual Narratives*, 87/4.

[24] Houchins, *Spiritual Narratives,* 10.

the call and her response were in direct opposition to the social structure of 19th century Northern life of what was considered 'American womanhood', centrally based in gender -distinct positions of domesticity and complicity. It was understood women had specific roles, mainly limited to housekeeping and childrearing. They were to be submissive and obedient to the men in their families, especially their husbands and fathers. Lee's contributions to womanist theology and ethics lies in her integration of biblical interpretation with real implications for addressing social injustices and missteps. Adamantly refusing to believe that women were not able to preach, Lee's quest for space and recognition is one of the earliest examples of addressing gender rights and clericalism by an African American womanist theologian, before this existed as a concept.

The spectrum of Christian affinity and adherence varies with everyone mentioned, but the connecting threads and common themes lie in the ability to create, advocate for, and expand methods and moments of meaning making. Scholar William Andrews notes Lee lived "an experimental life, morally engaged but not socially engulfed."[25] Lee's significance as a pivotal figure in the construction of Womanist Theology and Ethics is pervasive in her duality of embracing the fullness of the life she lived while constantly striving for the improvement of conditions of those around her. The basis of her zeal was following her call to preach and affirming and defending the rights of other women preachers to do the same. Encouraged by support from listeners and strengthened by her ability to integrate biblical texts in her appeals for clerical equality, because of Jarena Lee's life and literary legacy, I consider her among the great

[25]William L. Andrews et al., eds., *Sisters of the Spirit: Three Black Women's Autobiographies of the Nineteenth Century*, Religion in North America (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1986), 12.

foremothers of the womanist movement. Through Lee, readers are exposed to the struggles at the intersection of gender bias and clericalism among white and Black churches alike. In Lee's life, the womanist praxis of Christian belief and call to action is explicit and cannot be overstated.

Maria W. Stewart

Born in Hartford Connecticut and orphaned at the tender age of 5,[26] Maria W. Stewart epitomizes many of the characteristics central to Womanist thought. "Bounded out in a clergyman's family" where she had the "seeds of piety and virtue early sown" in her mind, Stewart was a radical political speaker and writer, combining her fierce religious devotion with tangible social transformation goals. The life she lived and the writings that reflect such life substantiate her positioning as a 'foremother' of Womanist Theological Ethics. At the tender age of 26 her husband died, and shortly after her inspirator David Walker also mysteriously died. Recounting her subsequent conversion in 1830 and profession of faith in 1831, scholars note this to be the start of her political activist journey.[27] After her conversion, Stewart's politically poetic usage of biblical quotes and verses is like that of male preachers during her time. Defying both gender and race barriers by speaking to "promiscuous crowds" of both men and women, Stewart quickly gained prominence as a bold orator and proponent of the implementation of Christian principles with militant opposition to slavery.

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[26]Maria W. Stewart, "Religion and the Pure Principles of Morality, the Sure Foundation on Which we Must Build" in *Maria W. Stewart: America's First Black Political Woman Writer, Essays and Speeches*, edited and introduced by Marilyn Richardson, (Indiana University Press: Bloomington), 1987, 28.

[27]Andrews, *Classic African American Women's Narratives*, 4.

At the age of 28,[28] Stewart hoped her "conduct will ever prove me to be what I profess, a true follower of Christ",[29] Her speeches and writings called for an end to slavery in the south and racism in the north. Adopting an almost militant tone, she advocated for Black freedom "by any means necessary." Inspired by fellow African American David Walker (1785-1830), Stewart also criticizes the inherent contradiction of slavery in America as supported by a primarily Christian population.[30] As a public speaker and activist, Stewart's existence and vocation contradicted the contemporary society she desperately wanted to change. Eighteenth and nineteenth century conceptions of morality and piety in the United States were heavily skewed by gender. Women were expected to be modest, passive, and attend to household duties, primarily rearing children and taking care of domestic duties.[31] Only a few of the politicians, educators and religious speakers were women, and hardly any were Black women. Although slavery was not tolerated in the north as it was in the south, racism, and prejudicial discrimination still relegated Blacks to a second-class citizen status. Blacks who were either born in the north or were able to make it there from the south enjoyed some benefits of freedom, and yet were still withheld others, of these, sufficient education.

In one of her writings, *Religion, and the Pure Principles of Morality, the Sure Foundation on Which we Must Build,* Stewart diligently pleas with multiple members of

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[28]Andrews, *Classic African American Women's Narratives*, vii.

[29]Stewart, "Religion and the Pure Principles", 32.

[30]*Maria W. Stewart: America's First Black Political Woman Writer, Essays, and Speeches*, edited by Marilyn Richardson, (Indiana University Press: Bloomington), 1987, 6.

[31]Andrews et al., *Sisters of the Spirit*, 13.

American society, addressing her local community of Boston, but also the larger country, as it continues to grapple as a divided nation over slavery. Her message of intellectual attainment, anti-racist rhetoric, women empowerment, and religious adherence and piety render Stewart's primary message geared towards the Black community, specifically Black women, encouraging them to actively increase their own moral standard, to "be careful that you set an example worthy of following, for you they will imitate."[32] Calling on all members of the community to engage in self-sufficiency through a variety of means, any means, as "it is no use to murmur nor to repine; but let us promote ourselves and improve our own talents."[33] American society has most recently witnessed this with former First Lady Michelle Obama's embodiment of taking a superior moral route, often stating, "When they go low, we go high!"[34]

Stewart's contribution as a foremother of womanist praxis has been long recognized by womanist and black feminist scholars.[35] Not only did Stewart work against racism and sexism of her day, but to gain prominence as a political writer, admired by blacks and whites alike, was reserved for but a select few African Americans, mostly men. Her understanding of the

[32]Stewart, "Religion and the Pure Principles", 36.

[33]Stewart, "Religion and the Pure Principles", 35.

[34]During an interview, First Lady of the United States Michelle Obama stated, "when someone is cruel or acts like a bully, you don't stoop to their level. No, our motto is: 'When they go low, we go high.' "For me, going high is not losing the urgency or the passion or the rage, especially when you are justified in it. Going high means finding the purpose in your rage. Rage without reason, without a plan, without direction is just more rage. And we've been living in a lot of rage." https://www.independent.co.uk/life-style/michelle-obama-stephen-colbert-catchphrase-b2225386.html.

[35]For more in-depth analysis of Maria W. Stewart and her significance, see Kristin Waters, *Maria W. Stewart and the Roots of Black Political Thought*, Margaret Walker Alexander Series in African American Studies (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 2021), Valerie C. Cooper, *Word, Like Fire Maria Stewart, the Bible, and the Rights of African Americans*, (Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, 2011).

possibility and potential of African Americans was heavily rooted in her interpretation of the biblical texts amid the contemporary social context she found herself in.

Ida B. Wells-Barnett

Perhaps known as one of the greatest lynching abolition journalists of all time, Ida B. Wells continues to be heralded as a giant in the fields of human rights, the abolition of lynching, the defense and protection of African American life, and the promotion of a more just and humane society for all, but particularly for those suffering at the hands of prejudicial attacks. The oldest daughter of eight children, Ida was born in Holly Springs Mississippi in 1862 to two enslaved parents.[36] Ida's childhood is unique from her contemporaries. Slavery destroyed families, but not only did Ida's parents remain together through the Civil War, they formalized their union with a marriage upon gaining their freedom. Ida was afforded an education through Rust College (renamed Shaw University), her father serving on the inaugural Board of Trustees.[37] Excelling in the classroom and diligent in her studies, Ida's fervor for social justice through a Christian lens was instilled at a young age through her mother's religious zeal and her father's keen awareness and involvement in politics.[38] Ida's experiences in life, her intellect and reporting abilities through storytelling, coupled with her awareness and acknowledgement of

[36]Noting Jesmyn Ward's novel is set in 21st century Mississippi, and many similarities still exist from Wells' time.

[37]Ida B. Wells-Barnett et al., *Crusade for Justice: The Autobiography of Ida B. Wells*, Second edition (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2020), xv.

[38]James West Davidson, *They Say: Ida B. Wells and the Reconstruction of Race*, New Narratives in American History (New York: Oxford University Press, 2007), viii.

social injustices through a critical Christian lens, posit her as a prominent figure essential to the emergence of a womanist praxis.

Tragedy struck Ida early on. While visiting her grandmother, an outbreak of Yellow Fever infected a large amount of her family, her parents dying within 24 hours of each other.[39] Some of her other siblings also perished, and those left at home were being cared for by community members. With help from her grandmother and other women in the community, Ida became a caregiver and provider of her remaining 6 siblings before her 15th birthday.[40] Though admitting teaching was not her vocation, Ida did well seizing opportunities to teach and provide for herself and her siblings. During a teaching invitation to Memphis, Ida experienced first-hand the harsh duality of sexism and racism, when she refused to change train cars, and got into a physical altercation with the conductor. Ida retained a lawyer and sued the railroad company on grounds of "separate and *unequal*."[41] Her case was the first of its kind where a Black person in the South appealed to a state court, and the start to Ida's action in the fight for racial justice and gender equality.[42] In 1887, she began writing for a church newsletter, and gained significant popularity among AME church members throughout the Memphis area.

When 3 Black men were lynched in 1892, however, Wells' focus turned to reporting on these incidents and demanding an end to the violence through the *Free Speech* paper, publishing

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[39]Wells-Barnett et al., *Crusade for Justice*, 11.

[40]Wells-Barnett et al., *Crusade for Justice*, 15.

[41]Wells' suit was in direct response to the Jim Crow laws claiming 'separate but equal' for Blacks and whites.

[42]Wells-Barnett et al., *Crusade for Justice*, 20.

Southern Horrors.[43] Threats to her safety and the paper press caused Ida to venture north to Philadelphia and New York, then officially beginning her international antilynching *Crusade for Justice*[44] finally settling in Chicago in 1895 and marrying Ferdinand Barnett, a fellow advocate for justice at Chicago's leading black newspaper, *The Chicago Conservator*.[45] In addition to her antilynching and justice crusade, Wells is firmly positioned as a foremother of womanist thought, from defending herself and others from injustices, to prioritizing the raising of her children while supporting activist endeavors, finding it possible to do both despite critiques of contemporary black feminist scholars.[46] Until her death in 1931, Wells' discussions on race, miscegenation, lynching, mob brutality, boycotting, the power of the press, and other themes form compelling arguments for the development of American social ethics and Black Christian ethics. She demonstrates that African Americans have long employed the media and boycotting as moments highlighting the struggle of living an oppressed narrative, to resist racism.[47] The womanist mantra of 'making a way out of no way' and engaging in aspects of life thought to be off limits to many, this is the manifestation of womanist praxis.

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[43]Patricia Ann Schechter, *Ida B. Wells-Barnett and American Reform, 1880-1930*, Gender and American Culture (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2001), 18.

[44]The phrase denotes Ida's international travels and reporting, spreading the narratives of justice (or lack thereof) taking place in the United States.

[45]Schechter, *Ida B. Wells-Barnett and American Reform, 1880-1930*, 23.

[46]Schechter, *Ida B. Wells-Barnett and American Reform, 1880-1930*, 28.

[47]Baker-Fletcher, *A Singing Something: Womanist Reflections on Anna Julia Cooper* (New York: Crossroad, 1994), 34.

Anna Julia Cooper

Born enslaved in 1858 in Raleigh, North Carolina, Anna Julia Cooper straddled the fence of multiple worlds from birth. Born to an enslaved mother and slave-owning father, her life experienced a major shift early on in 1863 with Abraham Lincoln's signing of the Emancipation Proclamation.[48] Not until 5 years later, was she afforded the opportunity of an education at St. Augustine's Normal School and collegiate institute, epitomizing the idea of 'lifting one another up' across racial, gender and class lines through education. During her 14-year habitation, she propelled herself through studies, and would eventually come to teach there at the time of her matriculation.[49] Learning to write at the age of 10, Anna was able to attend school and matriculated to the level of master's degree. Receiving her collegiate education at Oberlin College in Oberlin Ohio, Cooper fought at the triple intersection of racism, classism, and sexism.[50] Similar to her predecessors, Maria W. Stewart and Jarena Lee, Cooper's focus and energy was an uplifting of Black folks through education and the attainment of knowledge. Education was important for identity and for history, as Cooper recalls during a speech given, 'the "other side" has not been represented by one who "lives there".'[51]

[48]Baker-Fletcher, *A Singing Something,* 35.

[49]Baker-Fletcher, *A Singing Something*, 41.

[50]Baker-Fletcher, *A Singing Something,* 42-3.

[51]Anna Julia Cooper, "Raison D'Etre" in *A Voice from the South,* (1892) Dover Publications: Mineola) 2016, xi.

One of the most educated women of her time,[52] Cooper's crusade for the educational advancement of African American is comparable and perhaps even supersedes that of her Black male counterparts.[53]I chose Cooper both for her significant contributions to the emergence of womanist thought as well as for the critiques raised by other womanist and Black feminist scholars rendering Cooper foundational in many areas as a starting point for contemporary womanist ethics. Cooper points out the social ills that are preventing her people from surviving and thriving. The intersectionality she articulates is later coined by Kimberly Crenshaw, but Cooper was aware that being both Black and a Woman made living exponentially more difficult. As Karen Baker-Fletcher rightly states,

> Cooper recognized very clearly that communities across race, culture, gender, and nationality shared responsibility for and accountability to one another. She demonstrated this sense of responsibility and accountability in her life. Throughout her life she actively recognized her connectedness to others - to the illiterate, the poor, the needy. What is significant about Cooper is not that she was middle-class and highly educated and moved among culturally elite circles, but rather the way she employed these advantages to forward social transformation.[54]

Some of Baker-Fletcher's strongest criticisms originated in Cooper's all too comfortable acceptance of the white projection of the womanhood ideal.[55] Central to Cooper's discernment was the role of service as a Christian and a Black woman in America. Careful to not fall into the

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[52]Baker-Fletcher, *A Singing Something*, 33.

[53]Most notably W.E.B DuBois, a contemporary of Cooper. Cooper was highly influential in many of DuBois' publications, including *Black Reconstruction in America.*

[54]Baker-Fletcher, *A Singing Something*, 179.

[55]Anna J. Cooper et al., *The Voice of Anna Julia Cooper: Including A Voice from the South and Other Important Essays, Papers, and Letters*, Legacies of Social Thought (Lanham, Md: Rowman & Littlefield, 1998), 2.

altruistic trap designed for Black folks, giving of themselves for the good of the cause without improving oneself or one's people's conditions, Cooper struggled with what it meant to do service for the community and the good of people that is authentic in the Christian Faith and the fight for racial equality and justice across sexes.

Concrete Praxis: Modern Matriarchs of Womanist Theology and Womanist Ethics

Prior to the academic configuration of womanist thought, writings, oral traditions, and reflections on lived experiences served as epistemological repositories for the Womanist praxis.[56] Scholar Robert Patterson notes the 18th century to be a time when African American sought to 'foreground their subjectivity as a Black woman, positing it as a valid framework through which to consider social, political and social issues.[57] The resisted emergence of a silenced voice (Whites resisted the written and oral contributions of Blacks openly)and reflections on the lived experience of African-American women who lived during different points of Chattel Slavery created the way for a significant academic emergence of Womanist Thought.[58] Through autobiographical accounts and narratives of historical events alongside the creation of fictional works and organic works springing from the context, the seeds of womanist praxis were planted. Jarena Lee, Maria W. Stewart, Ida B. Wells-Barnett, Anna Julia Cooper and many other women unnamed in my work and in history provided the invaluable life narratives demonstrating some key components of the womanist praxis: a self-empowerment (centering one's own experience or

[56]Robert J. Patterson, "A Triple-Twined Re-Appropriation: Womanist Theology and Gendered-Racial Protest in the Writings of Jarena Lee, Frances E.W. Harper, and Harriet Jacobs," *Religion & Literature* 45, no. 2 (2013): 55, https://www.jstor.org/stable/24397780.

[57]Patterson, "A Triple-Twined Re-Appropriation.," 57.

[58]Denoting the historical period between 1619-1863.

viewpoint as valid), concern for community/social action, moral contemplation, unique relationship with God/questioning traditional conceptions of God in Christian and other contexts in light of lived experiences. These components of analysis and reflection resulted in a blooming generation of African American women 'in search of their mother's garden,' Black women intent on advancing the subjectivity foregrounded in the 18th-19th centuries into vivid intellectual reflective works.

In this section, I illustrate the intellectual manifestation of the womanist praxis seeds through the emergence of Womanist Thought, Womanist Theologians and Womanist Ethicists in the academy. Like their predecessors, scholars Alice Walker, Delores Williams, Katie G. Cannon, and Emilie Townes questioned the intersectional oppression of race, gender, and class, considering their personal experiences. Seeking ways to address these injustices, these scholars created foundational thematic texts and others formalized perspectives inseparable from African American religious (and American) identity, creating methodologies engrossed in the Black women's' understanding of the world, the womanist perspective. The development of the womanist narrative praxis as an intellectual episteme is equally composed of Womanist Ethicist methodologies as well as an assortment of Womanist Theological Traditions based on different experiences, some of which I reference here. The emergence and advancement of the fields of Womanist Theology and Womanist Ethics represent *survival* as Black women's' experience paramount to grasping the political, social, and economic realities of the United States' historical context. These women further highlight the communal dimension of a womanist praxis, and they all wrestle with pivotal questions related to life, identity, value, worth, and beliefs in the Black community. With the strongest religious influence on African Americans in the United States

being the Black Protestant Church, Black women scholars in the fields of literature, theology, and ethics analyze, critique, and praise the Black Church for its forward movement and elevation of its people as well as carefully and articulately identifying its shortcomings and missteps in oppressive situations, sometimes contributing to the denigrating structure. Womanist scholarship elucidates the countless views expressed in Black women's' lives and lived experiences, promoting the inclusion Black women as valid vessels of human struggle, and thriving.

Alice Walker

Best known for her award-winning novel and subsequent film *The Color Purple (1982),* academically, Walker is also the creator, Mother, and founder of the term and genre 'womanist', beautifully capturing the significance of black women's' lives, their history of oral transmission, and written reflection on life stories through storytelling, either autobiographical or fiction. Born in 1944 in Eatonton Georgia, Walker uses her life experiences and socio-religious context as the settings for many of her works, including *The Color Purple*, taking place in rural Georgia in the early 1900s.[59] Reflecting on her childhood and earliest memories on how she came to know the womanist experience through her mother, who 'labored beside, not behind my father in the field,'[60] Walker recounts the feelings and intuitions to reach back and find our ancestral narrative to make sense of the present and possible future. While tending to the children and various house chores, Walker's mother would tell her stories of her life, Walker 'not only absorbed the stories themselves, but something of the manner in which she spoke, something of the urgency that

[59]Yvonne Johnson, *The Voices of African American Women: The Use of Narrative and Authorial Voice in the Works of Harriet Jacobs, Zora Neale Hurston, and Alice Walker*, American University Studies, vol. 59 (New York: P. Lang, 1998), 79.

[60]Walker, *In Search of Our Mothers' Gardens*, 238.

involves the knowledge that her stories - like her life - must be recorded.'[61] *The Color Purple* addresses the intersectionalities of patriarchal violence, racial injustice, and class bias while uplifting the intimate relationships Black women have with each other and with the Divine.

Though not autobiographical, Walker's life is reflected in her characters and her works. So intertwined with the development of her characters and her writing process, Walker comments that while writing *The Color Purple,* her characters were "constantly complaining about the city," which led her to settle and finish her writing in Northern California, in a place that '"we could afford and that my characters like. No wonder: it looked a lot like the town in Georgia most of them were from, only it was more beautiful, and the local swimming hole was not segregated."[62] In 1983, 39-year-old Alice Walker published *In Search of Our Mothers' Gardens: A Womanist Prose.* In her first groundbreaking text of nonfiction, she compiled a series of essays and lectures written between 1966 and 1982, expounding on her multiple identities as black woman, scholar, mother, and feminist. Recounting the Civil Rights movement of the 1960s and the nuclear arms race of the 1980s, Walker vividly reflects on the positions, contributions, and acknowledgement of black women, coining the tradition of black women 'womanist'. Paraphrasing Walker's four-part definition of *Womanist:*

> **Womanist** 1. From *womanish.* (Opp. of "girlish," i.e., frivolous, irresponsible, not serious.) ...Wanting to know more and in greater depth than is considered "good" for one. 2. *Also:* a woman who loves other women, sexually and/or nonsexually… [*Committed to survival and wholeness of entire people, male and female…Traditionally universalist…Traditionally capable.]*[63] 3. Loves

[61]Alice Walker, *In Search of Our Mothers' Gardens: Womanist Prose*, A Harvest Book (Orlando: Harcourt, 2004), 240.

