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"A Plea for Color:" The Construction of a Feminine Identity in African American Women's Novels.

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**"A PLEA FOR COLOR:" THE CONSTRUCTION OF A FEMININE
IDENTITY IN AFRICAN AMERICAN WOMEN'S NOVELS**

By

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B.A. Purdue University, 1997

A THESIS

Submitted in Partial Fulfillment of the
Requirements for the Degree of
Master of Arts
(in English)

The Graduate School
The University of Maine

May, 2001

Advisory Committee:

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Thesis Advisor: Dr. Margo Lukens

An Abstract of the Thesis Presented
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Writers of slave narratives in the nineteenth-century manipulated the western sentimental literary tradition to appeal to a white, predominantly female readership during a time of national ideological division. These writers had their own agendas which often met (or were forced to meet) those of white-run abolitionist movements to achieve the ultimate goal of abolishing slavery. Northern white-run abolitionist movements were kept warm by the moral fires of mid-nineteenth-century Protestant Christianity; Christian ideals flooded their meetings and publications. Therefore, it is no wonder that the writers of slave narratives are so overt in discussing the validity of Christian beliefs and in linking the plight that Christianity faces in the New

Republic with the plight of slaves--who also happen to be fellow Christians. But slave narratives, especially those written by women, contained what I believe to be one of slavery's most lasting imprints left on twentieth century American fiction-- the search for a liberated feminine identity for African American women. This lasting imprint shows itself in four main themes or processes that the female protagonist must reckon with if she is to reach a place of security within her own identity. These four themes are: a relationship or rather non-relationship with a "white man's" God, a complex love/hate relationship to motherhood, family history and community, the conflicting relationship to one's own skin, and finally, the role that dress and adornment play in each of these matters. All of these themes persist in the twentieth-century novels that are the objects of this study: Nella Larsen's *Quicksand*, Zora Neale Hurston's *Their Eyes Were Watching God*, Alice Walker's *The Color Purple*, and Toni Morrison's *Beloved*. Harriet Jacobs' *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl* is the slave narrative I refer to as an example of a nineteenth-century foremother of these twentieth-century African American writers.

DEDICATION

I dedicate the effort behind this thesis to my late father Mark Douglas Moffler because my lasting memories of him include hilarious instances surrounding his own work on his Master's Thesis completed shortly before his death in 1986. The subject matter of our theses couldn't be more different: his having to do with Marine Botany and mine Literature, but our work habits and our hunger for learning are so similar that I have often thought of him throughout this process. Though he is not physically here to see this product of my efforts, I hope he notices the imprint he has left on me...and how much like him I really am.

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I wish to thank my fiance Rande Daykin for his continuous support. I also wish to thank my friends and all of the members of my family especially my parents: Mary and Tony Seger, my sister Stacy, and my grandparents June and Rudy Moffler, and Betty and Joe Hughes. Without these people, I would never have gotten to a place in my life where I would be writing an "Acknowledgements" page. Special thanks to my thesis committee, especially Margo Lukens who teaches the books I like to read.

I also wish to thank those writers and readers who are interested in learning about the importance of a woman forming her own identity through historically "alternative" measures. I truly believe that once we can accept how each person defines themselves through the things that give them joy and strength, our racial, gender, and religious differences will no longer be reason enough to trivialize, violate, or hate another being.

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FOREWORD

There are many speculations surrounding the original reasons why men and women started wearing clothing. According to most of the research I have conducted, historians and anthropologists agree on four theories that offer scientifically and sociologically sound reasons. The sociopsychological aspects of dress seem to me to be the most convincing because they attempt to explain clothing behavior:

the effect of the self-concept; the influence of reference groups; the role and status of the individual; the degree of conformity and/or individuality; the relative security and insecurity of people; the priority of needs, especially those related to self-actualization; [and] the force and effect of the authoritarian type of personality...(Gurel 91)

In a thesis primarily concerned with the development of a new African American female identity, clothing seems like an obvious way in to understanding the complexities of such a relatively new (African American) world identity because dress and adornment is the most immediate and physically represented forms of identification. "Self actualization" in the context of a forced submission to a racist society, where conforming to a stereotype is almost mandatory in order to

survive, is an important concept to examine. To witness that process in fiction is made even more beautiful and inspirational when the process unfolds itself in the bounty of multi-colored fabrics.

Fashion is often thought to be frivolous or even sinful because it supposedly encourages vanity--a deadly sin according to the American Puritan ethic. Though thoughts about fashion take daily precedents for most Americans--male and female, the study of fashion as a literary analytic tool is still not given the academic respect it deserves, perhaps because fashion is traditionally thought to be a woman-centered interest. If fashion is a place where women feel free and able to experiment with their creative powers, then that freedom can be seen as a threat to male security. The study of fashion has been considered to be socially inconsequential and according to Herbert Blumer in his essay discussing "the deficiencies of fashion as a Sociological concept" as "aberrant and irrational."

Presumably, this ill-considered view of fashion has arisen from considerations which suggest that fashion is bizarre and frivolous, that it is fickle, that it has arisen in response to irrational status anxieties, and that people are swept into conforming to it despite their better judgment. (Blumer 113)

Not too surprisingly, these criticisms of fashion sound eerily similar to common criticisms of femininity: "bizarre, frivolous, fickle, irrational, anxious, poor judgment." Instead of embracing these stereotypes about fashion, and assuring them a future, fashion should be taken seriously; not only because it is a human interest, but because it is a traditional female interest locked in a closet--so to speak. Instead of fearing fashion, and fearing its importance, it is essential to identify its relevance in any study of female spheres. If not, then perhaps this unwillingness to do so is reflective of our inability to examine the strengths and importance of a woman establishing a feminine identity in our American culture.

Fashion theory is an especially useful tool when looking at modernist and contemporary views of womanhood because it is frequently used to express the inner truths that a woman believes about herself. But what a woman decides to wear or is forced to wear also reflects what her culture feels about her. For example, if a woman is free to dress as she likes within her culture, the implication is that women enjoy freedom of expression within that particular culture. If however, a woman is dressed in such a way that her body is symbolically hidden from view, chances are that her culture represses her physically, intellectually, and spiritually. And because "fashion is always modern; it always seeks to

keep abreast of the times...it is sensitive to the movement of current developments as they take place in its own field, in adjacent fields, and in the larger social world," it can be relied upon for near-exact representations of how women feel about themselves and how they are regarded by their culture at a specific point in time (Blumer 116).

There are four sociopsychological theories of the origins and importance of clothing, and when looking at these four theories in detail, it is possible to fully appreciate just how useful these theories can be when discussing culture and feminine identity. The first theory, and one of the most useful for this thesis, is the Modesty Theory, often called the Mosaic theory. The Mosaic theory relates to the aforementioned excerpt taken from the book of Genesis in which Adam and Eve clothed themselves to hide their nakedness. This theory implies that the necessity of clothing arose from the human feeling of shame if certain parts of their bodies are exposed in front of others. But this popular theory is widely disputed because its ethnocentric presuppositions. "It is true that most people in the world today use clothing to conceal parts of the body [and]feel shame if these parts that are generally covered, are exposed. However, what is covered or left uncovered varies from group to group. In most of the world, 'Pornography is a matter of geography'" (Gurel 4).