[62]Walker, *In Search of Our Mothers' Gardens,* 357.

[63]My emphasis with the highlights and brackets.

> music…*Loves* the Spirit. Loves love and food and roundness. Loves struggle. Loves the folk. Loves herself. *Regardless*. 4. Womanist is the feminist as purple to lavender.[64]

Walker's full definition provides a comprehensive understanding of black women's existence and ethics. Pointing to the history of black women's lives in the United States originating in bondage, womanists are concerned with the freedom of all. Black women's sexuality is central in Walker's definition, and exemplified in a positive light, it contends with the exploitative sexual history black women have been associated with. In a social context where the Civil Rights movement seemed riddled with patriarchal connotations, and the feminist movement giving little space for racial integration, 'womanist' represented components of black women's lives in order to define what feminism means to them.[65] The term and field of womanism provided for ethicist Katie Cannon a 'methodological framework for challenging inherited traditions for their collusion with androcentric patriarchy as well as a catalyst in overcoming oppressive situations through revolutionary acts of rebellion.[66] The duality of challenging and overcoming is inherent in a womanist praxis of survival.

Katie G. Cannon

Heralded as the first African American woman ordained in the United Presbyterian Church in 1974 and a student of James Cone during her time at Union Theological Seminary, Katie Cannon's legacy in Black Womanist Ethics is equivalent to Alice Walker and Delores

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[64]Walker, *In Search of Our Mothers' Gardens*, xi.

[65]Stephanie Y. Mitchem, *Introducing Womanist Theology* (Maryknoll, N.Y: Orbis Books, 2002), 55.

[66]Katie G. Cannon, ed., Katie's *Canon: Womanism and the Soul of the Black Community* (New York: Continuum, 1996), 23.

Williams in their respective areas, with Cannon constructing an innovative ethical framework rooted in Black women's lived experience. Detailing her theo-ethical inquiries as a child, she began to "ponder the relationship between faith and ethics as a schoolgirl while listening to my grandmother teach the central affirmations of Christianity in the context of a racially segregated society."[67] Born in 1950 and raised in Kannapolis, North Carolina, where her "community of faith taught me the principles of God's universal parenthood which…embraced all humanity, " and yet her "city, state and nation declared it a punishable offense" to integrate any aspects of Black and White.[68] Cannon contemplated the disconnect and inconsistencies with her faith and society throughout her early life, leading to her dissertation and eventual landmark work, *Black Womanist Ethics.*

Introduced to Alice Walker's conception of womanism and womanist, Cannon found the language to be a "benchmark event for African American scholars in religion."[69] She now had a term that uniquely described the perspective of her contention, but what of ethics from this lens? If ethics is concerned with the moral values of a community, the determination of good and bad, right, and wrong, action and actions, then womanist theology must necessarily be an ethics-first praxis.[70] Womanist theologian Stephanie Mitchem states "Womanist Theology must be grounded by Womanist Ethics. Such grounding is dearly bought because it is rooted in and

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[67]Katie G. Cannon, *Black Womanist Ethics* (Eugene, Oeg: Wipf and Stock, 2006), 1.

[68]Cannon, *Black Womanist Ethics*.

[69]Cannon, *Katie's Canon*, 23.

[70]Mitchem, *Introducing Womanist Theology*, 58.

emerges from the complexities of lived experience."[71] Cannon connected to this grounding through literary excavations and reflections of her own experiences and those of her mother, grandmother, and other women around her, Cannon found "Black women live out a moral wisdom in their real-lived context that does not appeal to the fixed rules or absolute principles of the white-oriented, male (heterosexual), structured society."[72] The everyday movements of Black women, amongst themselves, amongst one another, amongst the world demonstrates an ethos distinct from the heteronormative ethical values that deemed Black women and Black people as either 'amoral' or 'immoral'.[73] The difference between historical feminists claiming rule and morals are male v. womanists claiming rules and morals are white is that womanism seeks to define an ethic that extends to all persons, not just Black and Brown women. Holding true to Walker's definition as "committed to survival and wholeness of entire people, male and female, [Black and non-Black alike]" womanist views are holistic, expansive, and all-inclusive.

In *Black Womanist Ethics,* Cannon traces the status of Black women as a moral subject beginning with chattel slavery to the 20th century, then parallels Black literary development with the historical development with a focus on Zora Neale Hurston's life and literature, positing literature as a source for Black moral wisdom in historical and social analysis. She completes the text by referencing theologians Howard Thurman and Martin Luther King, Jr., as helpful in constructing an ethics based on Black women's experience. Womanist ethics examines the expressive products of oral culture that deal with our perennial quest for liberation, as well as

[71]Mitchem, *Introducing Womanist Theology*, 58.

[72]Cannon, *Black Womanist Ethics*, 4.

[73]Cannon, *Black Womanist Ethics*, 2.

written literature that invites African Americans to recognize "the distinction between nature in its inevitability and culture in its changeability."[74]

Cannon's subsequent text in 1995, *Katie's Canon: Womanism and the Soul of the Black Community* picks up her work on ethics from a womanist lens, expanding her understanding of the womanist religious and ethics by discussing the concept of virtue, visiting slave narratives, and once again tapping into the literary tradition of Zora Neale Hurston. Though she mentions some aspects of normative ethics, her primary goal of mentioning them is to explain how such notions of autonomy, agency, and freedom are insufficient and do not consider those who are simply struggling for survival. Moral wisdom includes a nuanced notion of normative ethics, one that considers what 'ought' to be in conjunction with what 'is available to be.' She even provides a visual methodological framework seminarians and professors can use to teach how Womanist Ethics operates, continuing the importance of teaching the importance of action, meaning-making, and reflection in an academic setting, notions vital to a womanist praxis.[75] Cannon's legacy of womanist theological ethics is timeless, though her contribution to ethics is more so centered on the ways in which Black women interpret or understand their actions and the options they have as opposed to explicitly evaluating normative ethical claims. Cannon focuses on how one's culminated life experiences contribute to their ability and options to navigate moral dilemmas and acquire/develop moral wisdom.[76]

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[74]Cannon, *Katie's Canon*, 69.

[75]Mitchem, *Introducing Womanist Theology*, 79.

[76]May her soul and spirit rest in that which she dedicated her life to, Katie G. Cannon, a womanist legend and academic mother, (January 3, 1950 - August 8, 2018).

Delores Williams

Womanist theologian and Scholar Delores Williams' text provides insight into Womanist Theology through a biblical exegesis and theological analysis of the story of Hagar. A student of Black Liberation Theologian James Cone at Union Theological Seminary, Williams immediately noticed the pure absence of Black women's narratives and voices in the academic construction and review of Black Theology. Surely there were perspectives, stories and lived experiences from Black women contributing to the development of Black theological thought in the United States. However, in addition to the lack of recognition in academia and society of Black women, Black churches were also at fault in perpetuating clericalism and gender bias ideologies, negligent of Black women's' contributions. Finding her space among other Black women theologians and ethicists asking similar questions, Williams came to understand womanist theology as 'assuming the necessity of responsible freedom for all persons…especially concerning itself with the faith, survival, and freedom-struggle of African-American women,' meaning not only critiquing the oppression rendered by black males in the church and social setting, but addressing racism that 'oppresses all African-Americans, male and female.'[77]

Published in 1993, *Sisters in the Wilderness: The Challenge of Womanist God-Talk* brilliantly highlights a previously ignored perspective, the Black woman's, paralleling a biblical exegesis of Hagar with the historical trajectory of African American women as a paradigm for Black woman's relationship with God and Christian religious belief. Making note that womanist theology emerged from 'what many of us saw as characteristics of black women's

[77]Delores S. Williams, *Sisters in the Wilderness: The Challenge of Womanist God-Talk* (Maryknoll, New York: Orbis Books, 2013), xvii.

experiences of relation, loss, gain, faith, hope, celebration and defiance,'[78] Williams uses an interdisciplinary approach to shed light on a womanist theological framework. While many scholars have went into detail regarding Williams' work, few have spoken to how her biblical exegesis and articulation of a survival methodology contributes to my ethical framework. Williams' contribution lies in both the historical and contemporary significance of faith and beliefs in decision-making. Like my foremothers, I too repeat Williams' illuminative defining of womanist theology as an embodied intertwining of beliefs, practices, and reflection on such (otherwise known as praxis) in the intellectual field:

> Womanist theology attempts to help black women see, affirm and have confidence in the importance of their experience and faith for determining the character of the Christian religion in the African American community. Womanist theology challenges all oppressive forces impeding black women's struggle for survival and for the development of a positive, productive quality of life conducive to women's and the family's freedom and well-being. Womanist theology opposes all oppression based on race, sex, class, sexual preference, physical [or mental] disability and caste.[79]

Williams takes up the inextricable link between womanist survival and Christian theology in her text *Sisters in the Wilderness.* While her primary position is that Black liberation studies historically omits the contributions of Black women and their presence and story is fundamental to the story of Black faith and Black identity, her secondary focal point involves a close examination of the story of Hagar as a paradigm for the survival narrative of Black women. Instead of experiencing liberation from her oppressive situation, Williams interprets Hagar's story as experiencing the miracle of survival. 'God is not concerned with nor involved in

[78]Williams, *Sisters in the Wilderness,* xvii.

[79]Williams, *Sisters in the Wilderness,* xvii.

liberation.'[80] Williams notes God's response as 'a story of survival', naming the female centered African-American biblical appropriation that led to this determination as the *survival/quality of life tradition of African-American biblical appropriation*.[81] Williams' text continues to stand as central to the academic cannon of womanist narrative thought, highlighting the centrality of Christian faith, historical narratives, and decision-making as constitutive of the womanist identity.[82]

Emilie Townes

One of the most well-known womanist ethicists in the world, Emilie Townes' is a testament to the potential and possibility that lies in the life of Black women. Holding a Doctor of Ministry degree from the University of Chicago Divinity School and a PhD in Religion in Society and Personality from Northwestern University, Townes also became the first African American Dean and Distinguished Professor of Womanist Ethics and Society at Vanderbilt University Divinity School in 2013.[83] While situated in the academy as a common theological and ethical contributor, Townes holds humble beginnings, mirroring origins to that of her contemporaries. Born in Durham North Carolina in 1955, Emilie Townes questioned the validity of a society where so many of its members are bearers of 'old wounds'. These old wounds represent the racial, sexual, class, and inhumane abuse suffered by African Americans, passed

[80]Williams, *Sisters in the Wilderness,* 20.

[81]Williams, *Sisters in the Wilderness*, 5.

[82]To one of the foremothers of womanist theology, Delores Williams, (1937-November 17, 2022).

[83]"Profile," Vanderbilt University Graduate Department of Religion, accessed May 4, 2023, https://www.vanderbilt.edu/gdr/people/bio/index.php.

down through folktales, stories, hymns and songs, somehow permeating almost every aspect of Black culture and life. How does the Black woman make sense or make meaning of so much suffering and belittling? What could be said to the faith of the oppressed steeped in hope, salvation, and transformation? Townes responded by advancing womanist ethics, using history as her epistemological starting point to produce a myriad of books, articles, and essays, three of which I comment on below as they are central to her contribution to a womanist praxis or survival. It is those 'old wounds' that can lead to an ethical haunting if not sufficiently recognized and navigated.

In 1993, Townes published *Womanist Justice, Womanist Hope*, in which she highlighted a then overlooked champion of social justice and Black women's existence of resistance, Ida B. Wells-Barnett. Following a trajectory like Cannon, Townes uses the lived experience of Wells and her recollections as paradigmatic to womanist narrative praxis. In this text we see womanist seeds planted by Wells-Barnett blossom through Townes' tending to the life and legacy left for her discovery. Three years after publishing *A Troubling in my Soul: Womanist Perspectives on Evil and Suffering* in 1994,[84] at the behest of a friend asking when Townes would "write something happy,"[85] Townes decided to focus on the robust outpouring of what it meant to "create ruminations of the spirit,'"[86] and in doing so, compiled the second installation of the previous anthology, naming this *Embracing the Spirit: Womanist perspectives on Hope,*

[84]Emilie Maureen Townes, ed., *A Troubling in My Soul: Womanist Perspectives on Evil and Suffering,* The Bishop Henry McNeal Turner Studies in North American Black Religion, v. 8 (Mayknoll, N.Y: Orbis Books, 1993).

[85]Townes, *Embracing the Spirit,* xii.

[86]Townes, *Embracing the Spirit,* xi.

Salvation, and Transformation. Meditating on her position as preacher and how oral transmission through preaching, conversing, and living, speaks of a "strong word of hope, a promise of salvation, a yearning for transformation," Townes notes how this positively impacts the religious, spiritual and cultural security and assuredness of Black folks. "So often, Black life in the United States is painted in absolutely grim and hopeless colors…It became a necessity in my eyes, that womanist thought go on record about the hope, salvation, and transformation we have in our lives and in our academic and intellectual musings."[87] Townes' work weaves the maneuvering of survival in and out of visceral and intellectual contexts, noting that regardless of the circumstance and contexts, the goal is still the same, the hope for survival, and the yearning for a socially transformed world.

Nearly ten years later with a host of articles, lectures, and essays given on ethical analysis from a womanist perspective, Townes published two books in 2006, *Womanist Ethics and the Cultural Production of Evil*,[88] and *Breaking the Fine Rain of Death: African-American Health Issues and a Womanist Ethic of Care*.[89] In *Womanist Ethics and the Cultural Production of Evil* she passes through the inner notions of evil as a cultural construction through literary analysis,

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[87]Emilie Maureen Townes, ed., *Embracing the Spirit: Womanist Perspectives on Hope, Salvation, and Transformation*, The Bishop Henry McNeal Turner/Sojourner Truth Series in Black Religion, v. 13 (Maryknoll, N.Y: Orbis Books, 1997), xii.

[88]Emilie Maureen Townes, *Womanist Ethics and the Cultural Production of Evil*, Black Religion, Womanist Thought, Social Justice (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2006).

[89]Emilie Maureen Townes, *Breaking the Fine Rain of Death: African American Health Issues and a Womanist Ethic of Care* (Eugene, Or.: Wipf & Stock Publishers, 2006). Here Townes critiques the 'overly individualistic' nature of healthcare in the United States largely contributing to disparities most experienced by Black bodies. Townes contends society should engage in lament and offers a womanist social ethic of care that includes multiple levels of community with the goal of impacting health policy and health outcomes for Black people.

cultural studies, and theo-ethical frameworks, highlighting four expressions of the cultural production and their worldwide implications, [90]concluding with only a solidaric hermeneutic of hope as capable of dismantling the "fantastic hegemonic force"[91] responsible for such an evil. For purposes of my ethical framework of survival, Townes beautifully describes the complex social, religious, and spiritual turbulence that contribute to Black conceptions of identity, Black theological conceptions of God, and Black existential notions of survival through a particular (Christian) lens.

M. Shawn Copeland

I am a graduate of the only Catholic Historically Black College and University in the United States, located in New Orleans, Louisiana. Through my tenure there, I was introduced to the significance of the Catholic tradition and Catholic Social Teaching on the Black experience. Though most of the African American Christianity and influence largely hails from the Protestant tradition, it would be an injustice not to mention a pivotal Catholic Womanist theologian, M. Shawn Copeland. Born and raised in Detroit, Michigan, Copeland spent her childhood years in parochial schools, earning a BA in English Madonna College in 1969. She then joined the religious order as a Felician Sister, officially known as the Congregation of Sisters of St. Felix of Cantalice Third Order Regular of St. Francis of Assisi. While working with the Archdiocese and affiliated religious groups to protest the closing of Black, Catholic schools in Detroit, pressure from her order resulted in her transferring to the Adrian Dominican Sisters in

[90] To mention but a few womanist concepts demonstrated by Williams, Walker, Townes, and Cannon.

[91]Townes, *Womanist Ethics and the Cultural Production of Evil*, 21.

1971. After working for the Diocese and religious matters for 20 years, Copeland entered Boston College to study with Bernard Lonergan, completing her PhD in 1991, and leaving the religious life in 1994. Of her many accolades, she is known as the first African American and first African American woman to serve as president of the Catholic Theological Society of America (CTSA).

A constant advocate for the rights of the oppressed through the examination, uplifting, and critiquing of Christianity from the Black Catholic perspective, Copeland's research follows three trajectories: "thematizing African American Catholicism, a theological understanding of the human person and the human experience, pertinent to political or praxis-based theologies and analyzes the religious, cultural, and social conditions under which human persons seek to realize their humanity."[92] In 2018, two of Copeland's former graduate students, Dr. Robert J. Rivera and Dr. Michele Saracino, edited a festschrift celebrating her contributions to theology and theological education titled, *Enfleshing Theology: Embodiment, Discipleship, and Politics in the Work of M. Shawn Copeland,* composed of essays by seventeen international scholars exploring Copeland's theological work. Central to Copeland's work is to understand and interpret the lived experiences of Black and Brown bodies considering unique theological traditions and Christian faiths, with special emphasis on Catholicism.

Following the trajectory of womanist thought, Copeland too considers the pertinent sociopolitical and economic environment in which Blacks (Catholic and Protestant alike) find themselves both attempting to survive as well as make meaning out of their situations and circumstances. In the summer of 2020, in response to the unprecedented COVID pandemic and

[92]"Influential Theologian M. Shawn Copeland to Retire from Boston College." Accessed July 28, 2023. https://www.bc.edu/bc-web/bcnews/faith-religion/theology/copeland-retirement.html.

global televising of police brutality, Copeland displayed the beauty of womanist ideology by performing a biblical exegesis as it relates to the sign of the times the world was experiencing. In a stark comparison between the Gospels of the New Testament and the horrific realities suffered by Black and Brown bodies at the hands of white supremacy in the 21st century, Copeland reflects and notes:

> The advent of the Spirit in the Fourth Gospel is quiet, piercing fearful isolation and opening onto the joy of community. Jesus gives the gift of the Spirit through the most intimate necessity of life—breathing. George Floyd's last words were a plea for life: "I can't breathe." He, Ahmaud Arbery, Breonna Taylor, and Rayshard Brooks are the most recent victims sacrificed on the altar of the Pax Americana, established more than four hundred years ago on expropriation, genocide, rape, and enslavement. As a nation, we gasp for air as rage flames in nearly every corner of our country. We cannot breathe. White racist supremacy is suffocating us, choking the very life and breath of God out of us all, snuffing out the possibilities for embodied difference to live, to breathe.[93]

Drawing on all seven of the Catholic Social Teaching principles (1. Life and Dignity of the Human Person 2. Call to Family, Community, and Participation 3. Rights and Responsibilities 4. Option for the Poor and Vulnerable 5. The Dignity of Work and the Rights of Workers 6. Solidarity 7. Care for God's Creation), Copeland performs a theo-ethical analysis of sorts in her text *Enfleshing Freedom: body, race, and being* when she speaks to the difficulties of being Black in a Black hating or 'negrophobic society'.

Expanding the specific argument for Black folks into a universal ethical question of how to live as human, Copeland's contribution to Catholic Theology, Black Catholicism, Black Christianity, and Black Christians reveals an alternative normativity in which those considered

[93]M. Shawn Copeland, "Breath & Fire | Commonweal Magazine." Commonweal Magazine, July 2020. https://www.commonwealmagazine.org/breath-fire.

'other' take their lives and humanity seriously, thereby questioning and confronting the normative historical and contemporary relegation of Black bodies as less than. " As blackness "insinuates an 'other' so radically different that her and his very humanity is discredited...blackness becomes a narrative of marginality and marginal narrative."[94] This is crucial as the Black struggle for authenticity, or authentic recognition is "coincident with the human struggle to *be* human and reveals *black-human-being* as a particular incarnation of universal finite human being."[95]

Using the incarnated life of God as the focal point for her theological anthropology, Copeland is part of a collective of "feminist, womanist, Mujerista, mestiza, and minjung theologians, ethicists, and biblical scholars who have challenged the anthropological displacement of human being with bourgeois European white (straight, cis gender) male being."[96] Copeland's theological analysis has heavy ethical implications for my framework. If being Black is at its core represents a fundamental aspect of human existence, then how do the actions and decision-making of those individuals represent the possibilities of agency in human existence in general? Copeland responds, "I have expressed in the particular the universal claim of the inviolability and sacredness of black humanity and reaffirmed black dignity and worth."[97] By doing so, Copeland posits that beliefs, actions, and reflections on both by those inhabiting a

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[94]M. Shawn Copeland, *Enfleshing Freedom: Body, Race, and Being*. Innovations. Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2010, 19.

[95]Copeland, *Enfleshing Freedom*, 19.

[96]Copeland, *Enfleshing Freedom*, 89.

[97]Copeland, *Enfleshing Freedom*, 129.