Pornography is not only a matter of geography, but also a matter of chronology. Changes in fashion are affected by the changes in what is accepted within a culture; standards of modesty change with time. Skirt lengths, for example, consistently change from mini, to short, to knee, calf, and ankle lengths depending on how comfortable people living in their respective time periods are with a woman exposing her legs. While skirt lengths tend to change seasonally in the contemporary fashion world, this ease in skirt length transition occurs only as a result of revolutionary fashion trends such as the flapper's short skirt of the 20s or the advent of the bloomers as a proposed replacement for skirts all together in the 20s as well.

A woman's legs can mean as much or as little as the fashion industry, religious and other cultural leaders want them to. While legs never change, their symbolism does depending on the time period; it actually has very little to do with the amount of material in a skirt. "One must remember that clothing itself is neither moral or immoral. It is the breaking of traditions that make it so" (Gurel 4). This idea is important to remember when reading twentieth-century African American women's writing, because one of the greatest signs that a female protagonist is about to assert her female identity occurs when the reader can almost hear the breaking of a mold. That mold, or prescribed "womanly" role, has been

forced on her throughout the novel until the breaking point. When she cracks the mold, a strong, invincible, and self-defined woman emerges. This process of rejuvenation is limited by a culture that embraces the Mosaic theory of living and dressing. While modesty is an important phenomenon for Western cultures, it is not the only reason or even the primary reason for human use of clothing to come about--or why humans continue to dress and adorn themselves.

Discrediting this theory almost immediately leaves considerable space to discuss the twentieth-century African American woman's relationship to clothing in fiction. Rejecting the Mosaic theory of clothing makes room for other possible theories that have nothing to do with Judeo-Christian morality or Western tradition. In regards to clothing, (as well as motherhood, marriage, community relations and physical suffering), for Helga, Janie, Celie, and Sethe, rejecting the stifling Christian influence on the African American feminine identity only allows space to understand the necessary roles that dress and adornment play in the process of self identification.

The second theory relates to the first in that it has been dubbed by fashion theorists as the Immodesty Theory. Those who subscribe to this theory believe that clothing was first used to lure the opposite sex to mate. This idea is intriguing, but like the Mosaic theory, it puts up too many

boundaries that inhibit a satisfactory appreciation for this magnificent cultural art. This theory, largely endorsed by James Laver, the former director of the Victoria and Albert Museum in London and Lawrence Langner, the curator of the New York Theater Guild. "Laver believed that the purpose of fashion and the objective of clothes was to draw attention to various erogenous bodily areas" (Gurel 4). He explained the shifts in fashion as symptoms of the shifts in the cultural meaning of different parts of the body. Breasts, for example might be considered extremely erogenous at a certain time in history, and therefore, fashion might accentuate breasts by introducing plunging necklines. Ankles or legs might be the next trend in fashion that would mark a cultural shift in the way a woman's body is regarded by men. Langner, on the other hand, believed that "the main purpose of clothing was to stimulate sexual interest, but by its use, not its absence" (Gurel 4). This points to the idea that women must be mysterious in order to be desirable. Instead of revealing an erogenous area, clothing covers it up completely. According to Langner, clothing is the most helpful tool in the human year-round mating process. But despite the fact that his argument makes sense, that clothing helps keep mating interest alive daily for humans as opposed to the seasonal cycles of other mammals, the immodesty theory still seems to be ethnocentric. Its claim that because one erogenous area is

emphasized in Western culture, for example, any other culture that does not subscribe to the same belief is considered immodest by the standards of Western culture.

The third theory, the Protection Theory, is not only steeped in ethnocentrism, but also in phallo-centrism. The Protection Theory does discuss the fact that as humans migrated north, the need for warm protective coverings was increased. But, according to my research, the protection theory has mostly to do with the idea that *man* needed to find a way to protect his genitals once he learned to stand upright. Langner also subscribed to this theory and believed that "until man stood erect his posture served as protection for the sexual organs...and so early clothing served to protect and not hide these parts" (Gurel 5). This theory does not discuss early woman's need for clothing except for the possibility that she might need protection from "the evil eye, from unseen spirits, and from gods" (Gurel 5). While this theory lends some attention to some possible psychological and culturally created reasons for why early humans needed clothing, it doesn't lend too much to this thesis. However, the idea that clothing can protect a person from evil is relevant when discussing characters who are at times concerned with non-Western as well as Christian beliefs about the supernatural since most ideologies take a stance on how an evil spirit is summoned or pushed away by the way a

woman is dressed.

The fourth theory is the Adornment Theory, and "is probably the most important and original function of clothing. Creativity is expressed in the urge to improve upon nature by decorating, altering, shaping, and covering the body" (Gurel 5). This theory is wonderfully helpful when looking at why women might use clothing to celebrate their feminine identities because it combats the Mosaic theory's assertion that men and women clothe themselves because of shame alone. Instead of hiding behind clothing out of shame, women and men use the practice of adornment to acknowledge their own love of their bodies.

Four major ways that humans have historically adorned their bodies are present in these twentieth-century novels. Tattooing as "a means of tribal identification and a part of initiation ceremonies or rites of passage" is present in some of the novels (Gurel 5). Branding inflicted on an individual against their will replaces self-chosen tattooing and is a mark of slavery. For instance, Sethe's mother who showed her daughter the brand of a cross given to slaves at Sweet Home in Morrison's *Beloved*. Instead of a rite of passage or a symbol of belonging to a tribe, the brand just indicates that the body is someone else's property. One of the most intense forms of body adornment is scarification and the ritual of scarification plays an important role for Tashi and Adam in

Walker's *The Color Purple*. While this ritual symbolizes gender differences in the novel, it also symbolizes the efforts that many of the characters seem to be making to blend cultures, to establish a dual cultural identity.

For dark skinned peoples, tattooing is not a practical decorative device since no white dyes have been discovered for this purpose. African and Australian tribes have resorted to scarification or cicatrization for body decorations. Scarification involves cutting the skin and rubbing irritants into the wounds to cause scar tissue in the form of raised lumps or welts. Generally a part of some rites of passage, the resulting scars are often produced in elaborate geometric designs and are highly symbolic. (Gurel 6)

Scarification is especially interesting when looking at how women blend their own definitions of self with the physical symbols of belonging to a tribe or gender. Though women who undergo scarification do so out of respect for tribal rituals, their marks also indicate something about their personalities as well. These scars are "permanent adornments-- those involving some form of body mutilation-- [and] are more typical of rigid societies, where allegiance to the group is of massive importance" (Morris 15). And though by adornment I will typically be referring to hair dressing,

body painting, and perfuming, scarification is an essential ritual to consider when reading twentieth-century African American Women's fiction.

Still, the scars of slavery can also be read as permanent badges that identify the wearer as a member of a group. And though these scars are not administered during a ceremony necessarily, whippings or even brandings were systematic initiations into the institution. Take for instance, Sethe's scars on her back that Amy Denver describes as a "choke-cherry tree." Her scars can be read as part of her identity--she belongs to slavery. Scarification in this sense must be differentiated from tribal rituals if the "initiate" is willing or is forced to cooperate. Often in ritual scarification, the initiate performs the ceremony herself. The difference between this ritual and the systematic initiation of slaves, lies in who makes the marks on who and what that identification means.

Deformations, such as piercings, are also popular forms of adornment in many cultures. Like scarification, piercing can also be viewed as being a sort of rite of passage. More dramatic versions of deformation are male and female circumcision rituals performed all over the world. "Frequently the mutilations are genital and applied at the age of puberty. For the first time the child cannot turn to its parents for protection from pain and, in this way, is

turned away from them and towards the social group" (Morris 15). Female circumcision is an important theme in some African American novels (for example, Morrison's *Sula* and Walker's *The Color Purple*) because it is viewed as being a misogynist practice by many Western cultures and merely a rite to womanhood in some African cultures. A character dealing with her own circumcision would represent someone trying to blend drastically different cultures together to form her own identity. It could be said that another form of deformation adornment shows itself as the bruises a woman gets from a beating. Again, this type of body adornment is different from something like body painting because the giver and receiver of each treatment are decidedly different depending on the situation. A man might beat his wife to adorn her body with bruises to show everyone that she is his property. A woman who paints herself might do so out of love for her self and self-ownership. Though bruising is a form of body adornment and identification inflicted on women against her will, it is much different from other forms of adornment chosen by women. Bruising is certainly not "beautiful," but that is precisely the point. Women such as Janie in *Their Eyes Were Watching God* and Celie in *The Color Purple*, work to cover those marks with the garments of her choice--thus freeing themselves from the pain and humiliation of being beaten or owned by someone else. Other forms of adornment are

needed to reestablish ownership after a woman receives wrongful bodily adornments.

Hair adornment is directly linked to asserting an identity in Western and non Western cultures alike. Traditionally, wigs and hair styles suggested what degree of social prominence the wearer experienced...or how much money they had. For African American women in twentieth-century fiction, because hair is often times the most visible artistic palette. Christian morality as based on the Mosaic theory is an appropriate lens to view a woman's identity through because religion finds its way into strangest places: the beauty shop, for example. The following passage is a reflection of how the early church responded to the wig trend, which has made an appearance every few hundred years. Now wigs are not currently considered to be a social transgression, but to put it into a "hair" perspective, response to wigs in the past does have something in common with the contemporary response to the trend of dyeing one's hair an "unnatural" shade...purple, blue, red, pink etc.

The early Christian church hated the artificiality and vanity of wigs, and bishops refused to give a blessing by the laying on of hands if it meant touching a hairpiece that might have come from a pagan head. Even the natural flowing locks of female Christians became looked upon as tempting

and devilish and in medieval times women were urged to hide their hair under tight hoods. (Miller 16)

Surprisingly, women covering and uncovering their hair is a theme in the fiction that I consider in this thesis, and while I am sure that it has its roots in early misogynistic religious tyranny, it is usually symbolic of a man's dominance over his wife--both in contemporary and historical times. When a woman decides to let her hair flow freely, it is a sign that she is freeing herself from male dominance, or that she is being assertive by inviting attention, which is even more terrifying for men who are supposed to overpower women in all situations.

Fashion is often seen as oppressive to women, because it is meant to transform woman into something more appealing to a man. But I argue that fashion in its very truest sense is an art form that invites personal expression. Despite being forced into ridiculous contraptions like corsets, bustles, 3ft. high wigs, and high heeled shoes, women--and more specifically for this thesis, African American women, have always found a way to reclaim what I believe to be the original purpose of clothing, artistic expression of the self. Or to put it more simply, the joy felt with self-ownership.

Chapter 1

INTRODUCTION:

FOUR STEPS FROM SLAVERY TO A FEMININE IDENTITY

Harriet Jacobs' *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl* deals with four predominant themes that each play a part in unifying the slave woman and the northern white woman under a shared identity of femaleness. Ironically, she does this by criticizing the "cult of true womanhood" as unjustly exclusive to free black and slave women. Jacobs pleads with her white, female reader to find it in her Christian heart to see past skin color and to recognize a female slave's womanhood, despite her "failure" to live according to the rules of "the cult of femininity." The requirements for entry into the cult of true womanhood consist of four rules that feminist historian Barbara Wellter describes as "the attributes of True Womanhood, by which a woman judged herself and was judged by her husband, her neighbors and society, [that] could be divided into four cardinal virtues-- piety, purity, submissiveness and domesticity" (Carby 23). Jacobs illustrates through some "incidents" in the life of Linda Brent (Jacobs herself) that it is impossible for slave women to live up to these kinds of rules of femininity. She makes an important declaration that it is not because slave women are biologically or morally unable to incorporate these four

virtues into their lives, but that the institution of slavery itself does not permit a female slave to safeguard her own womanhood. After examining the accounts of her sexual indiscretions in her own slave narrative, Jacobs writes, "Still, in looking back, calmly, on the events of my life, I feel that the slave woman ought not to be judged by the same standards as others" (Jacobs 86). Though she spends a great deal of time apologizing, ultimately, Jacobs asserts that it is her place to receive an apology rather than issue one.

These four attributes or cardinal rules of femininity were unattainable for slave women, and Jacobs fiercely defends herself and her sister slaves by explaining the endless assaults on her femininity a slave woman must face every single day. Because her sexuality is viewed by her master (white people) as being animalistic both in purpose and in passion (meaning, the purpose of her sexuality is to breed like an animal and like an animal, her passionate sexuality is not governed by Christian morals), she is not a part of the "pure as the driven (white) snow" feminine cult. For young white women, purity was possibly the most important aspect of her femininity, for it was a physical emblem of her spiritual devotion to Christian morality, and for a man to challenge a young white woman's purity meant that he had no respect for God or community. As James Fordyce suggests in his *Sermons to Young Women* (1765), "The man that behaves with

open rudeness, the man that avowedly laughs at virtue, the man that impudently pleads for vice; such a man is to be shunned like a rattlesnake" (Seidenberg 3). But for a slave woman, her sexuality could be used to barter for a more immediate reward than a fictitious heaven: freedom, or what is more likely the case, her life. In her case, rape is not considered a violation at all; it is considered mere "practice" among white men. Also, the pervasive belief was that black women were not pure beings to begin with, so therefore, there could be no true violation of their purity. However, there is some inconsistency in this belief. Though a black woman was not considered a pure being at any stage, she could still be chastised by the white world for losing her virginity outside of marriage. And as Carby asserts in Jacobs' case, the fact that she survived the loss of purity only cements white assumptions about the slave woman's animal tendencies because

According to the doctrine of true womanhood, death itself was preferable to loss of innocence; Linda Brent not only survived in her "impure" state, but she also used her "illicit" liaison as an attempt to secure a future for herself and her children. Jacobs's narrative was unique in its subversion of a major narrative code of sentimental fiction: death, as preferable to loss of purity, was

replaced by "Death is better than slavery."