Black body speaks to a more universal and absolute claim about the dignity and value of the Black human life. It is in this argument that Copeland's unique Catholic perspective aligns well with the womanist narrative praxis.

Critiques and Expansions of Womanist Praxis: The Third Wave

The significance of the womanist perspective of theology is the idea of creating both strategic and spontaneous possibilities for life by simply navigating the day-to-day difficulties and decisions to be made. The womanist praxis represents an intricate maneuvering of historical narratives, contemporary circumstances, unique life situations and significant impacts on community. An authentic womanist praxis integrates both the experiences of surviving the everyday life with the normative (and counter normative) ethical questions regarding the good life, the purpose and meaning of such good life, and essentially that the good life is re-imagined as what it might mean to survive, and know that survival is an inviolable right, not a fight.[98] Providing new perspectives on theology, ethics, and narratives, womanist thought presents a new way to understand the dialectic between theory and praxis. Furthermore, this right is imagined and expressed against religious, social, economic, and political norms that support otherwise.

As more scholars and women of color are contributing to the academy and becoming part of the canons of their respective fields, works emerge either on methodologies either building on and expanding or acknowledging but departing from Alice Walker's 'definition' of 'womanist/womanism'. Part of the beauty of womanist thought is its origins in a non-monolithic

[98]The term survival is relative and robust. It may no longer mean the visceral survival connected with chattel slavery but could mean the intellectual and mental survival of a Primarily White Institution in pursuit of a graduate degree, the parental survival of having a child with no companion, assistance, or guidance, the survival in another country where English is not the first language.

context. Black life (while historically perceived as a monolith) is far from such. As such, the experiences and moments in each person's life add to the complexity of their intersectionalities. Two womanist scholars represent two of the many trajectories explored via womanist praxis, that of Stacey M. Floyd-Thomas and Monica Coleman. Both self-identified womanist scholars constructed anthologies pertinent to their understanding of Alice Walker's expression. Floyd-Thomas believes that those who are 'womanists' must be Black women, a belief not held and refuted by Womanist theologian Monica Coleman. For Floyd-Thomas, the beliefs of those women can vary as greatly as the physical features they possess, however the central to womanism is embodiment, held exclusively for 'Blackwomen.' For Coleman, one's identity is not as important as one's ideology. Viewing womanism as an ideology allows for the inclusivity Coleman believes Walker and others intended.

Based on my research and interpretation of the history of Black women's literature and autobiographical contributions, I continue my distinctions between first, second and third wave womanist thought. In this section I explore what it means to expand upon, fully define, and radically critique the preceding era of womanist praxis by actively engaging in other disciplines, the African diaspora, across gender, sexuality, and other identifying markers who connect with the womanist praxis in some capacity. While I align with Coleman regarding her categorization of the third wave of womanist thought, I depart from her (and align more with those whom she mentions in her introduction - name them). Categorized as the 'First Wave of Womanist Religious Thought' for Coleman,[99] I see the contributions made by Cannon, Williams, Townes,

[99]Monica A. Coleman, ed., *Ain't I a Womanist, Too? Third-Wave Womanist Religious Thought* (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 2013).

Grant, and others to represent the *second* generation of women to articulate their lived experiences and the implications of those experiences for humanity, a continuation of the foundation laid by Stewart, Wells, Cooper, Jacobs and others, and a pathway forward for current and future womanist scholars such as myself. I conclude this section with an example of a scholar demonstrating what I find to be a middle ground to Coleman and Floyd-Thomas, Queer Womanist Theologian Pamela Lightsey.[100]

Stacey M. Floyd-Thomas

Researching, writing and living amid the intersection of ethics, feminist/womanist studies, Black Church studies, critical pedagogy, critical race theory, and postcolonial studies with an overall approach to the study of Christian social ethics that engages broad questions of moral agency, cultural memory, ethical responsibility and social justice,[101] I consider Educator, Womanist, Ethicist, and author Stacey Floyd-Thomas one of the pioneers and progenitors of Third Wave Womanist Thought. Drawing upon socio-historical methods and liberation ethics, her work in Christian social ethics has a threefold focus—race, gender, and class—and she is equally interested in the challenges of religious pluralism, social justice, and the political world.

[100]There is an exhaustive list of womanist scholars I did not mention but have researched and considered when writing this section. I have also omitted mentioned African Traditional Religions, although I am aware and in agreement with pervasive presence of African rituals, beliefs, and systems of life (via the Gullah people of South Carolina and the Creoles of Louisiana), the lineage of Rastafari beliefs and Abrahamic religions. My goal was to emphasize two points: 1.) That the underlying narrative thread within each 'wave' of womanist thought is rooted in and emerges from survival, 2.) This narrative of survival is engrained in not only the womanist narrative thought, but the African American narrative, and as such, ingrained in African American identity.

[101]"Profile," Graduate Department of Religion, accessed May 10, 2023, https://www.vanderbilt.edu/gdr/people/bio/index.php.

Explaining womanism as an 'epistemological revolution,'[102] Floyd-Thomas gathers a hue of women across generations, beliefs, and ethnicities to expand upon, praise, and critique the womanist methodology in her text, *Deeper Shades of Purple: Womanism in Religion and Society*. While 'womanist' was the term poetically characterized by Walker, Floyd-Thomas distinguished this from 'womanism,' or the subsequent movement of Black women scholars of religion which used 'womanist' as its logos.[103]

Following the traditional poetic definition coined by Alice Walker, Floyd-Thomas develops her text in four sections: radical subjectivity, traditional communalism, redemptive self-love, and critical engagement, compiling a myriad of scholars with unique contributions from across the Diaspora. Mirroring these four dimensions of Alice Walker's original expose of 'womanist', Floyd-Thomas illustrates the remarkable progress and evolution womanist praxis has achieved in the academy and communities. "What characterizes womanist discourse is that Black women are engaged in the process of knowledge production that is most necessary for their own flourishing rather than being exploited for the enlightenment and entertainment of white psyches and male egos. Through reflection, an ethic is developed that enables Black women (and all humanity eventually) to not only survive, but to thrive and flourish."[104] Her chronological conception of womanist thought posits the matriarchs of (academic) womanist praxis as Katie Cannon, Jacquelyn Grant, and Delores Williams, making way for the 'first

[102]Stacey M. Floyd-Thomas, ed., *Deeper Shades of Purple: Womanism in Religion and Society*, Religion, Race, and Ethnicity (New York: New York University Press, 2006), 1.

[103]Floyd-Thomas, *Deeper Shades of Purple*, 4.

[104]Floyd-Thomas, *Deeper Shades of Purple*, 2.

generation' of womanist scholars such as Diana Hayes, Renita Weems, Toinette Eugene, Emilie Townes, Marcia Riggs and others. This in turn produced the 'second generation' of womanist scholars including Karen Baker-Fletcher, Cheryl Kirk-Duggan, Linda Thomas, Joan Martin, and Rosetta Ross.[105] Considering and centering Black women's experience as epistemologically normative, womanism and womanist praxis cannot be separated from the embodied existence responsible for its creation. These women, their experiences, and their written contributions have created a new literary and theological canon distinct from the traditional American male canon, from which the 'third generation' of womanist scholars can start, build upon, or critically engage with.

Despite the multiple interpretations of experiences across cultures, generations, classes and contexts, the womanist embodied epistemology remains constant. "To be a womanist, in turn, is to be a 'Blackwoman' - one among the dispossessed, no matter whose house one may work in or visit."[106] There remains a direct connection between identity, and who one is, with epistemology, or how one comes to know, and Floyd-Thomas eloquently depicts this through an anthology of diverse dialogues all deeply-rooted in one's survival, being and being in the world. Floyd-Thomas represents but one direction of third wave womanist praxis, a direction where identity is paramount to the expression of the narrative praxis.[107]

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[105]Floyd-Thomas, *Deeper Shades of Purple*, 4.

[106]Floyd-Thomas, *Deeper Shades of Purple*, 6.

[107]Floyd-Thomas, *Deeper Shades of Purple,* 6. She defines womanism as a 'homegrown' discourse deeply rooted in the concerns and realities of women of African descent. To be a womanist, in turn, is to be a 'Blackwoman'. She does not separate the material reality of one's ethnicity or ethnic heritage from one's epistemological starting point.

Monica Coleman

The advancement of the field of womanist theology and ethics has reached a maturity whereby "critiques offered, but previously tabled, are now being fully addressed and embraced."[108] Third wave womanist scholar Monica Coleman both follows the legacy and creates her own path in womanist thought. Advancing the interplay of Biblical exegesis, theological inquiry, and sociopolitical awareness, Coleman leads womanist discourse in new directions, including addressing mental health. In *Bipolar Faith: A black woman's journey through depression and faith*, Coleman stays true to the autobiographical notion of womanist narrative, contending that the legacies of slavery, abuse, Jim Crow, and other injustices suffered on a macro level mask the mental illnesses and difficulties faced at a micro level. Using her own personal battle with bipolar disorder, Coleman recounts how she had to learn to navigate her professional, religious, spiritual, and social spaces amid coping with her bipolar II diagnosis, grieving the loss of her grandmother like the death of God, and reconciling the tumultuous relationship she had with her father. It is the interconnected journey of life that gives space for Coleman to address her emotions and her faith. "For the first time, I applied to myself the unconditional love of God that I preached about. If there was nothing I could do to make God stop loving me, then maybe I didn't have to do anything to love myself. I could really love myself for the imperfect but pretty darn interesting person I was."[109] Few if any Black women religious scholars have taken such an intimate approach to speak on and speak to the eternal difficulty for the Black community to acknowledge, address, and affirm mental health as a

[108]Floyd-Thomas, *Deeper Shades of Purple*, 211.

[109]Coleman, *Bipolar Faith*, 136.

primary and urgent constitutive to Black bodies and Black lives. Ignoring the taboo of mental health conversations in the Black community (a critical reason for lack of survival in the community), Coleman's contribution highlights how external as well as internal complexities contribute to the difficulties in navigating decision-making and survival. In this regard, Coleman undoubtedly writes in accordance with the womanist tradition.

Coleman does not stay in this "normalized" understanding of womanist praxis, however. Taking an inevitable and refreshing turn in her text *Ain't I a Womanist Too? Third Wave Womanist Religious Thought,* she opens up the understanding of Womanist to encompass other religions, disciplines, genders, and ethnic identities. Pivoting away from Walker's demonstration of womanism, Coleman's investigation of third womanist problematizes centering the methodology within identity politics resulting from Black women's lived experience.[110] While naming the Black women's experience is important, Coleman notes how exclusionary naming can be, and also notes the power dynamics within Black women's perceived monolith. Speaking to the implied expansion and far-reaching gaze of womanism, Coleman introduces the reader to two other Black women scholars, Chikwenye Ogunyemi and Clenora Hudson-Weems who also invoked the term womanism but give little to no academic acknowledgement to their invocation. Marking the third wave of womanist religious thought as that which challenges the identity politics of the second wave,[111] Monica Coleman posits an expansive understanding of what it means to be 'womanist,' and invokes an alternative conception in a critical and inclusive way. Expressing one of the hallmarks of third wave womanist thought as 'more or an ideology politic

[110]Coleman, *Ain't I a Womanist, Too?*, 5.

[111]Coleman, *Ain't I a Womanist, Too?,* 17.

than an identity politics,'[112] Coleman provides a more fluid vision of womanist dialogue not limited to visceral embodiment, a conversation that makes space for non-Black women as well as non-Christians to contribute to meaning making in an affirming and transformative way.

Pamela Lightsey

Some who identify as womanist believe that one must embody the concept to express the concept (Floyd-Thomas, Baker-Fletcher, etc.). Others who aspire to continue the womanist claim agree the concept is rooted in Black women's lived experiences but believe this to be the epistemological origin of method and action, not limited to physiological embodiment (Coleman, Harris, etc.). Regardless of the position on the womanist spectrum, what remains consistent is that the womanist praxis centers those whose voices and lives have been relegated, silenced, oppressed, and devalued in society. Womanist thought highlights the triadic oppression of race, gender, and class amid social, political, theological, and theoretical fronts. Known in ecclesial circles as the first out Black lesbian elder in The United Methodist Church, Pamela Lightsey's published work is a direct manifestation of her vocation and engagement with the world. She contends that black women's faith is characterized by a commitment to community, a resistance to oppression, and a hope for liberation. As an ordained minister in the UMC, Lightsey strongly adheres to the real-life significance of relevant biblical exegesis with social considerations. She argues that the Trinity can be a resource for black women's liberation because it affirms the interconnectedness of all people and the power of love to overcome oppression.

I find Pamela Lightsey's exposition of Queer Womanist Theology in *Our Lives Matter: A Womanist Queer Theology to* be insightful, radical, necessary, and a nice blend of varying

[112]Coleman, *Ain't I a Womanist, Too?*, 18.

womanist interpretation. Using the protests of 2014 to spur her analysis, Lightsey illuminates the oppression of Black LGBTQ women, and referencing the broad framework of liberation theology and the more particular approach of womanist methodology, she introduces her assumed audience to the unorthodox and radical perception of queer theory. Her work is characterized by her lived experience and its critical engagement with traditional theological concepts and social justice. In addition to her academic work and continuing the womanist praxis of belief and action in the world, she is the founding pastor of Jubilee Community Church in Durham, North Carolina, and co-founder of the Black Church Center for Liberation Theology. Arguing that black women's experiences of oppression have shaped their understanding of God and the divine, Lightsey has written on the contemporary struggles of being a Queer Black minister in the Methodist church, highlighting the modern racist, sexist, classist and gender-based biases that have perverted society since the inception of Chattel Slavery.

Lightsey's work is an important contribution to theological conversation, liberative dialogues, and womanist discourse. Anchoring in the tradition, Lightsey also forges her own path, questioning the realm of survival as a person inhabiting multiple simultaneous identities. While the goal and quest of universal liberation and transformation is as firm as the womanist autobiographies they emerge from, each scholar and school of thought interprets the significance of these goals, quests, and the processes necessary to obtain them in compelling and symbolic ways, reiterating the expansive and ever evolving modes and methods of survival. Moving within and outside of the discourse, hailing its achievement, and critiquing its shortcomings, all contribute to a vibrant womanist narrative.

La Lucha et Lo Cotidiano: A Mujerista Praxis of the Struggle, a Womanist Praxis of the Everyday

Beginning with the earliest known writings of Black women through the 21st century, there has been an emergence, a solidification, and an expansion of a new epistemology rooted in the experience and oppression of Black women. The experiences and reflections of such experiences have culminated not only into a dynamic field in and of itself but has in turn given birth to other contextual based theological and ethical frameworks. Of these, *Mujerista Theology*, popularized by Latin/x or *Mujerista* theologian Ada Maria Isasi-Diaz, takes seriously what it means to center minoritized women's lives as the site and starting point for understanding and meaning-making, but transposes the womanist lens onto a Latin/x grassroots context. This final section will introduce the reader to significant by-products of womanist theology, via *Mujerista Theology*, and give language to the robust and complex context of the Latin/x women's life and experience, *la lucha* (the struggle) and *lo Cotidiano* (the everyday). I return to Isasi-Diaz in greater detail in Chapter 4. The short interjection here was to demonstrate the concrete implications of womanism for other communities. Following the expansion of these terms in the womanist context, making the connection back to the womanist praxis from whence it came, I conclude by summarizing the poignant features of a womanist praxis of survival, noting this praxis is inherent and constitutive to Black identity and Black meaning-making in the United States.

A Womanist Praxis of Survival

This chapter serves to elucidate the intricate connection between spirituality, faith, lived experiences as constitutive to identity and meaning-making in the African American women's

context, a meaning-making entrenched in survival and surviving the struggle. Just as liberation theology and feminist theology can be considered predecessors of Black Liberation Theology and subsequently Womanist theology, the same can be said for the birth of Mujerista Theology, Queer Theology, and virtually any other theology that seeks to amplify and illumine those that have been silenced and oppressed.

Isasi-Diaz's expressive analysis of 'the struggle' via *la lucha* and 'the everyday' via *lo cotidiano* is the closest capturing of the womanist praxis as perceived from another identity. The epistemological and hermeneutical shift womanist thought has given its contemporaries and provided for its descendants represents one of the most radical theological and ethical shifts in 21st century American academics and religion. Womanism as reality frameworks, and womanists as adherents to various interpretations of such framework through theological inquiry, ethical analysis, or a ranging combination of the two (hence my chapter title as Womanist Theological Ethics), seek to inspire, preserve, elevate, and show gratitude to the lives and realities of Black women, all women, and all people. The lens garnered from the lived realities of Black women extends into politics, arts, sciences, economies, and all areas of humanitarian efforts, for the community is always at the center of the womanist's concern. Understanding African American identity through Black women's religion, faith and spirituality is the most sufficient (and some would say only) way to engross oneself in the complexity of Black identity in the United States. To close this chapter, I echo the sentiments of Isasi-Diaz regarding womanist theology and ethics, finding this also to be true of the womanist praxis of survival:

> Womanist theology is not only knowledge about the religious faith of African American women. It is not only elaborating a discourse based on the religious experiences of African American women. Womanist ethics and theology is about creating meaning. Womanist ethics is about defining what ethics is, about

> what it should be. Womanist theology is about what theology is, about what it should be. Womanist theology and ethics is about defining what knowing is…Alice Walker gifted all of us with this wonderful epistemological task of naming and renaming, of defining and redefining.[113]

[113]Ada Maria Isasi-Diaz, "Womanists and Mujeristas, Sisters in the Struggle: A Mujerista Response," in *Deeper Shades of Purple: Womanism in Religion and Society*, by Stacey M Floyd-Thomas (New York University Press, 2006), 269.

CHAPTER FOUR

NAMING THE MEANING MAKING: A WOMANIST NARRATIVE ETHICS OF SURVIVAL

This chapter spells out what I mean when referring to a 'narrative ethics of survival'. I admittedly have been vague covering the multiple aspects of this ethic, and I am sure my colleagues and those who come across this work will have no trouble pointing to the fallacies and wide gaps I have created in carving out my take on Black life, I am looking to convey that the framework through which African-Americans conduct meaning-making and decision-making is intertwined with their identity as Black, an identity forged in survival, struggling for a 'good life' contrary to the modern assumption of what is perceived as good. This framework is one emerging from lived experience and critical reflection, a framework transmitted and reframed through many narrative avenues, particularly that of storytelling. This phrase most accurately defines what I have wrestled with and am coming to terms with. I defined each part of the phrase in the first three chapters. This fourth chapter constructs a particular take on narrative ethics by responding to the question: Is there a Black Narrative Ethics? The immediate response is yes, but three critical components must exist or whatever framework presented cannot be a Narrative Ethics of Survival (of which my preceding chapters establish from a Black/Womanist perspective): a) There can be no Narrative Ethics of Survival without *narratives;* b) There can be no Narrative Ethics of Survival without *reflection* on narratives, and c) There can be no Narrative Ethics of Survival without the reflection on *moral* questions. The presence of these three

signifiers denotes a Narrative Ethics of Survival is at play and gives space for transformative dialogue once recognized.

This chapter is divided into four sections: The first section begins the ethical conversation via a literary analysis, positing the centrality of stories in constructing a Womanist Narrative Ethics of Survival. African American scholar Henry Louis Gates Jr. exemplifies the importance of the African American Literary Tradition, illuminating both the stories and the literary techniques employed within them. Emphasizing stor(ies), the opposite of a grand meta-narrative posited in modern American history, Chimamanda Adichie warns of the dangers of the single story. The very method of 'signification' was both a tool of storytelling and a tool for survival. "Black people have always been masters of the figurative: Saying one thing to mean something quite other has been basic to black survival in oppressive Western cultures."[1] The second section correlates with the second chapter, denoting the forged construction of a narrative identity and reflections on such identities. Tracing the history of narrative identity in academia, I find the fields of sociology, psychology, theology, and literary studies to be primarily European and U.S white. Offering an alternative base from which to engage narrative identity studies, I interject Toni Morrison, this time through the conception of narrative in relationship to identities as a configuration of narrative divergent from the 'canonical' figures. I enrich Morrison's narrative analysis with a womanist lens, focusing on aspects of memory and history through practices, positing my construction of a narrative identity based on an epistemological shift, that of the womanist perspective.

[1]Henry Louis Gates, "Introduction: Criticism in De Jungle," *African American Review* 50, no. 4 (2017): 625–29, https://doi.org/10.1353/afa.2017.0111, 626.