(Carby 59)

By refiguring a major theme in white literature, Jacobs wages an attack on the ludicrous judgments that she as a black woman faces. She substitutes one instance for another, freedom for purity, to illustrate that the realities of black and white women are so vastly and unjustly different.

A slave woman's purity was not regarded as a physical emblem of Christian piety. She must breed as a domesticated animal must; not only was her body the property of her master, but also were any children she would have. It didn't matter who impregnated her, that child would bring money to the owner. Therefore, virginal purity was not an aspect of a slave woman's identity recognized by white slave owners. She had to be a whore to white angelic virginity for the sake of profit.

Hazel Carby discusses this definition of black femininity as being the opposite of white femininity. If womanhood included all of the things only white women could attain, then "naturally" along these lines, black women were not true women:

...The figurations of black women existed in an antithetical relationship with the values embodied in the cult of true womanhood, and absence of the qualities of piety and purity being a crucial

signifier. Black womanhood was polarized against white womanhood, in the structure of the metaphoric system of female sexuality, particularly through the association of black women with overt sexuality and taboo sexual practices. (Carby 32)

As Carby suggests, because black femininity was placed in juxtaposition to white femininity, black femininity and "illicit" sexuality must be deviant and animalistic as compared to pure and moral white womanhood. According to this belief, white women were God's intention of true femininity, and therefore, black women were not able achieve a true identity as women under God-- even if they did proclaim religious loyalty to a Christian God. So likewise, if she was impure, then she was not pious; this means that the slave woman was unable to meet not just one, but two standards of femininity.

While a slave woman may hope to practice her Christian faith, Jacobs argues that southern white people are not good Christian examples on any level (with the exception of the elderly woman who bought her grandmother's freedom)-- and in the narrative, slaves are rarely permitted to attend church because of the fear of an insurrection. But when it was discovered that the church could prevent a slave's insurrection against his or her master, church attendance was encouraged for, "the slaveholders came to the conclusion that

it would be well to give the slaves enough religious instruction to keep them from murdering their masters" (Jacobs 105). Jacobs recalls visiting a church where the "Pious Mr. Pike" delivered a sermon, not in the name of God, but in the name of local slave masters who wanted to warn slaves against planning an escape or uprising. He begins by warning them that God and their masters (who's agendas in this case are assumed to be one and the same since the message of God is really the message of white slave masters to their slaves) are aware of their inability to follow the commands of their masters. This, he suggests is an act of disobedience against God Himself. "Instead of serving your masters faithfully, which is pleasing in the sight of your heavenly Master, you are idle, and shirk your work. God sees you. You tell lies. God hears you" (Jacobs 106). The sermon goes on to denounce any cultural ties slaves have to African religion and proclaims that this new white man's religion is the only practice (worshiping and working for a Master) that will save their souls. Instead of a slave hearing the word of God, she is invited only to hear the master's pawn deliver threats: "You must forsake your sinful ways, and be faithful servants. Obey your old master and your young master...If you disobey your earthly master, you offend your heavenly master" (Jacobs 107). If a black slave woman accepts the teachings of a holy man like Rev. Pike, then she is really accepting

the rules of slavery as opposed to the rules of God. So, "piety", in the sense that a woman embraces the word of God and Christianity, is not achievable for the slave woman in the same way that it is for a white woman.

"Submissiveness" is certainly attainable for the slave woman because she must resign her entire self--body, soul, and spirit, over to her owner. But submissive behavior for a white woman means that she should trust in her husband and father, and through that trust, she can gain power over a domestic and spiritual domain. Slave women are expected to submit at the threat of death or extreme violation, not at the risk of her losing domestic power. Slaves are never guaranteed empowerment over anything. "Submissiveness" does not mean the same thing for white women and black slave women, as Jacobs earnestly points out.

Finally, "domesticity" as an attribute is unrecognizable in the life of a slave. While she may bear children, nurse white babies, and work as a domestic servant, she is not allowed to care for her own house and family because nothing--especially her time-- belongs to her. This situation marks one of the most painfully ironic truths about the role of motherhood in slavery. While children were sold from their mothers with little to no regard for the mother-child bond, slave owners acknowledged the obvious biological (if not psychological) ties a slave mother could have for a child.

The fact that a slave mother was often asked to replace her own child by taking care of a white child indicates a strange rationalization about mothering capabilities for black women made by white slave owners.

Harriet Jacobs' landmark work truly paved the way for twentieth-- century African American women's fiction. Her challenge to those four virtues of "true femininity" created space for those who followed her to redefine what it meant to be an African American woman in her own right.

Instead of these four unattainable virtues of feminine identity, four different virtues that link these fictional twentieth-- century African American women together that allows them to form their own feminine identities. These four virtues involve: defining God for themselves, defining motherhood for themselves, embracing the issue of skin consciousness, and the ability to dress and adorn as a personal ritual that signifies completion in maintaining an identity. Like those belonging to the "cult of true womanhood," these four areas of interest involve intense personal devotion, internal struggle, cathartic peace once the struggles are over, and power once that peace is embraced. Piety, Purity, Submissiveness, and Domesticity refer to the proper use of the physical female body in order to find peace in the earthly extension of oneself (the family), and these are all steps that are supposed to lead to

a spiritual paradise. Likewise, the four themes I intend to discuss in the following books deal with similar matters of physical and spiritual connection to the feminine--with the exception that these four "steps to feminine identity" are not only available to African American women, slave and free, but actively reclaimed by them because these steps or roadblocks must be addressed and overcome in the making of a self-aware African American woman. The fact that African American women writers redefined the steps used to judge a person's womanhood suggests that they chose a way to beat those who stereotyped them at their own game. But also, this rewriting and rethinking suggests that because black women's experience is so different from white women's experience, then perhaps it is time to broaden themes of literature to address that difference. The authors I have chosen to discuss are all engaged in this process. As Venetria Patton suggests in her book, *Women in Chains: The Legacy of Slavery in Black Women's Fiction*,

One means of making their gender visible was for black women to enter the literary arena. Writing could be a way of combating negative stereotypes by presenting themselves in a positive light. However, in order to address their race and gender concerns, black women writers could not merely plug black women characters into the existing styles and

genres. Instead, the writers utilized the traditions before them but also made strategic changes to develop a literary form that could address both race and gender issues. (Patton 38)