The third section transitions narrative identity to narrative ethics by positing reflections on moral dilemmas through a womanist lens. With the assistance of Hanna Meretoja, Hille Haker, and Paul Ricoeur, I note the ethical significance of meaning-making in narrative identity, bringing forth a *narrative ethics*. While I begin with Ricoeur and other European and White American scholars, I diverge to put forth a womanist narrative ethics, one that combines womanist theological ethical perspectives with traditions of narrative identity, here I note Morrison's literary interpretations of survival and agency as an example of a womanist narrative ethics. The fourth section expands on this womanist narrative ethics by tending to the *praxes* of survival, the praxes of everyday life. Reiterating the epistemological and ethical starting points for Black women as their lived experiences while also summarizing the key components of a womanist praxis of survival, a positive advancement of the field via Mujerista theologian Ada Maria Isasi-Diaz represents one of the many possible expansions of such a hermeneutic. Isasi-Diaz introduces the unique phrase resulting from reflection on Black women's lived experiences placed in the Latin/x context, *Lo cotidiano*, referring to "the everyday", a complex and robust view that explains how enlightening the *la lucha*, or "the struggle" as a practice serves as a medium for meaning-making and striving for a good life amid the everyday. *The final section revisits the above-mentioned question: Is there a Womanist Narrative Ethics? Yes, but considering the above metrics for a Narrative Ethics of Survival, I sharpen what a womanist narrative ethics of survival should entail, namely - 1. attention to black narratives, 2. attention to black womanist theological ethics (standing in the shoes my mother made), and 3. bringing attention to everyday life, and transitions to what that ethics looks like confronting a moral dilemma amid a story.* Again noting the relationship between Morrison's *Beloved* and the real

experience it is derived from, I conclude by revisiting a moral dilemma in the literary analysis I briefly mentioned in the first chapter, only this time an ethical analysis of a particular scene in the novel *Sing, Unburied, Sing* will demonstrate this decision-making and meaning-making framework called a 'Narrative Ethics of Survival' confronts the good life with the everyday struggle for survival in Black/African-American Identity.

Naming and recognizing this Narrative Ethics of Survival provides an explicit ethical framework based in and emerging from the construction of identity and its many expressions. Knowledge of this framework expands the opportunities for meaningful dialogue between those who embody such a survival-based existence on a daily basis, and those who have never met such a way of life. The continual moral dilemmas that encompass daily living have been and continue to be, even in 2023, constitutive of surviving and Black identity.

There can be no Narrative Ethics without Narratives

> It is amazing how much black people, in ritual settings such as barbershops and pool halls, street corners and family reunions, talk about talking. Why do they do this? I think they do it to pass these rituals along from one generation to the next. They do it to preserve the traditions of 'the race.' - Henry Louis Gates, Jr.

Chapter one began this exercise reflecting on a type of narrative in the form of the novel, *Sing, Unburied, Sing*. Within the understanding of narratives and their many forms, none have been as intriguing and varied as stories and storytelling. But before reflection on moral dilemmas can take place via storytelling, the stories must be gathered and told. The compilation of and exposure to different forms of stories, fiction, and nonfiction alike, speaks to the necessity of narratives in many forms of every day meaning making. Of the endless ways in which stories reflect and impact human life, I mention here only three that directly substantiate the presence of a Narrative Ethics of Survival: *they (stories) transmit notions, rules, and tactics for meaning*

making and decision-making amid survival; they expand the world(s) of the possible, and they instill identity(ies). Historian Henry Louis Gates, Jr., Nigerian author, and novelist Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie, and late author and literary scholar Toni Morrison iterate and reiterate the countless ways oral and written narration transmit cultural necessities through generations, ensuring the customs for survival are received. In addition to survival customs, stories of relatives, friends, ancestors, and strangers advocate for contemplation and reflection on decision-making through examples of what to do, what not to do, and what to consider. Celebratory rituals, customs, folk tales, and songs create and enhance indented(ies), both socially and individually. This concise explication of the three impacts through the research and authorship of the above-mentioned African American scholars guide me in providing a concise yet enriched hermeneutic of stories relevant to my larger project of identifying the presence of a Narrative Ethics of Survival.

Henry Louis Gates Jr.'s fascination with compiling multiple facets of Afro-American, Caribbean, and African literature centers around "defining the precise structure of the Afro-American Literary Tradition itself by trying to link…the form of art and the form of its historical consciousness."[2] Convinced not only that "the Africans who survived the Middle Passage carried within them to the Western Hemisphere aspects of their cultures that were meaningful"… but also that "they chose by acts of will, not to forget their music, their myths, their expressive institutional structures, their metaphysical systems of order, and their forms of performance."[3]

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[2]Henry Louis Gates, "Introduction: Criticism in De Jungle," *African American Review* 50, no. 4 (2017): 625–29, https://doi.org/10.1353/afa.2017.0111, 625.

[3]Henry Louis Gates, *The Signifying Monkey: A Theory of African American Literary Criticism*, Twenty-fifth anniversary edition (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014), 4.

Originating in oral narrations and transmissions across multiple languages, Gates' conviction directed him towards comparing the literary works alongside the historical situation of African-Americans. Collecting both fictional and nonfictional African, Afro-American, Caribbean and South American literary works, Gates advanced the fields of African American history and literature, through giving theoretical structure to what is now known as the African American literary tradition. Transcending the simple retelling of stories, Gates bridged his academic endeavors with social work, after explicating narratives from enslaved Africans in North America, the Caribbean, South America, and indigenous African people, Gates began assisting other African Americans with unearthing their own identities by researching their descendants, connecting narrative, history, and current lived experiences. His interactions with African Americans seeking their ancestry have been compiled and featured on the National Public Broadcasting Service, or PBS. Serving as a paradigm of why stories as the primary example of narratives are critical for the black community, they are fundamental to American history, Black history, American identity, and Black identity. By collecting the stories and focusing on their reflections and expansions of lived experiences, Gates points to the literal and theoretical survival of African American life as transmitted through narrative.[4] (provide more)

[4]For more works on African and African American literature and history by Gates see Henry Louis Gates, *Tradition and the Black Atlantic: Critical Theory in the African Diaspora* (New York: Basic Books, 2010), Henry Louis Gates, *The Black Church: This Is Our Story, This Is Our Song* (New York: Penguin Press, 2021), Henry Louis Gates, *Colored People: A Memoir*, 1st ed (New York: Knopf : Distributed by Random House, 1994), Henry Louis Gates, *Stony the Road: Reconstruction, White Supremacy, and the Rise of Jim Crow* (New York: Penguin Press, 2019), Henry Louis Gates and Kevin M. Burke, *And Still I Rise: Black America since MLK*, First edition (New York, N.Y: Ecco, an imprint of HarperCollins Publishers, 2015), Henry Louis Gates, *Loose Cannons: Notes on the Culture Wars* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1992), and Henry Louis Gates, *The Trials of Phillis Wheatley: America's First Black Poet and Her Encounters with the Founding Fathers* (New York: Basic civitas books, 2003).

Nigerian author and self-identified feminist Chimamanda Ngozi affirms how narratives expand the world of the possible by cautioning how impressionable one becomes amid the opening of a narrative. Many of her novels focus on concepts of gender, race, and social justice, all which stem from her lived experiences as a woman both in Nigeria and the United States. "We are vulnerable in the face of a story."[5] We become susceptible to the language, the meanings, the subjectivity, and objectivity all at once. Because of this, we should be conscious of the danger of a single story. During an interview on the importance of narratives and the reception of different stories, Adichie states, "Like our economic and political worlds, stories too are defined by…How they are told, who tells them, when they're told, how many stories are told, are dependent on power. Power is the ability not just to tell the story of another person, but to make it the definitive story of that person."[6] When one or a few have the power to define others through a single story, it dehumanizes those defined. "The consequence of the single story is this: It robs people of dignity. It makes our recognition of our equal humanity difficult. It emphasizes how we are different rather than how we are similar."[7] Either by direct caution or indirect negation, one must be careful when adhering to a single story. "Many stories matter. Stories have been used to dispossess and to malign. But stories can also be used to empower, and to humanize. Stories can break the dignity of a people. But stories can also repair that broken

[5]Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie, *The Danger of the Single Story*, Transcript, TED Talk, 2009, https://youtu.be/D9Ihs241zeg.

[6]Adichie, *The Danger of the Single Story*.

[7]Adichie, *The Danger of the Single Story*.

dignity."[8] It is only when vulnerability or openness occurs that expansion of worlds possible can unfold. Not through a single story, but through stories we are given a more well-rounded view and increased appreciation for life in general, and Black life. Furthermore, the collection of many stories reflects the many lived experiences mentioned (and forgotten) in the history of a nation, a country, the world, and specific groups of people.

World renowned author Toni Morrison's early critical engagements of American literature led her to question whether major characteristics of American literature, "namely individualism, masculinity, social engagement v. historical isolation, acute and ambiguous moral problematics, etc., are not in fact responses to a dark, abiding, signing Africanist presence."[9] As Morrison also believes literature is a representation of culture and tradition, it would seem American literature attempted to reiterate what American culture was unable to humanely justify, the denigrated African presence post chattel slavery. I expand on Morrison's take on the reflection on narratives in the subsequent section, but for now I aim attention at her citation of three major benefits to immersing oneself in literature: "(1) its character-building, moral-strengthening capacities, (2) its suitability for high-minded, politics-free leisure activity, and (3) its role in 'cultivating powers of imagination that are essential to citizenship'."[10] The plurality of narratives rescues one from their "traditional" comfort to experience the "unorthodox" moment

[8]Adichie, *The Danger of the Single Story*.

[9]Morrison, *Playing in the Dark,* 5.

[10]Toni Morrison, "Literature and Public Life," *The Source of Self-Regard: Selected Essays, Speeches, and Meditations,* First Vintage International edition (New York: Vintage International, 2020), 99.

of "being in the company of one's own solitary imagination."[11] Similar to Adichie's cautionary tale of the single story, in her text *The Origin of Others*, Morrison notes the inextricable links between the specific impact American literature has on American culture and identity, and vice versa. Surveying 18th and 19th century American literature, she finds several stories that "carefully rendered descriptions of how and why blacks are so vital to a white definition of humanity."[12] By initiating this project with the analysis/retelling of a story, I intended to invite the reader into a space separate of one's own location, to explore alongside the characters the question of survival. Stories are the platform for which the scene of life is theatricalized. Without these stories, without the oral and written narrations of lived experiences and articulations of endless imaginations, there can be no womanist Narrative Ethics.

There can be no Narrative Ethics without Reflection on Narratives (stories)

There can be no narrative ethics without stories. "The importance of personal storytelling hinges not just on its ready availability, however. There may be a special affinity between narrative and self, such that narrative can be said to play a privileged role in the process of self-construction."[13] The existence of narratives via stories, however, is not enough to render the presence of a narrative ethics. In addition to these narratives, there must also be dialogue, analysis, or some mode of reflection on such stories. How are stories told? What do these stories mean, and to what do they give meaning? Who is/are the storyteller(s), and who is the audience?

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[11]Morrison, "The Writer Before the Page," *The Source of Self-Regard*, 265.

[12]Morrison, *The Origin of Others*, 20.

[13]Peggy J. Miller et al., "Narrative Practices and the Social Construction of Self in Childhood," *American Ethnologist* 17, no. 2 (1990): 292–311, https://www.jstor.org/stable/645081, 292.

To what extent do narratives impact 'who' people are? These questions and more comprise the reflective nature and necessity of narrative reflection and determine how we address and interact with the stories of our lives and the lives of others. Keeping true to my triadic nature of expounding on concepts, I topically survey three fields (combining two) extorting the underpinning threads of sociological and psychological combined, theological, and literary endeavors of narrative identity as constitutive to the notions of defining the self and meaning making, both of which must exist for Narrative Ethics. Acknowledging the already vibrant conversation, I contribute a perspective that expands the surveyed endeavors through an epistemological shift. The introduction of the womanist lens via Toni Morrison both critiques Western conceptions of narrative identity (specifically the American context) and offers an alternative take on narrative identity that is both redemptive and life-giving, particularly for those whose narrative is immersed in survival. It is this level of reflection between narratives and identity, this visceral and immanent wrestling with narratives, the self, and others, which signals the active presence of Narrative Ethics.

The explicit study of identity through narratives in modern Western philosophy has parallel origins in psychology and sociology. Early roots of narrative identity can be found in 19th-20th century Sigmund Freud's theory of psychoanalysis. *Very broadly* speaking, in his theory, Freud posited that pathologies originating from conflicts [or conflicting narratives][14] within the self's psyche can be evaluated and treated via dialogue between patient and psychiatrist.[15] This groundbreaking method of what is now commonly known as psychoanalysis

[14]My interpretation.

[15]Sigmund Freud and Wilhelm Fliess, *The Origins of Psychoanalysis: Letters to Wilhelm Fliess, Drafts and Notes: 1887-1902*, New York: Basic Books, 1954. For more of Freud's writings see Sigmund

hones in on clarifying parts or complete pieces of biographies and making meaning or sense out of them relevant to the development of the self.[16] Advancements in the sciences and humanities gave way to the progression of Freud's idea. Development psychologist Erik Erikson developed Freud's theory by detailing the suggested creation and emergence of identity in psychosocial human development takes place in narrative stages. Erikson was one of the first to posit a framework for human development which included eight successive psychosocial stages.[17] Human development directly aligns with how one comes to know stories, and how one comes to tell stories, about the self and others. Here the trajectory is traced between internal and external contributors to identity and the construction of such identity via narratives.

Shifting the focus of identity development from the internal psyche and ego to the social and cultural influences, psychologist Dan McAdams defines narrative identity as "the internalized and evolving story of the self that a person constructs to make sense and meaning out of his or her life. The story for McAdams is a *selective* reconstruction of the autobiographical past and a narrative anticipation of the imagined future that explains for the self and others, how

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Freud and Sander L. Gilman, *Psychological Writings and Letters*, The German Library, v. 59 (New York: Continuum, 1995).

[16]I am aware of the inadequate and almost elementary exposition of Freud and his work on psychoanalysis and psychotherapy. For a more robust and provocative history of the emergence and development of psychoanalysis, see Michael P. Levine, ed., *The Analytic Freud: Philosophy and Psychoanalysis* (London; New York: Routledge, 2000).

[17]Justin Sokol, "Identity Development Throughout the Lifetime: An Examination of Eriksonian Theory," *Graduate Journal of Counseling Psychology* 1, no. 2 (March 2009): 1–12, https://epublications.marquette.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=1030&context=gjcp.

the person came to be and where his or her life may be going."[18] He and other 21st century psychologists alike posit the role of narratives in human development as fundamental to the creation and sustenance of one's identity. The contemporary view of narrative identity has since sparked interdisciplinary studies across the humanities and natural sciences. The work of McAdams' and his peers influenced sociological understandings of narrative identity, contending "the self comes to terms with society through narrative identity,"[19] understanding identity as a *relational* concept impacted by sociocultural and historical circumstances. Sociologist Margaret Somers states that while traditional narrative analysis was limited from a sociological standpoint, newer studies are considering narrative as "social epistemology and social ontology,"[20] building the bridge between identity formation and narrative analysis in the realm of social theory. Conceiving of identity as a social formation and narrative as an important if not primary contributor to personal and social development, Somers and others have begun to explicate the social significance of reflecting on narratives.[21] Other sociological viewpoints emphasize the

[18]Dan P. McAdams, "Narrative Identity," in *Handbook of Identity Theory and Research*, ed. Seth J. Schwartz, Koen Luyckx, and Vivian L. Vignoles (New York, NY: Springer New York, 2011), 99–115, https://doi.org/10.1007/978-1-4419-7988-9_5,

[19]Dan P. McAdams, "Personal Narratives and the Life Story." In *Handbook of Personality: Theory and Research*, 3rd ed., 242–64, New York: Guilford Press, 2008, 243.

[20] Margaret R. Somers, "The Narrative Constitution of Identity: A Relational and Network Approach," *Theory and Society* 23, no. 5 (1994): 605–49, https://www.jstor.org/stable/658090, 606.

[21]For more sociological perspectives of narrative identity, see Francesca Polletta, *It Was like a Fever: Storytelling in Protest and Politics* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2006), Arthur W. Frank, *Letting Stories Breathe* (Chicago, Ill.: University of Chicago Press, 2012), Mary Jo Maynes, Jennifer L. Pierce, and Barbara Laslett, *Telling Stories: The Use of Personal Narratives in the Social Sciences and History* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2008), Theodore R. Sarbin and Karl E. Scheibe, eds., *Studies in Social Identity* (New York, N.Y.: Praeger, 1983), and Kwan-Lamar Blount-Hill, "Exploring a Social Identity Theory of Shared Narrative: Insights from Resident Stories of Police Contact

temporality of storytelling and the unfolding of stories in real time. "The central implication of the time dimension for narrative is that the events in one's life can be made meaningful only in relation to other events,"[22] therefore identity can only be constructed in relation to the times and events in one's life. Sociological and other psychological viewpoints highlight the necessity of narrative identity as it relates to individual and group human development.

From a theological standpoint with specific attention to the Christian perspective, narrative identity becomes important in terms of life epistemologies and religious convictions. Both affirming and diverting from the psychological and sociological implications of narrative, theologians, theological ethicists, and philosophical ethicists conceive of narrative identity as broadly as their human science and natural science counterparts. Understanding *narrative* is central to grasping the Christian faith. "Theology is concerned with direct experiences expressed in narrative language."[23] Cognizant of the significance the category of narrative has, theologians have entered the conversation rich with the attempt to "explain human action, articulate the structures of human consciousness, to depict the identity of agents, to explain strategies of reading, to justify a view of the importance of 'story-telling', and more."[24] Christian theologian Stanley Hauerwas' conception of narrative theology entwines the story of human origins with

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in Newark, New Jersey, and Cleveland, Ohio," *Criminal Justice and Behavior* 48, no. 6 (2021): 810–27, https://doi.org/10.1177/0093854820969751.

[22]Mark Gover, "The Narrative Emergence of Identity," University of California San Diego, accessed July 10, 2023, https://cseweb.ucsd.edu/~goguen/courses/275f00/gover-narr.html.

[23]Johann Baptist Metz, "A Short Apology of Narrative" in *Why Narrative? Readings in Narrative Theology*, edited by Stanley Hauerwas and L. Gregory Jones, (Grand Rapids, Michigan: W.B. Eerdmans, 1989), 252.

[24]Hauerwas and Jones, *Why Narrative?* 4.

stories of creation, stories of end-times, and meaning-making in a particular context. Careful not to provide any one definition of narrative, he instead notes narrative is "a crucial conceptual category for such matters as understanding issues of epistemology and methods of argument, depicting personal identity, and displaying the content of Christian convictions."[25] Paraphrasing Hauerwas' and Jones' use of James Gustafson, this conception of narratives "as a crucial conceptual category" relates to four kinds of moral discourse giving way to an alternative conception of narrative, defined as that which "sustains the particular moral identity of a religious (or secular) community…shaping and sustaining the ethos of a community…functioning to give shape to our moral characters…sustaining and confirming the religious and moral identity of the Christian community, and evoke and sustain the faithfulness of its members to Jesus Christ."[26]

Humans are storytellers. How we recount, create, identify, recreate, and imagine all develops through a narrative form. Christianity is a story based in faith, and a faith based in storytelling. These two things are constantly reconciling one another, but neither avenue of understanding can be diminished. The Christian tradition is steeped in lived experiences and reflection on those experiences, all part of a narrative understanding of identity. As a *living tradition*, the oral, written, and performative transmission of central tenets, concepts and values of the Christian history is constitutive of both the collective Christian identity and individual

[25]Hauerwas and Jones, *Why Narrative?* 5.

[26]James M. Gustafson, "Varieties of Moral Discourse: Prophetic, Narrative, Ethical, and Policy," Calvin College, The Stob Lectures, 1988, 19-20. It is helpful to know that Gustafson does not end with this interpretation of narrative theology or narrative ethics, but his description provides a sufficient starting point to either align with or challenge the view through a Christian lens.

faith beliefs. Late 20th century investigations of narrative theology continue to expound on the relationship between the Christian tradition and narrative identity in a variety of ways.[27]While Christian conceptions are helpful in articulating the range of applicability narrative identity holds, it is unable to fully account for the breadth narrative studies has to offer. It does however enhance the possibilities of narrative power when placed in a context (i.e., the Christian tradition).

Literary studies provide the most in-depth analysis of narrative identity. Overlapping the fields of linguistic and cultural studies in this brief survey through scholars such as Charles Taylor and Hille Haker, these scholars entangled in literary studies put forth varied aspects of narrative identity, all of which can be and have been utilized across disciplines throughout academia. The reception of narrative via reading texts is but one aspect of one level of engagement with narrative, the second level involves reflection based in seeking understanding and developing meaning making from such texts (and oral traditions transcribed into written form). Other than syntactic and grammatical makeup, what is significant, Literary scholars across the globe and throughout academic times have attempted to figure out the ways in which text translates to, aligns with, or challenges socio historical contexts. Not only wrestling with the ways the text not only reflects the social, political, and economic 'sign of the times',[28] but also expanding and exposing possibilities of imagination outside of one's own familiarity.