All four of my proposed themes: the **rejection** of a white man's **god**, a woman's relationship to the institution of **motherhood** and family, her emotions surrounding a complex relationship with her inner and outer self as represented by her feelings about the color of her **skin**, and most importantly, her relationship to personal **dress and adornment** as a response to all three of these issues, each contribute to an altered literary format (rooted in the above themes) developed by African American women writers to discuss gender and race issues in terms of a personal feminine identity. Each of these themes relates to the overall need of the female protagonist to own a physical and spiritual space that she can freely inhabit. Symbolically, this space can be seen as the Garden of Eden, because like Eve, each of these particular women was expelled from a place of genuine paradise of self awareness and self love. Africa is often depicted as being Eden-like in African American stories. Its countryside and people are mythologized to the point of it being recreated into a mythic world where black skin is cherished and all who walk the continent are free. Unlike Eve, none of the women were created in the Garden of Eden [or

Africa], they only have only heard stories about its existence. It is not an actual place that each woman remembers because it is a place [of self-awareness and self-love] whose reentry she has been systematically and historically denied. Though these American women were not expelled from an African paradise, the pain of being forcefully taken from this place is a similar feeling. They can only search for a new promised land in America that is reminiscent of the holiest of paradises-Eden. This place would allow true feminine creativity and freedom of thought and movement. Each woman seeks it, she risks her body and soul to find it. Death is preferable to being denied this space where the full freedoms associated with their self-defined feminine identities reside. Instead of the fight for mere freedom on paper in the North being worthy of death as in Jacobs' narrative, the twentieth-century African American woman requires a freedom that is much more personal and more real.

The first theme I would like to discuss stems from the slave woman's attempt to establish a female bond with white women through Christianity. By contrast, for twentieth-century women, Christianity is often rejected so that each woman can find her own definition of spirituality and femininity. She frees herself from Christianity and from strict definitions of white femininity as well. Larsen's

Helga, Hurston's Janie, Walker's Celie, and Morrison's Sethe each confront their own inability to access the spiritual answers they need through a relationship with a white male god. Each woman struggles with the major role that a white, Christian, American God is supposed to take in their lives. Not only do white people advise their conversions, black people advise conversion as well, and this further contributes to the already oppressed African American community. This theme reveals the impact of colonization and brainwashing on the twentieth-century black community that is similar to Jacobs' discussion of Mr. Pike's southern church and slavery.

Each woman is looking for a Promised Land that is promised in the Bible; it is the same promised land their mothers hoped for in times of slavery. But the paradise Eden from Genesis doesn't really exist for them, no matter how often they look in the "right" places because it is from another world. Africa is not a promised land, although that is the easiest assumption. Historically, African Americans are linked to the fact that their ancestors were expelled from that garden, but it was not God who expelled them; it was their own people who did, and this issue is represented in the complex, dysfunctional black communities that these women are a part of. The Garden of Eden is not just a place that existed in history that one can return to and likewise,

the promised land cannot be reached without much trial. Going back to Africa (or Denmark, Harlem, the South, or Eatonville,) is not the answer in and of itself. These women must first suffer and experience true love and life so that they can adapt their own ideas of what the garden of Eden is for them personally. After they complete an individual journey, they can view themselves true women as well as a representatives of the African American community, but it is also in the belonging to these groups that these women are able to complete the journey. Many of those places they consider to be a promised land are in natural and rural communities, but ultimately, the true promised land that they each find includes a house of their own and a god of their own, not a white male Christian god-- in fact the exact opposite-- a God based on themselves. Each woman rejects all notions of a white man's god as being her master in any way. And in this process of rejection, she also develops the strength to free herself physically from any earthly male masters.

The second theme is one of the most important because like her relationship with a Christian God, Motherhood, according to the definition of true womanhood is supposed to indicate true femininity. Jacobs tried to convince white readers that slave women were capable of being true Christians, but that their exposure to impure white southern

Christians made it difficult to do so. Jacobs argued that if northern Christians cared about their faith, they might consider the fact that their southern white brothers and sisters were not allowing their slaves access to the real teachings of Jesus. This created a bond between northern white Christians and slave Christians. Appealing to northern white women in this manner brought the slave woman and the white woman closer together. Likewise, Jacobs also attempted to form a bond of womanhood based on the importance of the role of motherhood to both groups of women.

This equation did not appeal to white women in many ways because the definition of motherhood was so vastly different for white women than it was for slave women. For Jacobs, "the depiction of female slaves as mere breeders, and not mothers, was just one manner of attempting to strip female slaves of their gender. Thus the mother figure becomes the means of asserting and critiquing gender" (Patton XV). Despite the common white belief that slave women should not or could not form attachments to their children, the mother's natural feelings collided painfully with this assumption. Slave women were not to love "too thick," as Paul D. suggests that Morrison's Sethe does, because those children were not their own. And yet, as Jacobs illustrates, the institution of slavery did not prevent women from forming a natural human bond between mother and child.

But for the twentieth-century African American woman, the relationship between mother and child is even more complex as a result of the lasting impression that slavery has left on the African American family. None of the female protagonists I focus on has a simple and joyful relationship with her children-- if she has children at all. Likewise, their relationships with their own mothers are nonexistent or painful as well. The slave woman's role as "breeder" as opposed to "mother" has left an imprint so deep, that the theme of a confused or painfully problematic relationship to motherhood is prevalent.

A slave's femininity was compared to female animals and instead of being seen as a mother, she was classified as a breeder. Slave women were degendered (in terms of what constituted white femininity) by white slave owners with the exception that their masters acknowledged their biological capabilities of bearing children and of being sexual objects. As Patton describes in her first chapter "The Breeding Ground: the Degendering of Female Slaves," women were compared to female livestock such as horses or cattle. For example in *Beloved*, Sethe describes the pain of hearing the schoolteacher describe her unborn baby as a "foal." Even in books that do not directly discuss slavery, these mothering relationships leave tremendous emotional and sometimes physical scars on both the mother and the child (and in

Halle's case, the father) that require constant attention.

All of the mother and child relationships are marked by physical and emotional pain and distance. For each female protagonist, the tragically dysfunctional mother-child relationship directly relates to her lack of knowledge regarding her own family history, her place in the black community, and in the American family as a whole. The displaced mother can represent a people's separation from their mother country, but just as the simplistic idea of "Africa as Promised Land" poses many problems, so too does the idea of "Africa as Mother." From an American perspective, which each of these women has, these difficult relationships reflect the fact that the codes of motherhood were completely dismissed when it came to slave women. Like God and Christian religion, motherhood and family relationships are supposed to consume a woman's soul and life energy. These women cannot find a way to successfully immerse themselves in either of these projects (religion and motherhood) because of an inconsistent and atrocious history that women of color were still experiencing, slavery having been abolished less than 100 years before and current racist hatred running rampant.

Africa cannot be the ultimate hope for these women because, as each is aware, Africa is not really a viable solution to their day to day American problems. They are not

permitted to day dream and pine away for the reunion of the child and mother Africa as the male characters in some of these books do. Instead, they are compelled to find lasting answers steeped in the everyday truth of their current physical and emotional lives. They are faced with redefining an African American feminine self so that they too can leave their current oppressions behind and "enter into the Creation" (Walker 170). And since "femininity" has historically and biologically implied "motherhood," and each of these women struggles with her own definition of African American femininity, she is actually in the process of defining herself.

The third theme directly relates to how each woman feels about her physical self. Skin color and what it means to the individual as a member of a nonexistent community is an issue continually addressed in each of these novels. For those who are light-skinned, the issue of a mixed cultural identity is one of the strongest forces behind her development as a woman in the text. For those who are dark-skinned, there is always the issue of double consciousness experienced by black people when they come into contact with the white community, but as with lighter skinned women, dark-skinned women must deal with how the African American community judges skin color as well. For Hurston's Janie and Larsen's Helga, light skin can be a real trial because it suggests a bitter history of mixed

identity; but their skin is also the place where men and tradition can leave the most obvious marks of ownership. In Helga's case, reminiscent of the plight of other mulattas, the tragedy lies in the "impossibility of self-definition...[the] protagonists assume false identities that ensure social survival but result in psychological suicide" (Wall 89). Darker women also bear the psychological and physical marks of ownership in the form of traditional African tribal scarring, bruising, and branding. How each woman handles this issue of skin color and the bitter marks of current enslavement relates back to the tragic rape and violent heritage of slave women. This theme of mixed identity is yet another carryover from slavery.

Each woman's experience of her skin is important because it is representative of her own experiences inside their physical bodies. Just as motherhood leaves physical marks that remind both mother and child of their past bond, skin color is a physical emblem reminding them of their physical pasts as well as their possible futures. Celie, Janie, Helga, and Sethe all struggle to own themselves and to free themselves from historical and present-day racism and terror. Skin color often prevents them from experiencing freedom or from having an identity that is uniquely their own. But when each woman comes to terms with how she feels in her own skin, then she is truly on the path to self knowledge. This is the

most important step to finding that Promised Land.

When each woman accepts and even adores her own skin, establishes a spiritual connection to the supernatural by defining God and her own rituals, and finds place within the family/community, then she starts dressing to enhance her physical and spiritual beauty as well as her own comfort. She is filled with a certain peace and a feeling of coming home, indicative that she has found her Promised Land. This coming home to oneself is the fourth and single most important theme I wish to discuss in each chapter. It seems only natural that the way an African American woman, dark or light skinned, should find her peace, power, and freedom is in choosing her own clothing and body adornments. When a considerable part of one's identity is derived from the person's relationship to skin color, the outer body has the utmost importance. If that body is violated, then the woman must heal outwardly in addition to inwardly.

This physical healing is also indicative of a psychological or soulful healing, and this is the area that most concerns me. Clothing, adornment and even sensuous dance are not forms of blasphemy, wrongful pride or vanity as James Fordyce's *Sermons to Young Women* implies. Fordyce's sermons were published in 1765 and widely read in America in the post-revolutionary war era. Reading and understanding his message can illuminate the harmful ideas about American

femininity that still carry over today for the twenty-first-century reader. "Fordyce maintained that a woman's most important function was to serve and please her man"

(Seidenberg 2). His advice reflects what kind of behavior the culture thought most fitting for women, and the fact that a passion for clothing and physical beauty is advised against and woman's enjoyment of dress and adornment is discouraged only suggests how closely a woman's freedom from patriarchal oppression is linked to the use of these arts. He writes:

Men, it is true, are often dazzled by youth, vivacity and beauty...(Sermon III) I would exhort and even enjoin Christian women, always to dress with decency and moderation; never to go beyond their circumstances, nor aspire above their station, so as to preclude or hinder works of mercy; not to value themselves on their dress, or despise others more meanly habited; in short, never to spend too much time or thought on the embellishment of the body; but always to prefer the graces of the mind, modesty, meekness, prudence, piety...These are the chief ornaments of their sex; these will render them truly lovely as women; and Christianity will more peculiarly become them.

(Fordyce Sermon I)

The forces of patriarchal Christianity completely denounced

female freedoms, as witnessed by such strict warnings against the freedom of expression through dress. While published in 1765, the sermons definitely reflect the predominant thought regarding women and dress in this country. Fordyce's advice complements those ideals valued by "true white women" as well. He links a woman's "loveliness" to obedience and submission. The only outlet for female self-identification was achieved through dress and adornment. The predominant religious authorities declared that a woman's interest in fashion was somehow deviant from their ideas of a more submissive woman. A woman was defined by her devotion to the church and to her husband. Dress and adornment was too blatant an assertion of feminine power and identity at this time, and those who ignored the advice of Fordyce and other religious officials were warned that they would pay for their insurrection. Obviously for twentieth-century women, black and white, it was time to reclaim the lost arts of self expression so that they could reassert themselves--to build their own identities-- in this still relatively new country.

Instead of being distractions from women's godly duties, the ritual of clothing and adornment is an outlet to freedom at the most basic level for oppressed people. To find oneself or heal oneself through the physical and psychological aspects of dress and adornment, is to begin to free oneself. In this act, these women establish ownership of their bodies

and souls. This is the most helpful and sensual form of self love.

This act of self dressing as a symbol of freedom was also a topic of discussion for Jacobs. Her grandmother illustrated her physical and spiritual liberation from slavery by sewing clothes for herself and for those members of her family still living as slaves. Linda feels a bond with her grandmother for the same reasons that many of these twentieth- century women eventually feel a bond with a displaced maternal figure. But that bond is made even stronger because Linda wears physical proof of her family history, her attachment to a mother figure, and her unwavering belief that she will also be free like her grandmother. This physical symbol is in the form of a dress.

The practice of dress and adornment are the physical rituals of a free woman. These rituals are often belittled as being frivolous, vain, immoral, overtly sexual, and other qualities women are not supposed to cherish. Jacobs transformed the traditional sentiment that death is preferable to a loss of freedom as opposed to a loss of purity. Likewise, these women have transformed and reclaimed the rituals of dress and adornment in the same way that they have redefined what role religion, motherhood and family, and their beliefs about skin color will play in their own identities. The Promised Land they seek is that free space

where a woman can celebrate her own "found" or personally defined identity. Each of these themes make up the necessary steps that lead to this final stage of establishing women's identities and securing their own futures.

In addition to looking for freedom from earthly and spiritual domination, these women are also looking for a compromise between cultural identities-- or rather, a balance that will ensure an inner peace. For these women, self knowledge is a blessing. It is liberating. Dress and adornment is a joy to behold and for them, no matter what the style, the clothing of their choice represents self knowledge and self ownership. It is not vanity or anything else negative that a male-centric religion might suggest. Each of these women was once forced to wear certain clothes or scars as a mark of ownership; these are symbols of their oppression.

After much self discovery and an overthrow of oppressive forces, these women celebrate by dressing as they wish, by burning head rags and disposing of all dirty and dingy dresses. Dressing is a ritual, and it is an integral part of a new gyno-centric religion. The Promised Land consists of a place of their own where they can celebrate themselves by dressing as they wish. Only after this process has been achieved can these women truly attempt to find love and meaning through family, community, country and God. Dress is

a visible symbol of created identity and is illustrative of the fact that these twentieth-century women have defined their own spiritualities and earthly existences for themselves.