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[27]Texts on narrative theology and Judaism/Early Christianity include William Richard Stegner, *Narrative Theology in Early Jewish Christianity* (Louisville, Ky: Westminster/J. Knox Press, 1989).

[28]For texts on the connection between literary analysis and cultural studies see Robert Con Davis and Ronald Schleifer, eds., *Contemporary Literary Criticism: Literary and Cultural Studies*, 2nd ed, Longman English and Humanities Series (New York: Longman, 1989), Robert Dale Parker, *How to Interpret Literature: Critical Theory for Literary and Cultural Studies*, 2nd ed (New York: Oxford University Press, 2011), and Greil Marcus and Werner Sollors, eds., *A New Literary History of America*,

One such example of this critique and expansion is found in philosopher Charles Taylor's challenge to the Hobbes, Lockean and Condillac theory (HLC) based in the rational empiricist tradition in his text *The Language Animal: The full shape of the human linguistic capacity*.[29] Based in the 17th and 18th centuries, this tradition holds that language is not a shared process of learning, but rather an objective instrument at the behest of human interaction for the purposes of "information coding"[30] Warning of the dangers of this limited view of the human linguistic capacity, Taylor argues language is constitutive to the thoughts that comprise human expression and give meaning to human experience. What the HLC tradition and others miss includes at least two things: "1. a grasp at the way in which the expressions of language portray the nature of their object; and 2. a grasp at whatever 'thick' cultural meanings, which turn out to be essential to grasp the expressions which pertain to such ranges".[31]

Considering the category of narrative, Taylor details how stories among other things "transmit certain alternatives"[32] for human beings. "Literature gives us new categories to understand life, a real sense of human possibility, and of the important choices we have to make."[33] It is from literature and other forms of narrative that the self can form and evolve. Both

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Harvard University Press Reference Library (Cambridge, Mass: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2009).

[29]For more information on the HLC tradition, see Charles Taylor, *The Language Animal: The Full Shape of the Human Linguistic Capacity* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2016).

[30]Taylor, *The Language Animal*, 103.

[31]Taylor, *The Language Animal*, 128.

[32]Taylor, *The Language Animal*, 292.

[33]Taylor, *The Language Animal*, 295.

fictional and factual literature displays the diminishing and the embellishing of human experience, understanding, and being. Reaffirming the prior studies from psychology and sociology, for Taylor, telling stories is inseparable from humanity's existence. It is how we as human beings make sense and meaning of our lives. "We live across time."[34] The stories of our lives are also the stories of the lives of others, and vice versa. Taylor concludes with the importance of narrative to identity. "But however I do it, through my story, I define my identity. And this is central to being a self."[35] By telling one's story, and participating in one's own story, one *becomes* a self.[36]

German American Feminist Ethicist Hille Haker forges the concepts of narrative identity and morality into a 'moral identity', one that builds from Paul Ricoeur' s concepts of narrative, mimesis, and identity, creating a beautiful segway from narrative identity to narrative ethics for the subsequent section. Regarding identity, Haker conceives of personal identity as having several concurrent elements, including physical immediacy (we are our bodies), reflexivity (indirect ascertainment of oneself from a distance), temporality (are in reference to time), contextuality (life histories of others), intersubjectivity (the identity ascribed by others), individuality (distinguishable from others), and most importantly for this analysis, narrativity (identity depends upon articulation).[37] Of those elements of identity, Haker questions the

[34]Taylor, *The Language Animal*, 317.

[35]Taylor, *The Language Animal*, 317.

[36]Taylor, *The Language Animal*, 381.

[37]Hille Haker, "Narrative and Moral Identity in the Work of Paul Ricoeur" in Maureen Junker-Kenny and Peter P. Kenny, eds., *Memory, Narrativity, Self and the Challenge to Think God: The*

relationship between identity and storytelling. Keeping true to her German social location, Haker's primary focus is that of German literature and German life, though for narrative identity research her major interlocutor is Ricoeur. Haker comes upon Wilhelm Schapp's approach of human beings "entangled in stories," noting stories imply narration. The entanglement is felt by the storyteller, the audience, and the story itself, as each is beholden to another. "The experience of our own bodily existence is also only possible as the experience of a story." Furthermore, while identity creation and development takes place individually through each person's unique circumstances, "the identity of a self is constituted by encounters with others and the world, and these encounters can only be comprehended as experiences only when they are articulated and interpreted - hence the turn to narration."[38] Not only is identity inherently narrative in nature, but it is just as much dependent on interactions with others as it is dependent on the self's biographical circumstances.[39] I will refer to Haker again in the narrative ethics section.

Thus far I have mentioned mostly white, Male, European authors, or some combination of the three. Many of these threads represent the dominant or 'popular' articulation of certain theories. This recognition is an apt reflection of their respective fields and the academic endeavors into narrative identity with one exception. What may or may not be evident in the

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Reception within Theology of the Recent Work of Paul Ricoeur, Religion, Geschichte, Gesellschaft, Bd. 17 (Münster: LIT, 2004), 135-137.

[38]Hille Haker, "The Responsible Self: Questions after Darwin" in Stefan Lorenz Sorgner, ed., *Evolution and the Future: Anthropology, Ethics, Religion*, Beyond Humanism: Trans- and Posthumanism, vol. 5 (Frankfurt am Main: Peter Lang GmbH, Internationaler Verlag der Wissenschaften, 2013), 29.

[39]For a brilliant analysis of Ricoeur' s narrative and moral identity by Haker, see also "The Fragility of the Moral Self," *The Harvard Theological Review* 97, no. 4 (2004): 359–81, https://www.jstor.org/stable/4495096, and Hille Haker, *Moralische Identität: Literarische Lebensgeschichten Als Medium Ethischer Reflexion: Mit Einer Interpretation Der Jahrestage von Uwe Johnson* (Tübingen: Francke, 1999).

above-mentioned scholarship is the (assumed) unintentional mention or consideration of how one's own social location impacts one's narrative expression as well as one's interpretation or reception of other narratives. As this project is focused on the ethical framework derived from the African American experience, it is only fitting to provide a paradigm of narrative identity from that perspective. Paying attention to the difference in narration and the creation of narratives between such polarities as oppressor and oppressed, native and foreigner, white and Black, both Toni Morrison's fictional works as well as her autobiographical pieces provide a critical epistemological pivot in the reflective aspects of narrative identity, away from the White, male, European perspective, towards her own social location in America. Her fictional pieces are intertwined with the narrative events of her lived experiences and the experiences of others, while her critical reflection on literature, identity and history is rooted in a groundbreaking critique of American literature from the episteme of the 'Othered'. If "cultural identities are formed and informed by a nation's literature,"[40] What does the 'American literary canon' say about the identity of non-white Americans? What does the narrative identity of slaves in American literature imply? What are the socio-historical impacts of those implications for the 21st century? What is characteristic of the African American literary canon, and what are its implications for the corresponding African American identity?

Positing that the major characteristics of American literature (and American identity) are responses to an Africanist presence and attempts to diminish, negate, or eradicate completely the fullness of experiences endured by slaves and subsequent Blacks, Morrison presents alternative

[40]Toni Morrison, *Playing in the Dark: Whiteness and the Literary Imagination*, The William E. Massey, Sr. Lectures in the History of American Civilization 1990 (Cambridge, Mass: Harvard University Press, 1992), 39.

constructions of narrative identity authentically emerging from Black lived experiences. Like Haker, Morrison both acknowledges the projected historical and literary narratives relevant to their works and critiques or diverts from them (Haker references Uwe Johnson, Dietmar Mieth and Paul Ricoeur), Morrison references William Faulkner, the history of chattel slavery, and Mark Twain). Invested in the notions of memory, recollection, remembering, and imagination, she begins by noting the origins of Black literature in the United States as slave narratives.[41] These narratives (regardless of the style and circumstance) served a twofold purpose: "1. To posit their historical life that is both unique and representative of a group (asserting both individual and collective identity), and to write to persuade the reader, who was probably not black, that we are human beings, worthy of God's grace and the immediate abandonment of slavery."[42]

As part of two marginalized groups (African American and woman), the task for Morrison in the 20th and 21st century becomes much more critical when engaging the discourse of Western narrative, because of her identity. "For me…a writer who is black and a woman" Formulating perspectives of memory, identity, possibilities and impediments through storytelling, Morrison's works are great insights into the creation of narratives, their representation of history, focusing on the 'othering' of Black folks and the literary imagination in the U.S. Morrison ponders grave moral dilemmas in her stories (through the imaginative bridge between fiction and nonfiction).[43] This will be emphasized in the next chapter. Gathering

[41]Toni Morrison, "The Site of Memory", *The Source of Self-Regard,* 233.

[42]Morrison, "The Site of Memory", *The Source of Self-Regard*, 234.

[43]One of Morrison's most renowned novels, *Beloved*, is based on the true story of enslaved woman Margaret Garner. For the complete story, see Steven Weisenburger, *Modern Medea: A Family*

'historical' news clippings, diaries, and other works of art, Morrison emphasizes the historical and social constructions expressed in African American literature as constitutive to and reflective of Black life. Again, the overlap between fiction and nonfiction is that both narratives raise similar if not the same questions, the moral questions particular to the circumstances, and the practical questions of survival in the everyday. "Narrative fiction provides a controlled wilderness, an opportunity to be and to become the Other. The stranger."[44] Without reflecting on the narratives and stories told, without questioning the identities taken on, without pondering the impact these stories have on lived experiences and vice versa, there can be no Narrative Ethics.

There can be no Narrative Ethics without Moral Questions

Now that the priority of stories and reflection on stories in connection with identity and biographies is established, it is important to specify which kind of questions confront narratives that bring about Narrative Ethics. What do narratives say about notions of human agency? Are there normative aspects to narratives that impact social, economic, and political contexts? In what ways do narratives contribute to or endanger human flourishing or 'the good life?' I evaluate these ethical questions and others by noting the intersection of literature, identity, and ethics through Paul Ricoeur, Hanna Meretoja, and Hille Haker as three possible hermeneutical stances of narrative ethics. While I agree with parts of each perspective, I conclude this section with another epistemological shift more in alignment with my social location and identity, that of

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Story of Slavery and Child-Murder from the Old South, 1st pbk. ed (New York: Hill and Wang, 1999). For Morrison's complete analysis of the historical narrative, see Toni Morrison, *The Origin of Others*, The Charles Eliot Norton Lectures, 2016 (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 2017), 75-91.

[44]Morrison, *The Origin of Others*, 91.

the womanist viewpoint. The field of narrative ethics has significantly more women scholars,[45] but not nearly enough scholars of color. By integrating 'third wave' womanist thought with 20th-21st century conceptions of narrative ethics, I produce my vision of a womanist narrative ethics.

Referenced as one of the major contributors to narrative identity and narrative ethics, Paul Ricoeur begins the sixth study in his text, *Oneself as Another* distinguishing *ethics* as 'the aim' and *morality* as the articulation of that aim in norms. From this distinction, Ricoeur articulates that the aim of human life, or the 'ethical intention' of human life is essentially relational, "aiming at the good life with and for others, in just institutions."[46] Just as narrative identity consists of the influences of others as well as is dependent on human developmental aspects of the self, the ethical dimension of human life also depends on recognition and participation of the other. Viewing narratives as the "laboratory of moral judgment,"[47] Ricoeur connects narrative to identity and morality by suggesting that through narratives humans can experiment with hypothetical moral questions. When turning narrative identity towards ethical reflection, he posits that "ethical identity requires a person to be accountable for their actions."[48] He argues that rather than view narrative as separate from the outside world, narratives "construct the identity of characters, what can be called his or her narrative identity, in constructing that of the story told. It is the identity of the story that makes the identity of the

[45]Those who identify as 'woman' or 'female'.

[46]Paul Ricœur, *Oneself as Another*, Nachdr. (Chicago, Ill.: Univ. of Chicago Pr, 2008), 172.

[47]Ricœur, *Oneself as Another*, 140.

[48]Ricœur, *Oneself as Another*, 157.

character."[49] Both the actions and interactions of a person and the reflection on those actions in relation to others constitutes a narrative ethics, the telling of stories that relay the possible avenues of human existence in search of the good life.[50]Choosing the entanglement in webs of narratives as her starting point, and heavily referencing Paul Ricoeur, philosopher Hanna Meretoja embarked to create a framework that helped to engage how narratives enlarge or diminish one's space of what's possible in her book *The Ethics of Storytelling: Narrative Hermeneutics, History, and the Possible*.[51] Treating narratives as "culturally mediated practices of (re)interpreting experience,"[52] Meretoja explores the ethical implications narratives have on human life, providing the reader with a framework designed to broaden and strengthen the connection between the stories we tell about our lives, and the possible decisions we can (or cannot) make in them.[53]

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[49]Ricœur, *Oneself as Another*, 148.

[50]For other Ricoeur texts on identity and ethics, see Paul Ricœur, *Time and Narrative. Vol. 1*, Repr, vol. 1 (Chicago, Ill.: Univ. of Chicago Press, 2009), and Paul Ricœur, *From Text to Action*, New ed, Northwestern University Studies in Phenomenology and Existential Philosophy 2 (Evanston, Ill: Northwestern University Press, 2007).

[51]Hanna Meretoja and Hanna Meretoja, *The Ethics of Storytelling: Narrative Hermeneutics, History, and the Possible*. Explorations in Narrative Psychology (New York: Oxford University Press, 2018).

[52]Meretoja, *The Ethics of Storytelling*, 2.

[53]For further explorations in narrative and the humanities, see Molly Andrews, *Narrative Imagination and Everyday Life* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014), Lars-Christer Hydén, *Entangled Narratives: Collaborative Storytelling and the Re-Imagining of Dementia*, Explorations in Narrative Psychology (New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 2018), Jack J. Bauer, *The Transformative Self: Personal Growth, Narrative Identity, and the Good Life*, Explorations in Narrative Psych Series (New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 2021), and Dan P. McAdams, Ruthellen Josselson, and Amia Lieblich, eds., *Identity and Story: Creating Self in Narrative*, 1st ed, [The Narrative Study of Lives, v. 4] (Washington, DC: American Psychological Association, 2006).

From an ethics and morality standpoint, Haker echoes Ricoeur' s ethical intention as a relational moral identity, one that is steeped in recognition and encounters with others. Considering these experiences can only be articulated and interpreted in a narrative manner, the reflection on one's actions (or one's life stor(ies), the actions of others, and the norms on which the actions are judged, create a narrative ethical reflection. She interprets Ricoeur' s view of morality in the ability for the self to care for self and others, while simultaneously respecting the others' freedom to act in their own way in the context of just institutions.[54] Just as the narrative of self overlaps, interacts, and yet remains distinct from the narrative of others, so does the morality of the self depend on while remaining distinct from the morality of others. When the agent makes an ethical claim, they establish a sense of "normative morality…meaning that integrity for respect for one's own self as an autonomous subject, respect for other people and institutionalized respect in the form of a person's principle of justice arise as 'ought' claims of obligation which [one] has to confront. Haker takes Ricoeur' s moral conceptions further by highlighting the responsibility inherent in a narrative moral identity. Constituting the memory, history, and imagination like Morrison and Womanist Ethicist Townes, Haker defines responsibility as both 'responsiveness and accountability' in a narrative manner, instituting *memory* by taking stock of the historical past, being cognizant of the present *choices* being made, and the *effects* those choices have on the future possibilities.[55]

Haker however disagrees with Meretoja, and it is here where I align with Haker's understanding of negative universalism. Again building from Ricoeur' s understanding of moral

[54]Haker, "The Responsible Self: Questions after Darwin," 32.

[55]Haker, "The Responsible Self: Questions after Darwin," 32.

identity and the act of spontaneous benevolence that 'wills' individuals to act in the best interest of self and others, both Ricoeur and Haker acknowledge the potential and possibility for one to do *violence, harm,* or *ill will* to another, under the guise of good intention or aiming for the good.[56] What happens when the enactment of one's rights leads to violence experienced by another? How does the ethical intention of striving for a good life justify the harm? In short, it does not. To this extent, the ethical intent must move beyond the teleological understanding of striving towards some end and render another moral claim of higher priority. It is here that the intention to goodness evolves into an imperative of right, namely 'do not incur harm or violence to others,' which becomes posited as a negative ethical claim. For Haker, (and for myself), the ethical claim to 'the good life with and for others in just institutions' begins with the negative formulation 'without the threat of harm or suffering.' It is this negative moral claim that I will return to in the final chapter, confronting an authentic moral dilemma with my ethical framework. When contemplating moral dilemmas, claims and rights, not only do positive rights and claims matter, but negative claims as well. One ought not to experience harm, hurt, or suffering at the expense of another's striving for a good life. This experience, or this constant threat of hurt or harm, is part of the normative structure of African-American life, and greatly impacts their episteme of agency, autonomy, justice, and survival.

[56]Haker, "The Responsible Self: Questions after Darwin," 31.

Womanist Theological Ethicists have mastered interpreting negative universalism into spontaneous possibilities of life by centering their epistemological privilege.[57] A historical lineage of balancing all the above-mentioned aspects of identity, selfhood, narrative and ethics, under the presumption of being non-human. The womanist perspective confronts dominant (and any) ethical norms that assume certain principles of life, such as political freedom and autonomy, that are not ascribed to the lives of Black bodies.[58] From pre-academic contexts when slave narratives demanded human recognition, proclaimed freedom in their spirits, and navigated unthinkable dilemmas, moral and otherwise, to Delores Williams' 'Making a Way out of no way' in Black theology with her own critical biblical exegesis through a critical sociohistorical lens based in her identity, Black women's moral agency is deeply entrenched in the stories of the their lives and the faith of their people. No other group in modern history has more poignantly asked, against all the normativity and metanarratives comprising the 'American Identity, '*Am I not human too?' 'Ain't I a Woman?'* Part of expressing one's humanity is the telling of one's story, the creation and expression of one's being, the struggle and survival of the self.

Unique to African Americans and other marginalized bodies is this struggle for recognition. These battles over negative universals do not necessarily happen at momentous points in one's life, but rather, these dilemmas are encountered in everyday living. The constant intermingling of stories, the entanglement of ethical responsibilities, the striving for the good life with and for others in just (and unjust) institutions, the mutual exchange of possible

[57]I call it a privilege because we now know what used to be considered 'subjugated knowledge' is a robust perspective only garnered from the viewpoint of the 'other'.

[58]Melanie L. Harris, *Gifts of Virtue, Alice Walker, and Womanist Ethics*, Black Religion, Womanist Thought, Social Justice (New York Basingstoke (GB): Palgrave Macmillan, 2013), 54.

misrecognition, these instances of womanist interpretations of moral agency, justice, and survival, these take place during the movements of day-to-day life. Explaining the daily ethical positioning of African American women and the significance of meaning-making while 'making a way out of no way' creates an ethic, an ethic that centers the experiences of Black people and women as valid starting points for interpreting norms, values, and claims assumed as natural but contradict their lived realities and the realities of many others. It is in this centering, in this formal recognition of an epistemological shift to the lived realities of marginalized bodies, that narrative ethics takes on a womanist lens, and hones its scope down to the movements of and reflections on everyday life.

More than a Narrative: An Ethic(s) of Practical Everyday Life

Haker notes that narratives (stories) are a medium of and for ethical reflection.[59] I agree with a slight amendment, stories are a medium of ethical reflection, but they are related to practices as a medium for ethical reflection too. As much as storytelling and other forms of narrative are important, minoritized bodies such as African Americans are 'consumed' to a certain extent by the immediacy of surviving the everyday. Yes, there is a Narrative Ethics, but a Black Narrative Ethics must attend to the very experiences that are told in the stories, experiences rooted in survival practices of everyday life. Therefore, a Black Narrative Ethics is not just a Narrative Ethics, but a Black Narrative Ethics of Survival that is articulated and reflected in the storytelling of the everyday.

[59]Hille Haker, *Moralische Identität: Literarische Lebensgeschichten Als Medium Ethischer Reflexion: Mit Einer Interpretation Der Jahrestage von Uwe Johnson* (Tübingen: Francke, 1999).

Building from liberation and womanist theologies, Mujerista theologian Ada Maria Isasi-Diaz elegantly and articulately depicts the focus of my chapter from her own social location, naming the amazing, creative, and spontaneous movements and processes that arise out of one's simple quest to maneuver and survive daily. Though her context is that of Latin/x and Hispanic women, her ability to transpose womanist ideology onto Hispanic history and circumstances reiterates the equitable impact of the womanist praxis on global humanity.

Ada Maria Isasi-Diaz: 'La Lucha' et 'Lo Cotidiano'

The liberation theology of the 1970s brought with it a host of issues including clericalism, classism, and reinforced certain notions of gender conformity and gender bias regarding roles in the Church and what was necessary for the salvation of souls. Scholars and members of the community noticed the importance of centering biblical narratives and theological investigations in the guides of grassroot experiences. Asking similar questions to that of her womanist contemporaries while at Union Theological Seminary, Cuban American theologian Ada Maria Isasi-Diaz posed the question, 'What does it mean to take the experience of oppressed and poor Latin/x grassroot women seriously as a way of how we come to know faith and the world?' With the goals of "providing a platform for the voices of Latina grassroots women through engaging a liberative praxis, developing a theological method that takes seriously the religious understandings and practices of Latinas as a source for theology; to challenge theological understandings, church teachings, and religious practices that oppress Latina women, that are not life-giving, and therefore, cannot be theologically correct,"[60] Isasi-

[60]Ada María Isasi-Díaz, *Mujerista Theology: A Theology for the Twenty-First Century* (Maryknoll, N.Y: Orbis Books, 1996), 1.

Diaz's texts *Mujerista Theology: a theology for the 21st century* and *La Lucha Continues: Mujerista Theology*[61] energize organic divergences flowing from personal experience, building from the epistemological turn taken by womanist scholars, aimed at transformative praxis.

In both texts, Isasi-Diaz follows womanist theologian Monica Coleman in asserting *Mujerista* theology is not exclusively *for* Latinas but is epistemologically rooted in the perspective of Latinas intrinsic to Hispanic/Latino theology in the United States. Just as the North American context is unique and cannot be overlooked for liberation, Black, womanist and queer theologies, it must also be considered for *Mujerista* praxis. Describing what Mujerista anthropology is, Isasi-Diaz introduces and details two extremely critical terms, *la lucha* and *lo cotidiano,* translated as 'the struggle' and 'the everyday' respectively. These terms are not only central to understanding her view of Hispanic/Latin/x theology, but terms I find aptly characterize womanist praxes. As a valid starting point for fully comprehending the lives of Latin/x women, Isasi-Diaz implores *la lucha*, calling attention to "how they (Hispanic grassroots women) manage to live in the midst of such arduous, demanding, rough and trying realities, in the midst of great suffering."[62] *La Lucha* represents what it means to live life and celebrate love amid suffering. By acknowledging the suffering and struggling ensued by Hispanic women "is not necessarily or at least mainly her fault, but due to oppression,"[63] Isasi-Diaz notes this acknowledgement strengthens community, camaraderie, and solidarity amongst one another and

[61]Ada María Isasi-Díaz, *La Lucha Continues: Mujerista Theology* (Maryknoll, N.Y: Orbis Books, 2004).

[62]Isasi-Díaz, *Mujerista Theology*, 129.

[63]Isasi-Díaz, *Mujerista Theology*, 130.

in between minoritized groups. The struggle is, among other things, a search for the good life. "The struggle for survival then, is not only a struggle not to die, not only a struggle to live but only barely. It is a struggle to live fully…The good life does not ignore suffering. It struggles to go beyond it, to evade it."[64]

Coinciding with *la lucha, lo cotidiano* draws attention to how Latin/x women consider norms, discourses, social roles, and themselves.[65] So central to her development of *Mujerista Theology*, Isasi-Diaz dedicates an entire chapter in *La Lucha Continues* to ensure the reader grasped the magnitude *lo cotidiano* and its implications. *Lo cotidiano* is not the end, but rather the starting point for how to think about the struggle to live fully in everyday life. In *La Lucha Continues*, Isasi-Diaz gives a more thorough analysis of *lo cotidiano* as integral to a *Mujerista* theology. Though she admits *lo cotidiano* is a complex concept not easily defined,[66] Isasi-Diaz contours and shapes the necessity and vitality it provides grassroots Latin/x women as situating them in their here-and-now lives. It is the historical and contemporary narratives of lives, similar yet distinct. Intrinsic to the term is the "unmethodical-ness", or spontaneity the term implies. Considered inconsistent by those unfamiliar with the ontological difficulties of marginal bodies, *lo cotidiano* indicates the core of the lived reality as seen day in and day out by those focused on survival. In a society where they are face to face with the daily procurement of their well-being, 'the everyday' represents the simultaneous tactical and uninhibited responses to moments and movements in life.

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[64]Isasi-Díaz, *Mujerista Theology*, 131.

[65]Isasi-Díaz, *Mujerista Theology*, 131.

[66]Isasi-Díaz, *La Lucha Continues*, 95.

Not only does *lo cotidiano* refer to ways of being in the world, but it is also indicative of epistemology, or knowing. The descriptive function of the term allows for new narratives and new life stories defined by those marginalized. For Isasi-Diaz, "it is only when we are self-defining that we become historical subjects capable of conceiving new narratives… new narratives that break the hegemony…a hegemony that has contributed much to produce and maintain prejudices and oppressive structures."[67] *Lo cotidiano* gives space for alternative truths, for the validation of narratives from the underside of history. It enacts a "responsible relativism," one that "helps us to see knowledge and truths as different explanations of reality, explanations not necessarily exclusive of each other but often in agreement, at least partially."[68] Isasi-Diaz's integration of the liberation framework with an emphasis on womanist methodologies reflects the unlimited potential of the womanist praxis to impact and influence all women, and all people. For this reason, although I favor Floyd-Thomas's understanding of womanist as an embodied 'Blackwoman', I would consider Isasi-Diaz a womanist by association, or a progenitor of the womanist praxis, as her intellectual contributions are a direct result of her reality, vital to the grounding of the womanist tradition.

Conclusion: Implementing A Womanist Narrative Ethics of Survival

Thus far I have argued there can be no Womanist Narrative Ethics without the presence of three salient features: 1. There can be no Womanist Narrative Ethics without narratives in the form of stories. We are narrative and storytelling creatures. It is how we convey thoughts and expressions to one another, and how we make sense of ourselves and of the world. 2. There can

[67]Isasi-Díaz, *La Lucha Continues*, 98.

[68]Isasi-Díaz, *La Lucha Continues*, 103.

be no Womanist Narrative Ethics without reflection on narratives and how we construct identities via those narratives. We must question the stories we are told. What value do they bring to one's life? Is there a 'lesson' to be learned, or a concept to be remembered? What is the relationship between fictional and historical narratives in the telling of one's story? How does this narrative reflect, contradict, or question one's possible experiences? 3. There can be no Womanist Ethics without reflection on moral questions. Narratives inherently have a moral component, as they are inescapably linked to the actions, reactions, and interactions of people. Narratives beg the question of agency, of justice, of right and wrong v. good and bad. In addition to *what* moral questions are asked, it is equally important for *who* is asking the moral questions. Each person's episteme impacts their processing regarding decision-making, meaning making, and what they conceive of as a 'good life with and for others.' The womanist episteme assures that the moral questions asked appeal to human dignity in those least dignified, rooted in survival. To be a Womanist Narrative Ethics, the framework cannot remain in the realm of the theoretical positions, but must be a living, breathing, and moving entity expressed in the beautiful, diverse, and sometimes tragic lives of those wrestling with dehumanizing affairs. An ethical framework is only as valid as the results it produces when tested against contemporary moral dilemmas in need of ethical reflection.

CHAPTER FIVE

ANALYZING THE MORAL TRAGEDY IN THE NOVEL *SING, UNBURIED, SING* USING A WOMANIST NARRATIVE ETHICS OF SURVIVAL

This project began with and is centered around the ethical framework inhabited by African Americans, aptly expressed in narratives such as Jesmyn Ward's *Sing, Unburied, Sing*. I want to show that African American narratives such as Ward's, Morrison's, and the lived stories of everyday people inhabit a distinct episteme and framework to navigate surviving the world, constitutive to their identity. I briefly mentioned the negative universalism that Ricoeur and Haker speak of regarding the right 'not to endure harm'. I also touched on the beautiful fictionalizing Toni Morrison did to Margaret Garner's real-lived experience to create the fictional piece *Beloved.* What I have intentionally glossed over is the momentous moral dilemma the reader is faced with in both Ward and Morrison, that now beg for ethical reflection. The final chapter of this project conducts an ethical analysis of Ward's climactic scene in *SUS*, referencing Morrison's basis of *Beloved* as the literary progenitor. Focusing on the moral dilemma in the narrative and distinct ethical outcome, I will conclude with how this framework of decision making and meaning making, from their food to their faith, to acting and reflecting on actions as a part of survival, is ingrained the narrative identity of African Americans.

The Beginning of the End

Of the four tenets of womanist theological ethics coined by Alice Walker, I am most aptly participating in the fourth, 'critical engagement.'[1] This project names, constructs, and puts to use a particular ethical framework rooted in the lives of marginalized bodies. It commenced with the critical engagement of a literary text. My literary analysis of Jezmyn Ward's *Sing, Unburied, Sing*, is no different from other scholars who engage the novel. It highlights all the main characters, some unique relationships among those characters, motives, antagonists, protagonists, symbols, themes, and the plot. It is from this analysis that my preceding chapters unfolded through interdisciplinary studies, ending at the construction and implementation of an ethical framework. The previous chapter hinted at the interdisciplinary origins of my narrative ethics of survival framework, distinguishing the unique interjection of the womanist epistemology as a valid source of moral wisdom. This final chapter will revisit the novel, framing the conflict raised in the text in terms of a particular kind of *moral dilemma, a moral tragedy*. Observing the misstep of traditional ethical frameworks to adequately consider the contexts, circumstances and narratives of marginalized bodies contributing to the dilemma, I implement my framework as a sufficient and authentic lens that centers epistemologies contrary to normative ethics. Like the dilemma faced by Margaret Garner, later fictionalized character Sethe in Toni Morrison's *Beloved*, the character Pa is confronted with an unimaginable dilemma that presents a fascinating contention between competing obligations.

[1]See Alice Walker, *In Search of Our Mother's Garden.*

Revisiting *Sing, Unburied, Sing*

As a symbolic and literal rite of passage, Jojo is with his grandfather 'Pop' (named River), getting ready to slaughter a goat for his 13th birthday meal. "I'd like to think I know what death is. I like to think that it's something I could look at straight."[2] Waiting for Pop's instruction to assist with the animal, Jojo reminisces on his relationship and admiration of his grandfather. While his grandmother, dying of cancer, and younger sister sleep in the house, Pop slaughters and prepares the goat outside, with the process becoming overwhelming for Jojo, as his admiral maturity is temporarily stifled by the reality of his youth at the sight and smell of the butchered animal, he runs outside to vomit. We are led to believe early on that Jojo can understand or relate to animals, he expresses feeling what they feel, and hearing their *bleeps* and *bahhs* as words and phrases. Surrounded by the chaos of the male and female farm animals who've witnessed the death of the goat in the barn, Jojo is reminded of the chaos and turbulence he has witnessed from his parents. He concludes his teacher is befallen to a similar fate based on witnessing his parents' chaotic interactions.[3] In addition to Jojo's inner monologues, we are introduced to Pop's open storytelling of his time at Parchman prison to Jojo. Sent to prison for no other reason than racism, Pop (along with his brother Stag who defended himself in the actual bar fight) were incarcerated. "When all them White men came to get Stag, they tied both of us and took us up the road. You boys is going to learn what it means to work, they said. To do right by the law of God and man, they said. You boys is going to Parchman."[4] It was during this incarceration, 15-

[2]Jesmyn Ward, *Sing, Unburied, Sing,* 1.

[3]Ward, *SUS,* 26.

[4]*SUS,* 19.

year-old River met 12-year-old Richie, one of two haunting spirits in the novel. “I was fifteen. But I wasn’t the youngest noway…that was Richie.”[5] In preparing Jojo’s birthday meal, Pop retells another ‘coming of age’ story from his time at Parchman at Jojo’s request, the story of himself (Pop, or River, his name), Stag, and Richie.

The retelling is interrupted however when Jojo’s younger sister, Kayla, wakes up. It is clear Jojo is her primary comforter, she calls for him, and he is already in anticipation of her daily needs and her routine. “Jojo? she asks. That’s what she always says, even when Leonie is next to her in bed. That’s the reason I can’t sleep on the love seat with Pop in the living room anymore; when Kayla was a baby, she got so used to me coming in the middle of the night with her bottle.”[6] The reader becomes privy to the absence of Leonie as experienced by her children and her parents, and Jojo even monologues the severe gap between himself and his mother. “Sometimes I think I understand everything else more than I’ll ever understand Leonie.”[7] Instead of the traditional cake Jojo is used to receiving from his grandmother, she is too ill for this birthday, and instead, Leonie has purchased a baby shower cake, perhaps a simple last minute gesture with good intentions, or perhaps reminiscent of the future hopes and dreams that come with newly minted motherhood, but in stark contrast to the rite of passage the reader is witnessing.[8] Leonie’s attention is soon diverted at the ringing of the telephone, readers soon find it is Jojo’s father, Michael, after whom Kayla (Michaela) was named, calling to announce his

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[5]*SUS*, 19.

[6]*SUS*, 19.

[7]*SUS*, 25.

[8]*SUS*, 28.

release from Parchman where he is currently incarcerated for drugs. The introductory chapter ends with the echo of Michael over the phone, *I'm coming home.*[9]

The relationship between Leonie and Michael's parents has always been non-existent for obvious racial reasons. The two biracial children resulting from their love (Jojo and Kayla) only heightened the tension between Michael's white parents and Leonie, but it is not the origins of discontent between the families. Leonie is a drug addict, and when she is high, she can see her dead brother Given.[10] Recall that Given was killed by Michael's cousin in a botched 'hunting accident' in high school after Given won a hunting contest and the white teen became angry. Due to the race and power dynamics, the 'hunting accident' was the narrative dispersed to the community, to Leonie's parents, and to the courts. A year later, Michael introduced himself to Leonie and apologized for his cousin's ill behavior. They talked for some time, and 'the rest is history.' Leonie's best friend Misty is white, but her boyfriend is black. Leonie claims this 'love across color lines' as one of their friendship bonding points. Leonie is black dating a white man who is incarcerated, and Misty is white dating a black man who is also incarcerated. Many parts of the family dynamic are revealed in Leonie's introductory viewpoint. She often reminisces of her mother teaching her the rootwork of the Gulf Coast, recognizing everybody has a gift, but Mam, her ancestors, and her descendants, had powers to see and speak to the dead, had powers of maternal and doula instinct, and natural healing gifts, with Leonie and her children being no exception. Jojo hints at understanding the language of the animals, and the reader just learned

[9]*SUS,* 30.

[10]*SUS,* 33.

Leonie sees her dead brother when under the influence. We will soon learn whether Kayla also has a gift, and how it is connected to Pop's story.

Almost every major concept of the novel is elevated during the actual trip to Parchman. Currently, Pop's storytelling of Parchman introduces the reader and re-introduces Richie and his situation. At just 12 years old and stealing food for his sick and poor family, Richie was a child sent to do work no adult could do without struggle, let alone a child. Pop takes pity on Richie, and though Riv was only 15 at the time, he took to Richie in almost a father/son relationship. Like the horrors at Parchman, Pop revisits his grandmother's stories of the middle passage, and the unimaginable horrors that seem to repeat themselves once again.

> She learned that bad things happened on that ship, all the way until it docked. That her skin grew around the chains. That her mouth shaped to the muzzle. That she was made into an animal under the hot, bright sky, the same sky the rest of her family was under, somewhere…in another world. I knew what that was, to be made a animal.[11]

Pop's story transitions back to Parchman, he is careful to tell Jojo of Kinnie, the inmate caretaker for the dogs used in tracking down runaway inmates. This position was always a White man, but Pop was given the responsibility of tending to the Prison dogs and leading them on the hunt for escaped inmates, of which he was a natural. On a tracking expedition that ended in Kinnie killing a man from over two hundred yards away, Kinnie said, "Everybody got a line - something to break them"[12] almost foreshadowing either the current narrative on the trip to pick up Michael, or the subsequent part of Pop's story, the reader is unsure at this point.

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[11]*SUS,* 69.

[12]*SUS,* 76.

In addition to the details of Leonie's mothering and decision-making, the reader is given a distinct historical narrative. Weaved in and out of the perspectives are the religious and 'rootwork' history of the geographical region, experiential pieces of the transatlantic slave trade, and the emergence, evolution, and perpetual unyielding of the mass incarceration system, all reminisced on the car ride to north Mississippi.[13] We are given a firsthand look at Leonie's capacities as an adult and the impacts of her decisions on those closest to her. She decides to take both Jojo and Kayla to pick up their father, a decision Pop does not agree with. Before they leave, Pop makes Jojo a *gris gris bag*[14] and slips it into his pocket for protection, which Jojo finds later. En route to Parchman, Leonie, Misty and the children stop off at Misty's friends' house, which later turns out to be a drug trafficking ordeal confirmed by Jojo's familiar suspicion: "I know I've seen this before, know that smell because when Michael built his learn-to in the woods behind Mam and Pop's house, it looked and smelled like this… the man is cooking…but there is nothing to eat here."[15] Leonie's choice to participate in trafficking with Misty illustrated her selfishness and failure to prioritize her children. Her decision was motivated by her future with Michael, not the survival and wellbeing of her children. Misty says to Leonie the night of Jojo's birthday party after Michael called: 'If we do this, the trip's paid for…you and Michael could have enough for a deposit. Y'all could get your own place. You always say the

[13]In a conversation Michael has with Leonie prior to his release he says, 'This ain't no place for no man, Black or White. Don't make no difference. This a place for the dead,' Ward, *SUS,* 96.

[14]A small bag with tiny trinkets and remnants carried around for good luck.

[15]*SUS,* 88.

problem is y'all parents. Yours 'cause you live with them; his because they're assholes'."[16] There are many points throughout Leonie's narrative where her hope and peace lie in her relationship with Michael, but the reality of that relationship most aptly displays itself in her inability to mother her children, or provide a stable living environment for herself or her children.

In the middle of the road trip, Kayla develops an illness. Despite Leonie's best attempts at consoling her child, she fails, and Kayla vomits constantly in the car. Jojo does his best cleaning up the mess and keeping Kayla calm. Noticing the closeness between her children, Leonie expresses jealousy and an acute awareness. "I'm tired of this shit… I don't know why I say it…maybe because part of me wanted her to leap for me…maybe because I want her to burrow in to me for succor instead of her brother…all his attention on the body in his arms, the little person he's trying to soothe, and my attention is everywhere. Even now, my devotion: inconstant."[17] Though she recognizes her own shortcomings, she ultimately blames the world for what it gives, or rather what it withholds. Searching for an herbal remedy to alleviate Kayla's vomiting, Leonie reprimands herself for not being more attentive when her mother was teaching her how to treat the body and survive using the earth. Reflecting on the advancing cancer and how nature failed to cure her mother, she is now frustrated over the failure to provide something identifiable to treat her child. "Sometimes the world don't give you what you need, no matter how hard you look. Sometimes it withholds."[18] After the stop at the trafficking location and a gas

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[16]*SUS,* 91.

[17]*SUS,* 98.

[18]*SUS,* 104.

station pull off, the group end up at Michael's lawyer, Al's house for the evening. The next morning, the group reconvenes and makes their way to the prison. Upon arriving at Parchman prison are we enlightened to the full extent of Jojo and Kayla's gifts:

> "Jojo." I walk across the parking lot, closer to the fields with her. "What do you see, Kayla?" I ask. "All the birds," she says, and coughs. I look out the fields but I don't see birds. I squint and for a second I see men bent the waist, row after row of them, picking at the ground, looking like a great murder of crows landed and chattering and picking for bugs in the ground. One, shorter than the rest, stands and looks straight at me.

Ward is brilliant in her switch back and forth through monologues. It is here, seeing the 'bird', that Jojo remembers the last bit of the story Pop was willing to share. The young boy Richie was severely beaten one day at the prison, and Riv (Pop) tended to his wounds. The next day Richie was sent back out in the fields, his sores oozing blood and puss. He remembers telling the boy he must keep his wounds clean, and Richie shaking his head back and forth doubled over in pain in the dirt, almost delirious. "Something ain't right." Pop said to himself. He could tell something was off with the young man, save the fact he was beaten the day prior. Richie only said the words, "I'm going home."[19] In the novel this scene is important, effortlessly shifting from the present release of Michael to the past story of Pop and Richie, blending the two points in time into the single present. Michael is picked up, the family and friends pack into the car to return to the Gulf, and Kayla vomits again. When this moment ensues, Jojo notices a 'dark, skinny boy with a patchy afro and a long neck,'[20] standing by the side of the car. Kayla also notices a figure close to them. "The bird, the bird," she says. What Jojo sees as a boy; Kayla sees

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[19]*SUS,* 126.

[20]*SUS,* 130.

as a bird. When the boy leans to the window and says, "I'm going home," the reader realizes this is Richie, the young boy from Pop's Parchman story.