CHAPTER 2

MULES: NELLA LARSEN'S *QUICKSAND*

Helga's relationship to clothing in Nella Larsen's *Quicksand* mirrors the development of her spirit and the establishment of her own African American female identity. But unlike Hurston's Janie and Walker's Celie, who will be discussed in upcoming chapters, Helga does not overcome any of her crises surrounding her identity at the end. Helga does not find peace in her family, community or her history. She does not find peace in her own identity as an African American woman, nor does she find peace in a self-defined God. Unlike Celie and Janie, Helga is not able to redefine her identity in relation to each of these areas. As Hazel Carby asserts, "Helga's search led to the burial, not the discovery of the self" (Carby 173). Instead of *Quicksand* being a novel about progress towards defining an African American female identity, it is about the disappearance of one, and this is just as helpful, if not more so, when looking at the literary history of the development of an African American female identity.

The novel begins with Helga feeling secure in her own room at Naxos. There is an overwhelming sense that she is completely at ease with her own strength and identity, much like Celie and Janie are at the end of their journeys. She appreciates her own skin color, and she finds strength in

being an orphan who is estranged from the rest of her extended family. There is a certain dignity in the fact that she does not fit in anywhere, and that she completely rejects the white western God. Her impeccable and luxurious taste in decor and fashion illustrate her unique and fearless identity. Some critics regard this room at Naxos as well as her room at the end as symbols of her lack of choices, suffocation, and claustrophobia: Cheryl Wall states, "Larsen, like many nineteenth- and twentieth- century women writers, used rooms as metaphors of female confinement and frustration" (Wall 113). While this is an obvious metaphor, I argue that her room at Naxos is her own true haven where she can celebrate herself through adornment and it also functions as a hiding place from the hypocrisy found in Naxos' artificial eden-like surroundings.

Helga's clothing and her room decor are indicative of both her internal strength and her concept of self-ownership. She is free in this room, and with each sigh and imagined rustle of her silk dressing gown, it is possible to hear her contentment. Her furnishings reflect her own personal style and she has used her creativity to weave herself a place to safeguard her identity.

It was a comfortable room, furnished with rare and intensely personal taste. Only a single reading lamp, dimmed by a great black and red shade, made a

pool of light on the blue Chinese carpet, on the bright covers of the books which she had taken down from their long shelves...on the shining brass bowl crowded with many-colored nasturtiums beside her on the low table, and on the oriental silk which covered the stool at her slim feet. (1)

Her room is a place of peace and contentment, and complements the reclining Helga as if it were really an extension of herself. This particular room is vastly different from the room we see her in at the end of the novel, and this is representative of the complete erosion of Helga's spiritual and physical strength. But at the beginning, in this room at Naxos, despite (or perhaps because of) her rejection of Naxos' beliefs about race and identity, she is at peace here with her own identity as a woman. Her dress, a "vivid green and gold negligee and glistening brocaded mules" brings out her gentle passions and flatters her "skin like yellow satin" (2). She dresses herself and reclines in the deep peacefulness of the room with a sense of ritual to rid her mind and soul of the day's strain. Helga created this room to keep out "the intrusion of irritating thoughts and worries...She wanted forgetfulness, complete mental relaxation, rest from thought of any kind" (2). While this suggests that she is looking for a place to hide from her problems, mostly the room is a positive celebration of

herself because she is able (at least until this particular evening) to be at peace in this room.

Helga tries to block out the fact that she and the other people of Naxos have been through a long day under attack. Her daily ritual of indulging in "the sweet pleasure of a bath" and changing her clothes during her lunch hour have been interrupted. Instead of practicing her daily ritual of adornment, she has been forced to sit in quiet submission along with the rest of the school to listen to the "banal, the patronizing, and even the insulting remarks of one of the renowned white preachers of the state" (2). In these first few pages, it is apparent that Helga sees right through the offensive teachings of white culture to the black community. She rejects the interruption of her own daily rituals of dress and adornment because these, not those advocated by the white church, are essential to her own self-defined religion. She uses these rituals as a release from the judgment of the outside (black and white) world. In this room at Naxos, she is able to view the white and black community as "outside" her own identity. Her perception changes as she moves from community to community, and she begins regarding herself as the outsider. This perception is made even more tragic as we watch her abandon her own daily rituals because the outside world degrades her only way to express her true identity and selfhood.

Though her room is her sanctuary, Helga cannot bear to be a part of Naxos because she feels it betrays the very people it is supposed to help. The school does not encourage its young black students to learn about *African American* culture and history so that they can form an identity. Instead, "it was no longer a school. It had grown into a machine" (4). Naxos plays to white people's ideas about black education that reinforce the inferior status of African Americans. Though Helga secures her own identity by performing rituals of dress and adornment within her room, once those ugly ideas invade her personal space, she can no longer ignore the fact that the school was "only a big knife with cruelly sharp edges ruthlessly cutting all to a pattern, the white man's pattern. Teachers as well as students were subjected to the paring process, for it tolerated no innovations, no individualisms" (4). Helga defines herself by her own characteristics and these are illustrated through her innovative sense of style. To better understand the historical relationship of an African American sense of self to fashion, I turn to Jacqui Malone's study of African American dancers and performers. With the help of Ralph Ellison, Malone offers an explanation that illuminates Helga's personal relationship to style and identity:

Style is an attitude, a mechanism used for sizing up the world, and a mode of survival. 'Behind each

artist,' writes Ellison, 'there stands a traditional sense of style, a sense of the felt tension indicative of expressive completeness; a mode of humanizing reality and of evoking a feeling of being at home in the world.' (Malone 30)

Helga uses her sense of style to form her attitudes about personal identity and about black and white society. Her style greatly influences her outlook on the world and its view of her. She works to set herself apart from those at Naxos, despite the fact that Naxos has an "air of self-righteousness and intolerant dislike of difference" (4).

Helga decides to leave Naxos before it destroys her. Already, her haven is being infiltrated with the smothering ideas from the outside world, and from the beginning, social definition severely interrupts her own sense of self. The problem is that she feels immobile due to finances. Mobility is extremely important to the twentieth-century African American identity. Just as Janie in *Their Eyes Were Watching God* (1937) exercises her wishes to become free by walking away from stifling situations and toward new experiences, so too does Helga rely on her ability to move. She can't quite afford to leave Naxos right away because "most of her earnings had gone into clothes, into books, into the furnishings of the room which now held her. All her life, Helga Crane had loved and longed for nice things" (6).