Chapter one of this project spoke to the significance of history 'haunting' or being a ghostly specter to present narratives. While the perceived positive or joyful moments in history can be nostalgic and sentimental, the negative, traumatic, and unnatural moments in history linger, endures, and haunts the present. Symbolic of the unseen, the unspoken, the repressed and the forgotten, no one is free from the specter, illustrating the pervasiveness of history, cautioning of its repetitive abilities. When looking at history through a narrative lens, we see that history is his*tory-telling*, a blending of multiple stories into a complex illustration with the purpose of providing meaning to actions and events. Ward's novel shows that every movement, moment, and thought is connected in some way to the past and influences the future.

For the first time in the novel, the perspective is from one of the haunting specters, Richie (Leonie's brother Given who appears when she is high being the other, and Richie's narrative via Pop's story is 'haunting' the road story to Parchman for Michael). The phantom of Riv's (and Parchman's past) is present alongside the unfolding events. Richie's perspective provides the strongest interactions with the supernatural/transcendental elements that have mildly surfaced through other characters. Richie recalls 'awakening' to be stuck in a "stand of young pine trees."[21] Having no previous direct experience of Richie, the reader is unsure what contextual period (or form) Richie is in.[22] Recounting the earliest memories of this experience, he says:

[21]*SUS*, 134.

[22]We know Given-Not-Given is a ghost, but currently, we are unaware as a reader the metaphysical shape Richie takes. If he is dreaming, if this is an embodied experience, or is it the narrative of a ghost.

> In that day that never ended, I watched the tops of the trees toss, and I tried to remember how I got there. Who I was before this place, before this quiet haunt. But I couldn't. So when I saw a white snake, thick and long as my arm, slither out of the shadows beneath the trees, I knelt before it.[23]

Richie speaks with the snake who proposes he can lead Richie 'away' if he wants it. There are things he needs to see. It is here again where Ward's vivid imagery and the reality of the supernatural dance beautifully, using wordplay as their platform. Richie watches the snake transform into a horned vulture. From one of its scaly wings, Richie clenches a scale,

> and I rose up on my tiptoes and suddenly I wasn't on the ground anymore. I flew...I spread my arms and legs and felt a laugh bubbling up in me, but it died in my throat. Because I remembered. I remembered before. I remembered being spread-eagle in the dirt, surrounded by hunched, milling men, and a teenage boy at my shoulder who stood tall under the long shadows. River. River, who stood as the men flayed my back, as I sobbed and vomited and turned the earth to mud. I could feel him there, knew that he would carry me after they let me loose from the earth…The way he carried me to my cot, the way he bent over me, made something soft and fluttery as a jellyfish pulse in my chest. That was my heart. Him my big brother. Him, my father.[24]

His flight and reminiscing are interrupted as more and more of his historical narrative comes to his consciousness. He is dropped in the fields of Parchman Prison.

> This is where I worked, this is where I was whipped…This is where River protected me…Tried to find River. He wasn't there…Men left, men returned and left again…until the scaly bird returned and led me to the car, to the boy the same age as me sitting in the back of the car. Jojo.[25]

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[23]*SUS,* 134.

[24]*SUS,* 135.

[25]*SUS,* 136.

From Richie we learn a different, yet similar perspective of Pop, we learn of River Red. His memories of Riv are full of care, protection, and a sense of authentic nurturing that Riv's time at Parchman as well. "I want to tell the boy that I know the man who sired him. That I knew him before this boy."[26] It is Richie who confirms what the reader suspected from the last chapter, that Jojo indeed has a gift to sense beyond the ordinary. Watching the way Jojo consoles Kayla, Richie thinks "I realize there is another scent in his blood. This is where he differs from River. This scent blooms stronger than the dark rich mud of the bottom, it is the salt of the sea, burning with brine. It pulses in the current of his veins. This is part of the reason he can see me while the others, except the little girl, can't."[27] While he decides to keep this knowledge of Jojo and Riv (Pop) to himself, he does settle in the car with them, 'in the crumbled pits of paper and plastic that littered the bottom of the car.' He 'crouches like the scaly bird,' and prepares for the journey with the family and friends back to the Gulf Coast, back to Riv.

Michael (and Richie) is in the car, and the group is set to drive back to the coast, save for a stop at Michael's lawyer's house. Michaela's illness has resulted in the entire group smelling like vomit, and upon settling in for the evening, Leonie attempts to bathe Kayla. Kayla's thrashing and obnoxious behavior quickly becomes overwhelming for her. "She kicks. I want to hit her." Finding no relief once the bath is done, she deflects the rest of Kayla's hygiene to Jojo, who she knows has been watching the entire ordeal "like a blue jay mother, ready to dart in and peck if I do her wrong."[28] "Get her dressed. Put her to sleep for a nap. Don't leave this room. I

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[26]*SUS,* 136.

[27]*SUS,* 140-141.

[28]*SUS,* 146.

slam the door."[29] Leonie's true devotion and desire are quickly exposed as she 'runs out of the hallway and see Michael standing in the milky light, my anger turn so quickly to love I stop, silenced.'[30] Her inadequacies so sharply identified by her family, or her lack of presence in her family structure, all but melt away to feelings of happiness, hope, and simplicity with Michael. She is so completely captivated by Michael and the surreal possibilities his presence brings, she thinks to herself, "If we had another baby, we could get it right."[31] Leonie plays back the conversation she and her mother had about Michael. We see Mam had a gift to read people, to see beyond what was shown to her, and Leonie's blind love for Michael was no exception. "All you hear, all you see, is him," Mama said… "Everytime you say something, you look at him like a little puppy dog. Like you waiting on him to pet you." It was during these same conversations that her mother warned her about having protected sex, and her relief when she told her mother she was pregnant at seventeen with no reprimand.

The car ride from Parchman once again showcases Leonie's inability to comfort and provide maternal guidance to her children, through the experience of another troubling aspect of racism in America, police brutality. Leonie's dreaming recollection of being pregnant with Jojo is interrupted as Michael alerts her the police are following behind them. The ride home and the police incident are told from various simultaneous perspectives, the first being Leonie, the next two being Jojo and Richie. Unbeknownst to the reader, Michael's lawyer Al had given the group a small bag of drugs out of the larger bag they delivered to him. Unable to throw the baggie out

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[29]*SUS,* 146.

[30]*SUS,* 146.

[31]*SUS,* 150.

the window, Leonie swallows it. Questioning by the officer leads to everyone exiting the car and being handcuffed, including Jojo. With Kayla screaming around Jojo's neck and Misty attempting to harness Kayla, it isn't until the police officer is pointing a gun at her son, that Leonie sees him for the child he is, and for a moment she is filled with what may be the closest thing identified as maternal rage over the absolute disregard for the innocence in front of her, but due to her circumstances (both the literal of her swallowing the pack of meth, and her metaphorical inability to mother her children), she has no words, no gestures, no energy of protection to afford to her children.

It is astonishing that we are once again witness to the grave differences between an adult mother and teenage son/teenage brother, the stark lack of empathy exhibited by Leonie, and the natural, nurturing, comforting companionship Jojo relentlessly devotes to Kayla. "It's easy to forget how young Jojo is until I see him standing next to the police officer. It's easy to look at him…and think he's grown. But he's just a baby. And when he starts reaching in his pocket and the officer draws his gun on him, points it at his face, Jojo ain't nothing but a fat-kneed, bowlegged toddler. I should scream, but I can't."[32] While Leonie is stuck and lost in a confused and overwhelming state, the high from the meth she swallowed has kicked in, and Given-Not-Given appears, 'witnessing' to the entire ordeal. Jojo "only has eyes for Michaela. He twists his neck to look at her, speaks to her."[33]

From Jojo's (and Richie's) perspective, the experience is a first of its kind for Jojo. While the officer is questioning everyone and taking them out of the car, there is anguish, fear and pride

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[32]*SUS,* 163.

[33]*SUS,* 164.

in Jojo's subconscious as he is handcuffed and told to sit. Looking for relief, he remembers Pop's *gris gris* bag in his pocket, when he goes to reach for it, the officer becomes alerted and points his gun directly at Jojo. The officer searches the pouch in Jojo's pocket, as well as the car, and lets the group go, reminding them to keep the baby in the car seat, but Jojo is traumatized by the incident. "The image of the gun stays with me. Even after Kayla throws up, after the police officer checks my pants and lets me out of them biting handcuffs, even after we are all in the car and riding down the road with Leonie bent over sick in the front seat, the black gun is still there."[34] Richie begins to ask Jojo questions about Riv until they pull off to a gas station to get charcoal and milk for Leonie's stomach. Misty and Michael are attempting to pour the concoction down Leonie's throat. "That's your mama?" Richie asks Jojo. "No." he says, and he doesn't explain any of the circumstances or clarify to Richie. After Leonie's vomiting spell and the group is back on the road, Richie inquires more into his own story as told by Riv to Jojo. Revealing the extent of abuse experienced inside the prison, Richie was unable to maintain the needed mental toughness to persevere through his sentence. "I couldn't live with it. So I decided to run. Did Riv tell you that?" Jojo nodded his head. "I guess I didn't make it…but I don't know how. I need to know how. Riv will know."[35] We as the readers are taken back to Kinnie's remarks 'everybody got a breaking point,' and we are cognizant that foreshadowing is coming to light. Jojo becomes uneasy, and his monologue reveals he does not want to hear more of the story. "Pop has never told me the story of what happened to Richie when he ran. Every time I

[34]*SUS,* 171.

[35]*SUS,* 181.

ask about it, he changes the subject or asks me to help with something in the yard… I know what Pop's saying: *I don't want to talk about this. It wounds me.*"[36]

Jojo and Richie have a direct 'conversation' in the car about several poignant topics surrounding home, love, and family. Richie believes the only way for him to 'get home' is for the ending of his story to be told. He then explains to Jojo that home is not about a geographical location, it's "about the earth. Whether the earth opens up to you. Whether it pull you so close the space between you and it melt and y'all one and it beats like your heart."[37] Richie then explains the feeling as that of a song, the same song that allows Jojo and Kayla to see and speak to Richie, the same song that allows Leonie to see Given-Not-Given when she is high. The two boys speak on existential concepts such as love, home, and time.

Richie now reflects on his experience of each of these concepts through his interactions with Riv. Contemplating the purgatory-like state he has found himself in, looking for understanding and certainty, he starts with time, "I spent so many turns of the earth at the new Parchman."[38] His memories transition from Parchman days to this type of purgatory existence and back, and the reader becomes privy to an instance he recalls Riv attempting to protect him once again, showing him love. A working woman Riv frequented with at the Prison told him and Richie about a lynching horror of a man and woman that took place (where and when). The details of the lynching are gruesome, a mixture of tragedy and spectacle, innocent death and cynical life. "There was wax paper and sausage wrappings and bare corncobs all over the

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[36]*SUS,* 181.

[37]*SUS,* 184.

[38]*SUS,* 186.

ground. The man was missing his fingers, his toes, and his genitals. The woman was missing her teeth. Both were hanged…the mob had set the couple afire, too."[39] Riv's facial expression showed his displeasure about the drastic description, but the woman said, "he grown enough to be in here, Riv…. that mean he grown enough to know." Disagreeing and defending his position, Riv replied, "Just 'cause he in here don't mean he can bear that. He shouldn't have to."[40] Richie realized then that the relationship the woman and Riv did wasn't love, but the things Riv did for Richie was. "I began to understand home when Riv and I slept next to each other and Riv told me stories in the dark."[41] Riv's stories were those of the Gulf Coast waters, different colors, beautiful, endless. It was those waters, the desire for *home,* that motivated Richie upon Jojo's arrival at Parchman picking up Michael, to follow, to *go home*.

When the group arrives back in town, Michael convinces Leonie to take the children to see Michael's parents. They have only seen Jojo once or twice and have never met Michaela. While Michael's mother is mildly pleasant, Michael's father Big Joseph cannot contain his true feelings when Jojo and Kayla do not speak immediately. "Raised by her, what you'd expect Maggie? Hell, they half of her. Part of that boy Riv, too. All bad blood. Fuck the skin."[42] Racial tensions erupt, and Michael and Big Joseph get into a major physical altercation. Leonie takes the children back to the car and waits for Michael. He appears from his parents' house, speaking and hugging his mother, and the family returns to Leonie's parents' house. Upon return, Leonie

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[39]*SUS,* 188.

[40]*SUS,* 189.

[41]*SUS,* 190.

[42]*SUS,* 207.

finds her mother is in a gravely ill state. “It’s time…for me to go.”[43] Mam reveals the pain is too much, and she is ready to transition to be with the ancestors. She asks Leonie to gather items needed for her spiritual departure, and after much grieving and hesitation, she agrees, and goes out to gather the requested items.

From Jojo’s viewpoint, the return home is welcomed by him and Richie, who has not seen Riv for many many years. While Pop checks on the ride and confirms the gris gris bag was found and put to good use, Richie incessantly questions Riv, and questions Jojo as to why Riv is not answering him and cannot see him. “You was the only daddy I ever knew. I need to know why you left me.”[44] Jojo does not convey the question to Pop, and the scene ends with no response to Richie. The next morning Jojo and Kayla are awakened to Michael making breakfast. An attempt to have a bonding moment with the children derails when Michael spanks Kayla for not getting off the floor upon his demand. Jojo’s protective instinct kicks in, and he immediately swoops in to console her. While consoling Kayla, Richie reappears, incessantly questioning why Riv cannot see him, and insisting that Jojo ask his Pop about Richie. Jojo finally responds with a ‘no’. Confirming Pop’s inability to finish the story every time he says it, Richie feels the only way he can go home is if he hears the end of his narrative. Jojo finally agrees. Jojo visits his ailing grandmother, alerting her that Michael spanked Kayla. Mam reveals that Leonie “ain’t got the mothering instinct…she ain’t never going to feed you.”[45] Jojo reveals to his grandmother his perception of Leonie. “She hates me.” He says to Mam. “No, she love you. She don’t know how

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[43]*SUS,* 214.

[44]*SUS* 222.

[45]*SUS,* 233.

to show it. And her love for herself and her love for Michael - well, it gets in the way. It confuse her."[46] Jojo and Mam speak of death and the afterlife, of which she asks Jojo whether he has he ever seen or heard anything strange. Refusing to honestly answer Richie and the animals, he simply says 'no'. Richie is singing outside, and Mam turns her head, as if she hears it, an indication that she is virtually in between the land of the living and the land of the dead.

Ward is beautifully intentional. The 13th chapter of the book is Jojo's perspective, he and Pop are outside cutting wood, Richie close by, and Jojo asks Pop to finish the story of Richie and Parchman. Pop reveals to Jojo that eventually Richie escaped, and immediately Jojo asks, "So he went home?"[47] In this moment, as Pop looks at Jojo, Jojo looks back at him and raises his eyebrows, telling him without him saying it: "I can hear this. I can listen."[48] Pop then goes into the story of baseball Sunday, when a Black inmate nicknamed 'Blue' raped a woman and then escaped the prison. Before Blue was gone far enough, he ran into Richie… Richie interjects that he actually ran upon Blue amid the violent assault of the woman and threatened Richie to come along or end up bloodied like the woman. Richie recalls "Part of me went because I didn't want him to turn my face red like hers. And part of me went because I was sick of that place. Because I wanted to go."[49] As the dog runner, Pop's job was to lead the dogs after escapees, and this incident was no different. He and the others were sent after Blue and Richie. During their escape, they came upon a water well, and Blue ran into a white woman, and ripped her dress. She ran

[46]*SUS,* 235.

[47]*SUS,* 249.

[48]*SUS,* 250.

[49]*SUS,* 251.

home and told her folks she had been brutally attacked by a Black man, and soon a large mob gathered to hunt the man who tainted the woman's innocence. "I knew that when it came to the two of them, when it came to Blue and Richie, they wasn't going to tell no difference. They was going to see two niggers, two beasts, who had touched a White woman."[50]

At some point, Blue and Richie separated, and Blue was eventually found in a tree. "Wasn't five minutes passed before I saw the bonfire they lit, and I knew what was happening. I knew before I even heard Blue start screaming." Ward illustrates Richie's intense listening by comparing his movements to that of a bird preparing for flight. One of the trusties told Riv they cut pieces of Blue off before they started skinning him. "They was going to do the same to him. Once they got done with Blue. They was going to come for that boy and cut him piece from piece till he was just some bloody, soft, screaming thing, and they was going to string him up from a tree…he wasn't nothing but a boy, Jojo. They kill animals better than that."[51] At this part of the novel, the climax of the story Richie and Jojo both anticipated unfolds:

> (paraphrased) I said: *It's going to be all right, Richie…* I heeled the dogs. Held out my hands to him, light side out. Moved slow. Soothed him. Said: *We gone get you out of this. We gone get you away from here*. Touched his arm: he was burning up. *I'm going home, Riv?* he asked… I looked at him. He had baby hair on the edge of his scalp, Jojo. Little fine hair he'd had since he sucked at his mama's tit. *Yes, Richie, I'm a take you home*, I said. And then I took the shank I kept in my boot and I punched it one time into his neck. In the big vein on his right side. Held him till the blood stopped spurting. Him looking at me, mouth open. A child. Tears and snot all over his face. Shocked and scared, until he was still.[52]

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[50]*SUS*, 253.

[51]*SUS*, 255.

[52]*SUS*, 255. This scene is the center of my ethical analysis, which I examine more in the subsequent sections of this chapter.

Once Richie died, Riv directed the dogs to attack the body and mimic a catch and kill. Pop's movements are slightly discombobulated and distorted, like he is no longer confident in any of his movements. Richie lets out first a whine that has advanced into a yell and rises to a piercing scream. Jojo can barely hear Pop over Richie's screams. Pop recounts his daily attempts to wash the blood off his hands, and how he struggled for a long time with the smell of the blood and flesh from the dogs tearing into the body. Pop admits he was close to losing his mind, and nothing came close to easing his misery until Jojo was born. For the first time in the novel, we see Jojo ease the pain and suffering of Pop. There is a deep indescribable emotion and then a momentous relief. "I hold Pop like I hold Kayla…Both of us bow together as Richie goes darker and darker, until he's a black hole in the middle of the yard, like he done sucked all the light and darkness over them miles…until he's burning black, and then he isn't. There is soft air and yellow sunlight and drifting pollen where he was, and me and Pop embracing in the grass. The animals are quieting in grunts and snores and yips. *Thank you,* they say. *Thank you thank you thank you,* they sing."[53]

Still feeling the effects of the meth she swallowed during the traffic stop from Parchman, Leonie's experience of Pop's telling the final piece of the story to Jojo culminates in her returning from gathering stones and other items to find Given-Not-Given in the house. The aura of the moment is surreal, with the entire family in the house. There is commotion, Michaela is crying and sobbing about "the boy, the black bird…He Flies!" Leonie attempts to soothe and dismiss her fussiness, but then she screams, "He wants Mam!" and takes off running to Leonie's mother's room. To calm Michaela, Leonie opens the bedroom door and is overwhelmed by the

[53]*SUS,* 257.

sight. Mam is lying almost unconscious, half on and half off the bed. It is clear death is near, but all Michaela sees and says is "Bird."[54] At this moment, Mam faintly speaks of hearing a voice and seeing a face, describing a boy calling to her, saying he wants her to be his mother. She realizes it is "the first dead I see."[55] Everyone is present in Mam's room. Pop, Jojo, Michaela, Leonie, Given-Not-Given, and Richie (through the vision of the Black bird). Through Mam's insistence, Leonie invokes the Saints of the dead, Jojo is telling Richie to leave, understanding that although Richie did not come for his grandmother, he is leaving with her. Given then speaks and tells Richie to go. Jojo swoops up Kayla, who is murmuring "Uncle." Jojo looks at Given, and Given speaks "Nephew."[56] Leonie, Jojo and Michaela watch as Given moves towards his mother, brushes his hand over her face, Mam makes a few sudden last movements, and goes still. "We cry in chorus," except for Jojo, who is consumed with anger. There is a deep sadness and feeling of grief in the room. Jojo is mad at Leonie for 'letting in a river that took her and Uncle Given away,' actively contributing to the last moments of Mam's life, taking away Mam and Given. Leonie is embracing "having the first thing you ever done right by your mama be to usher in her gods. To let her go."[57]

Leonie's sadness and guilt also turn to anger, and she lashes out and smacks Jojo repeatedly until constrained by her father. She goes outside to the porch, where Michael pulls up. She sobs her mother has died, and she asks Michael to leave and go up to Al's to get high.

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[54]*SUS,* 263.

[55]*SUS,* 265.

[56]*SUS, 269.*

[57]*SUS,* 270.

When he questions about the kids, she simply replies, “I can’t”, noting that even in this tragic moment, at the death of her mother, at the relived trauma of her father, the witnessing by her children, Leonie conveys to Michael *I can’t be a mother right now. I can’t be a daughter. I can’t remember. I can’t see. I can’t breathe.* Michael partially succumbs to Leonie’s request and places her in the car. Leonie knows if she continues to ask, Michael will concede, because he also wants to leave the misery of his narrative. “The tires catch and spit gravel. We hold hands and pretend at forgetting.”[58]

The final chapter ends with Jojo reflecting on the days since Mam’s passing. At night, he hears his Pop speaking Mam’s name, sometimes sobbing. It is here that Jojo feels “I think I understand Leonie. I think I know something about what she feels. That maybe I know a little bit about why she left after Mam died, why she slapped me, why she ran. I feel it in me, too. An itching in my hands. A kicking in my feet…An unsettling. Deeper.”[59] Still hearing the voices of the animals and spirits past and present, Jojo encounters Richie. Disappointed that he has not seen Mam, but knowing he will not see or hear her or Uncle Given call him ‘nephew’ again. Confused as to why Richie is still around, Richie replies “I thought once I knew, I could. Cross the waters. Be home… Maybe, I could. Become. The song.” “There has to be some need, some lack…But after all that - your mam, your uncle. Your mama… you’ve changed. Ain’t no need.”[60] Richie acknowledges that Jojo has experienced viscerally those major concepts of love, home, and time with all that has taken place.

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[58]*SUS,* 275.

[59]*SUS, 279.*

[60]*SUS,* 281.

Richie then reflects on the songs of those who have 'died violent deaths and are stuck' as Mam previously stated. "There's so many, so many of us…hitting. The wrong keys. Wandering against. The song." Speaking directly to Jojo he says, "Now you understand life. Now you know death."[61] Jojo sees Richie 'ascend the like the white snake'. He then looks up to the tree, and sees ghosts, men, women, girls and boys, even infants. "None of them reveal their deaths, but I see it in their eyes, their great black eyes. They perch like birds but look like people. They speak with their eyes." Pop and Kayla appear, and Kayla is pointing up to the trees and saying, "Go home." Jojo notes the ghosts 'shudder, but they do not leave.' Kayla begins to sing a song, and the ghosts lean in and sway as if in affirmation. "They smile with something like relief, something like remembrance, something like ease."[62] Pop is leading the walk back to the house, with Jojo carrying Kayla. She is singing 'Shhh', and the ghosts reply *home.*

A Traditional Ethical Analysis

The intricate and complex plot in *Sing, Unburied, Sing* contains a grave moral conflict. Knowing the fate of the young boy if he is caught (the reader is made aware of the gruesome tragedies that will take place from the stories told), the choice Pop faces to hand over Richie to the warden and mob, or take Richie's life himself, presents an unimaginable and yet inescapable dilemma. The competing obligations between beneficence (do good, defense of others, care for Richie) and the prohibition to kill are unresolvable. Traditional ethical frameworks such as deontology, teleology, and utilitarianism consider the obligations and duties one must respect the dignity of another person, the ways to realize the end, and the act of goodness or beatitude that

[61]*SUS,* 282.

[62]*SUS, 284.*

benefits the greatest number of people (or causes the least amount of suffering) when evaluating actions respectively. These traditions assume rational agents, acting free of coercion, and driven by their own quest for 'the good life.'

The scene at Parchman Prison in the woods with River and Richie does not fit easily into either of these frameworks. Riv and Richie have developed a unique relationship during their time at Parchman, Richie looking to Riv with admiration, and Riv protecting Richie like an older sibling or father. There has been trust, vulnerability, and loyalty instilled in their relationship, and Richie's survival is dependent on the relationship. From this relationship, Riv develops a positive obligation of beneficence, or care with Richie that expresses one obligation, the duty to do good, and to preserve life. The circumstances the two find themselves in have forged such a relationship, and ultimately impose a simultaneous responsibility on Riv. As the dog runner at Parchman, Riv is given a privileged position nevertheless built upon coercion, not autonomy. He is required to obey lest he risk his life himself.

Focusing on the ethical analysis from a deontological perspective rooted in one's duty, for example, would seek to measure the obligation to beneficence against the universal of 'do not kill', but even a shallow reading of the text will unveil this simple analysis in no way gives credence to the intricacies of the circumstances and context surrounding the dilemma, provides no insight into the true autonomy of either agent (Pop or Richie), nor do they give credence to the narrative significance of the dilemma, ultimately rendering those frameworks are starting points for the ethical conversation, not ending points. To consider the full scope of the moral dilemma and adequately engage in ethical reflection on the issue, it must first be understood that traditional ethical frameworks do provide the foundational language in terms of syntax, but fail

because although they consider the relativity of context and circumstance,[63] traditional frameworks do not consider the moral and ethical epistemologies arising from those context and circumstances (i.e. how the identity of being Black in America determine and impacts one understanding of morality, identity, ethics, and survival), and second the conflict must be stated in terms of a *moral tragedy*, specifically substituting the assumed 'striving for a good life' with a negative universal that one should 'not have to choose between a suffering and murderous life, or death with *dignity.*' The normative claims that come with traditional ethical frameworks however do not and cannot apply to the circumstance those such as Riv and many others face. The external constraints and narrative contributive to the current dilemma characterize the scenario as a *tragic* instance or *tragedy* occurring in Riv's moral life.

In the fields of philosophy, theology and ethics, a moral dilemma is generally defined as an agent having two obligations, but cannot enact both obligations, thus experiencing a moral failure.[64] There exists an unresolvable conflict that cannot be reconciled through the enactment of either. In ethical theory, the agent is both constrained and obligated. Paul Ricoeur takes seriously the role of *tragedy* in moral life. Anchored in Aristotelian ethics and a Kantian understanding of obligations, Ricoeur says it is Hegel who comes the closest to reconciling the universal claims of morality with the very concrete situations in which these moral claims are

[63]See Lisa Tessman, *Burdened Virtues: Virtue Ethics for Liberatory Struggles*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005). Using Aristotelian virtue ethics, Tessman explores how individuals and groups enact moral agency when under duress from oppressive social structures, and Martha C. Nussbaum, *Creating Capabilities the Human Development Approach*, (New Delhi: Orient Blackswan, 2011).

[64]Terrance McConnell, "Moral Dilemmas," in *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, ed. Edward N. Zalta and Uri Nodelman, Fall 2022 (Metaphysics Research Lab, Stanford University, 2022), https://plato.stanford.edu/archives/fall2022/entries/moral-dilemmas/.

challenged. Rather than derail into each conception of morality, what is of importance in this piece is Ricoeur reverts to the Greek tragedies and extracts a powerful theory to account for the context and circumstances that diminish, erase, or distort possible actions an agent can take. For my construction and enactment of a narrative ethics of survival, the notion of *tragedy* in moral terms illustrates indeed that there is something "unique about the unavoidable nature of conflict in moral life."[65] These unresolvable conflicts will always be a part of the moral life, because the abstract universals that morality lays claim to are challenged and often fall short in concrete scenarios, as they cannot account for the fullness of the human experience.

Ricoeur identifies some common features of Greek tragedy: adverse mythical powers echoing the identifiable conflicts of the roles; an unanalyzable mixture of constraints of fate and deliberate choices; the purgative effect of the spectacle at the center of the passions it produces.[66] Using Ricoeur's analysis of tragedy, we see Riv and Richie's scenario as a prime example: there is evident conflict in the dual roles Riv holds: that of protector of Richie, and that of dog runner for the prison, responsible for capturing and returning escaped inmates from the facility. Proper enactment of one role automatically results in the failure of the other role. Ricoeur says the mixture of constraints of fate and deliberate choices is unanalyzable, which may be true, but those some of those pertinent constraints can be acknowledged: the historical and social contexts of constraint of the deep south, of the incarceration system, and the limitations imposed on Black men all contribute to and influence the 'deliberate choices' made by Riv to befriend and look after Richie, to defend him in the face of others, to tell him stories of a world beyond their

[65]Ricœur, *Oneself as Another*, 243.

[66]Ricœur, *Oneself as Another*, 242.

current, give him hope of a home, and to show kindness and love in the face of oppressive misery. All these things contribute to the complexity of the moral dilemma at hand. Concerning the 'purgative effect of the spectacle at the center of the passions in produces', there is no doubt that either choice enacted by Riv would evoke unexplainable feelings of despair, failure, and helplessness, that the relief of the incident to pass mixed with the guilt of any decision will result in a *moral residue*, a constant questioning of whether the 'right decision', the 'best decision', the 'only decision' was made.

Implementing a Womanist Narrative Ethics of Survival

Though traditional ethical frameworks provide the foundational language to think about complex moral dilemmas, they fail to sufficiently consider certain complexities resulting in an inaccurate analysis. I now posit my ethical framework, a *Womanist Narrative Ethics of Survival,* presenting an alternative analysis that more closely resembles the social, moral, and epistemological circumstances surrounding decision-making and contemplation of actions, highlighted through a womanist lens, centered around 'making a way out of no way.' Recalling the framework from chapter 4 that makes three claims as metrics of establishing a womanist narrative ethics presence: *1. There can be no Womanist Narrative Ethics without narratives (in the form of stories).* These narratives substantiate the presence of a Narrative Ethics of Survival by "transmitting notions, rules, and tactics for meaning making and decision-making amid survival; they expand the world(s) of the possible, and they instill identity(ies)". *2. There can be no Womanist Narrative Ethics without reflection on narratives (stories).* Exploring the many questions and facets raised in the story, from the story, and by the story enlivens the narrative into a living *re*presentation of an experience. It is here the construction of social and individual identity takes place, the formation of faith beliefs, and the constitution of moral disposition

develops, and *3. There can be no Womanist Narrative Ethics without moral questions.* Reflection on narratives accounts for one level of analysis, but a simple literary analysis may not account for the ethical significance of the text. Posing particular questions of human agency, the normative aspects of narratives that impact social, economic, and political contexts, and exploring in what ways narratives contribute to or endanger human flourishing or 'the good life', this framework acknowledges the many facets that contribute to decision-making and action taking, such as identity formation, social and theological constructs, and the stor(ies) of one's life to engage and understand the moral reasoning and ethical reflection of individuals and groups placed in compromising and marginalized scenarios.

Using this framework to analyze the scenario of Riv and Richie at Parchman Prison, the reader can consider aspects of the moral tragedy traditional frameworks do not provide the space for. If the novel presents the aspects of a Womanist Narrative Ethics of Survival, then not only are we able to render a sufficient ethical analysis, but we render an analysis open to the flourishing of life.[67] Considering the first criteria, *there can be no Womanist Narrative Ethics without narratives (in the form of stories)*, Ward has provided multiple narratives in the form of storytelling from different perspectives. Having access to various versions of the same event 'expands the listener's vision of possibilities' while providing first-hand accounts. Ward produces a plethora of narrative for the listener/reader to immerse oneself in. Separate from the author, the characters themselves provide unique narratives that must be simultaneously considered as part of a larger story as well as distinct narratives. The story of Michael coming home, the story of Richie and Parchman told by Pop in pieces, the story of Leonie and Michael,

[67]Perhaps universal implications.

the subtle story of Mam's illness, the story of Given, all wrapped up in the narrative of the family over a week's time. All these stories construct and contribute to understanding the moral tragedy faced by Riv.

Considering the second criteria, '*there can be no Womanist Narrative Ethics without reflection on narratives (stories)',* we see each character reflect on different points of the abovementioned narratives. Readers can think alongside the characters, reflecting on the geographical significance of the deep south, the vivid imagery of running water throughout the novel perhaps as a result of living on the Gulf Coast, the tense racial dynamic between the families, the impacts of substance abuse, and the pervasiveness of traditional religious, spiritual and cultural practices. All these aspects and several others not mentioned contribute to the context and circumstances that contribute to the characters' identity development and decision-making. The power of narratives to model under what circumstances one must contemplate difficult decisions makes them compelling arbiters of moral deliberation and ethical reflection, leading into the third criteria, *'there can be no Womanist Narrative Ethics without moral questions.*

The reader can extract several instances throughout the novel that pose moral questions, but it is the identified *moral dilemma* in the form of a *moral tragedy* of Riv's decision regarding Richie at Parchman. Here the principle of beneficence or a positive obligation to preserve the life of another (Richie) comes into conflict with the universal 'do not kill'. Riv has an obligation to both, and a circumstance where enacting still leaves the failure of the other. If he adheres to the universal 'do not kill', and captures Richie, both he and the reader are acutely aware of what will happen to Richie, a horrible and unimaginable death, voiding any beneficence. If Riv prioritizes

doing good to Richie, he risks both Richie and his own life (though the reader is unaware what this option looks like). In addition to that, the overall situation is one where the agent (Riv) will experience a *moral injury.*[68] The presence of moral questions to this magnitude not only signals the presence of a *Womanist Narrative Ethics of Survival but* can serve as the paradigmatic example of such.

This ethical framework is by no means the ending point of this project, but rather the starting point. Using narrative to construct the framework reinforces the notion that narratives are indeed a medium of and for ethical reflection.[69] A *Womanist Narrative Ethics of Survival* framework integrates the womanist perspective of centering moral wisdom and ethical reflection in the lived experiences of Black and Brown bodies, and that centering stands as the origin of reflection, analysis and interpretation of actions and decisions. The framework uses these considerations to challenge normative assumptions of autonomy, agential action, and universal claims in light of those marginalized beings seeking to live full lives. While a clear conception of 'the good life' may not match the normative conception or even be available to those, what IS clear is the negative universal that one SHOULD NOT be killed to escape a life of suffering or misery, or an unthinkable and senseless death.[70]

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[68]Using the definition of moral injury as a particular type of trauma characterized by guilt, existential crisis, and loss of trust that may develop following a perceived moral violation. See Jeremy D. Jinkerson, "Defining and Assessing Moral Injury: A Syndrome Perspective.," *Traumatology* 22, no. 2 (2016): 122–130, accessed September 27, 2023, http://doi.apa.org/getdoi.cfm?doi=10.1037/trm0000069.

[69]Hille Haker, "Recognition and Responsibility," 470.

[70]Based on the lived experiences of Black and Brown women, the womanist epistemology can and does extend to all groups, part of the beauty of the womanist lens.

A *Womanist Ethics of Survival* framework reveals that at the most basic and rudimentary levels, the ethical principles should strive to NOT be in tension with one another but reconcile the two. (i.e., in enacting self and social care, a requirement and choice SHOULD NOT include the dilemma between beneficence and the prohibition to kill). The central point of a *Womanist Narrative Ethics of Survival* indeed *Survival,* dually recognizing the day-to-day life movements that detail decision-making unique to those who cannot assume 'the good life,' as well as the amalgamation of circumstances and contexts that represent the construct one must make decisions in.

The *Ethical* component of a *Womanist Narrative Ethics of Survival* demonstrates how the process of decision-making is at least partially constitutive of one's identity, and the likelihood that if placed in the same or similar coincidence, the similar or same actions may befall the agent. Establishing this ethical framework as the metric for analyzing and understanding the ethical significance of moral tragedies such as that faced by Sethe in *Beloved* and Pop in *Sing, Unburied, Sing* opens up the ethical possibilities for those constrained in action and existence in the present and future. It challenges what is considered 'right' or 'best' action and substitutes it for what is deemed 'necessary' or 'just is.' For the context of this moral dilemma, the notion of survival extends beyond the present event, the moral residue that attaches itself to the agent and to the context as a reminder and a cautionary tale (we see this quite literally with Richie and Given), perhaps of what future generations can expect in similar social constraints, or as a harsh reminder of the disproportionate burden that falls on the disadvantaged as part of their plight, the 'haunting' those decisions enact on the lives of the agent and all those affected.

Part of the ethical weight is the historical weight of those who experienced moral tragedies at the cost of their lives, how those lives lost are weaved into the totality of human history and human experience, and how the quest for a 'good life' is riddled with those completely consumed with survival. I previously mentioned the connection between Morrison's work and Ward's work. Morrison states beautifully what I feel can be perceived for Ward's creation of Richie (and Given) in *Sing, Unburied, Sing.*

Reflecting on the significance of *Beloved,* Toni Morrison writes,

> It was in *Beloved,* however, that all of these matters coalesced for me in new and major ways. History versus memory, and memory versus memorylessness. Rememory as in recollecting and remembering as in reassembling the members of the body, the family, the population of the past. And it was the struggle, the pitched battle between remembering and forgetting, that became the device of the narrative. The effort to both remember and not know became the structure of the text…Therefore not only is the major preoccupation of the central characters that of reconstituting and recollecting a usable past…but also the narrative strategy the plot formation turns on the stress of remembering, its inevitability, the chances for liberation that lie within the process.[71]

[71]Toni Morrison, "Rememory" in *The Source of Self-Regard,* 324.

CONCLUSION

With this dissertation, I have attempted to provide a womanist narrative ethics framework. Rather than continuing the use of abstract ethical language and theory often found in philosophical and ethical texts, my dissertation posits a concrete framework that is narrative, womanist, and theological. The framework is narrative because it focuses on the perception of human life as narrative in nature. As storytelling beings, we make sense of events and instances in life through narrating and retelling those events to ourselves and others. How we tell those stories, how those stories relate to other moments and movements in life, and what meaning is developed from both telling and receiving stories all contribute to our identity and meaning making. Narrative weaves the historical events of reality with the imaginative creativity of fiction to expand (and sometimes constrain) one's idea of what is possible.

The focus on the dilemma in narrative fiction helps us understand why a moral conflict may not be resolved in real life. It is womanist because the thoughts, decisions, and reflections of the framework emanate from a methodology of creating in a space deemed void, a combination of will to live, and the will of others to live, expanding from an episteme of survival that has implications for all of humanity. It is the womanist lens that acknowledges the group and personal trauma faced by Black people that is forever a part of our history and collective identity. Womanism acknowledges this, but does not end there, in the wallows of trauma and despair, but also faces forward, towards human restoration and social transformation. Standing on the shoulders of my womanist foremothers, I too am concerned with the wholeness and flourishing of all humanity and am aware that the historical and contemporary trauma must be addressed if

all people are to have a chance at something more than survival. Theological because this is one of the sources that supports the ethical outlook on human persons. The Christian narrative is a primary contributor to some of the most prominent theo-ethical constructions of Black identity, the understanding of human/divine relationships, and navigating moral dilemmas. We find in the earliest of Black writings the strong references to the biblical narratives to help make sense of the situation one found themselves in. Through some biblical narratives, marginalized bodies are reminded that they matter, and their significance is always seen through the eyes of God. It is these theo-ethical constructions that contribute to Black and Brown bodies decision making and meaning making amid traumas.

This dissertation provides an ethical framework for womanist theology that has implications for other fields such as technology, business, and specifically medicine. It shows how one can interpret normative claims using history, literature, and narrative. Focusing on medicine, this work has potential to contribute to the fields of narrative medicine and narrative bioethics. Scholar and Physician Rita Charon emphasizes narrative's impact on the physician-patient relationship, noting when physicians are "adopting methods such as close reading of literature and reflective writing" they are able to increase trust, develop empathy and understanding, and close the gap of understanding between patient and physician, leading to better health outcomes.[1] Considering the thick medical historical narrative Black people in the United States carry contributes to their medical decision making.

[1]Rita Charon, "Narrative Medicine: A Model for Empathy, Reflection, Profession, and Trust," *JAMA* 286, no. 15 (October 17, 2001): 1897, https://doi.org/10.1001/jama.286.15.1897.

Black women scholars Dorothy Roberts and Harriet Washington have thoroughly and diligently examined the thickness of this medical history of Black folks in the United States, and I seek to continue this work, both for the field of bioethics as well as African American medicine. As a Clinical Ethicist, part of my role concerns helping to navigate value-laden conflicts in the realm of healthcare. Decision making in this context often presents complex considerations including social determinants of health, economic circumstances, political positions, unique personal belief traditions, preferences and values, and individual and group histories, all combined in a patient's narrative. These decisions are often magnified when concerning end of life, withholding, and withdrawing life sustaining treatment, life changing procedures, quality of life v. prolongation of life. My dissertation provides a contextualization of a specific tradition that one group of people carries with them often in difficult decision making (Black people in the United States). Often these circumstances and thick history are overlooked, the narrative is dismissed or diminished, and the ability to meaningfully dialogue is lost.

This womanist narrative ethics framework allows present practices of trust-building and relationship strengthening to be supplemented by the intentional and strategic integration of narratives, making space for the thickness of history. By taking seriously and centering one's story (from the telling of the story to the reception), physicians may gain more insight into the rationale by healthcare decisions made by Black and Brown bodies, their continued hesitancy and medical mistrust, and the values and preferences that contribute to their health care decisions and struggles for survival.

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