The people at Naxos distrust and dislike her because she finds such pleasure in physical adornment, and her pleasure is called "pride" and "vanity." Naxos' reaction to Helga's pleasure in identifying herself freely through dress and adornment is similar to the Eatonville community's reaction to Janie and her sense of style, and Mister's sister's reaction to Shug Avery in Walker's *The Color Purple* (1982). Because Helga has no family, she ought to be inconspicuous and plain. Only those members of the "first families" are allowed to artistically call attention to themselves--their skins. Yet, the elite do not do this; they set the example for conformity with their bland, selfless styles. Helga makes up her mind that evening in her room that she will go to visit Dr. Anderson and give her notice. She decides that because of financial reasons, she will wait until the end of the term.

Hazel Carby asserts that Helga must compromise her integrity by not leaving because she is an "object of white consumption...an objectified body...[and] a consumer, a woman who defined herself through the acquisition of commercial products, consumer goods, and commodities" (Carby 172). While it is true that Helga's mobility is threatened because she spends all of her money "consuming" goods, I argue that this is not what is so tragic about Helga's situation. She builds her identity, not necessarily through political ideas or

community, but through her own rituals of self-adornment. Making her out to be a victim of white consumer culture is to ignore Helga's only avenue of identification. Carby also suggests that "Larsen's representation of sexual politics delineated the dilemma of the woman's body as a commercialized object" and that when her exchange value lessened because she had no money to buy things, this "denied her humanity while cementing her fragile dependence on money" (Carby 173). Though this reading works depending on the instance in the novel, it is too dismissive. To only link Helga's personal fascination with dress and adornment only with capitalist victimization is to dismiss her own sense of self-worth. Making a woman a victim of "devilish" fashion is a common response to the connection a woman has to body adornment, and this idea should be rejected if we are ever going to understand female artistic expression.

Fashion as an art form plays an integral part in the representation of the modern American woman. In the modernist art world, the traditional separation between art and audience dissipates. According to Kurt Back's article on modernist fashion criticism, which directly ties into this discussion of Helga, who is a character greatly influenced by the cultural ideas at this time (1928):

The audience becomes an active participant in the communication process; the reader or spectator has

to work to ascribe meaning to the message...The role of the audience under these conditions becomes closest to that of the consumer in fashion...this development in the culture strengthens the role of the consumer as part in the fashion-creating process. The distinction between creator and audience is almost overcome. (Back 10)

Helga's relationship to fashion is representative of the modernist need to comment on art, and the belief that the commentary is also art. Her self-expression through fashion is an art form in itself, but she is also inviting those who look at her into a complex, modernist discussion of art.

Helga considers the importance of using clothing as a representation of the free self. She uses her own definition of self-hood to point out the ridiculous hypocrisy of Naxos--especially where clothing is concerned. She walks to Dr. Anderson's office in peace because she is able to admire the gardens and lawns with a feeling of certainty about her decision to leave. This is not because she is being expelled, but because she herself must take control and leave this stifling place. She makes her way to the office waiting room where she thinks about her place at Naxos. The proof that she does not belong at Naxos is confirmed in the difference of her personal style vs. theirs. "It was pleasant to Helga Crane to be able to sit calmly looking out of the window on

to the smooth lawn...for once uncaring whether the frock which she wore roused disapproval or envy" (18). She compares herself to the secretaries who all wear beige, navy, or drab brown. They set the example for the women of Naxos, both in occupation and in fashion sense. Naxos' philosophy of fashion as told to Helga over and over again by various people is as follows: "bright colors are vulgar...black, gray, brown, and navy blue are the most becoming colors for colored people. Dark complected people should never wear yellow, or green, or bright red" (17).

Drab colors will, of course, make dark-complected people invisible because the wrong colors mute instead of enhance features and skin tones. Helga can't subscribe to this idea because she bases her identity on drawing attention to her skin as a bold statement. This proves her existence to a world (both black and white) that considers her a non-entity. Helga's mulatto status is despised at Naxos despite the fact that her "high yellow" skin color is considered an important improvement. But even for those who are darker, she feels confident that it is far more important for women to rejoice in the beauty of their skin as opposed to hiding or ignoring it. The following passage illustrates this point well.

But something intuitive, some unanalyzed, driving spirit of loyalty to the inherent racial need for gorgeousness told her that bright colors were

fitting and that dark-complected people *should* wear yellow, green, and red. Black, brown, and gray were ruinous to them, actually destroyed the luminous tones lurking in their dusky skins. (17)

Helga remembers the sight of a dark-skinned woman in a flaming orange dress who was forced to dye the dress a different color. That dress, Helga recalls, looked amazing on the woman, and was one of the "loveliest sights" she had ever seen. "Why, she wondered, didn't someone write a *Plea for Color?*" (18). Her plea for color is really a plea for acknowledgement. When a woman is allowed to make a statement about her individuality and her humanity, it is often through clothing. Helga sees no reason why dark-complected women can't also take part in this ritual to make themselves seen and heard.

In many ways, Helga tries to live according to her imagined "plea for color," and as she sits in Dr. Anderson's office looking at the blandly-dressed secretaries walking mutely around the office, her desire to leave increases. The people of Naxos in accordance to their submission to white ideas about race, "yapped loudly of race, of race consciousness, of race pride, and yet suppressed its most delightful manifestations," love of color being one of these primary "delightful" qualities. For the love of color as expressed in bodily adornment represents "harmony, radiance,

and simplicity, all the essentials of spiritual beauty in the race [white people] had marked for destruction" (18). Helga challenges this "destruction" by completely rejecting all of Naxos' theories of decoration for herself. Her room contains every deep and bright shade of color, and so do her dresses. "Clothing had been one of her difficulties in Naxos" (18). She loves elaborate clothing, but in the past, has tried not to offend the others at the school by toning down her sense of style when outside the confines of her own room:

But with small success, for, although she had affected the deceptively simple variety, the hawk eyes of dean and matrons had detected the subtle difference from their own irreproachably conventional garments. Too, they felt that the colors were queer, dark purples, royal blues, rich greens, deep reds, in soft, luxurious woolens, or heavy clinging silks. And the trimmings--when Helga used them at all--seemed to them odd. Old laces, strange embroideries, dim brocades, faultless, slim shoes made them uncomfortable and her small plain hats seemed to them positively indecent. (18)

Helga's rich tastes in dress and adornment go against the puritanical notions of womanhood and the Southern white notions of black identity. Helga does not largely compromise her beliefs about dress at Naxos, because she will not trade

her individuality for conformity into this community. Her identity is at this point too important to her. Helga's struggle for self-expression through adornment represents the modernist need to carve out a place for the self in a fragmented society. For, "fashion even in its aspect as a craft, faces the same task as the artists who produced modernism, namely to mediate a place for the individual in an increasingly complex mass society" (Back 11). Helga carves out a space for her individual identity because she does not fit under the oversimplified definitions of race created for African Americans to that point in history.

But her creations do not receive praise because they free her from her social confines. Instead, they inspire jealousy and hatred among her fellow women. She thinks to herself that the women must "hold their breaths" until she makes her appearance at an evening function because the fear is that she will showcase her individuality in the form of an evening dress when everyone else is wearing "afternoon attire." The others wish to dress their conformist identities with bland clothing so that they never forget their submission to tyrannical white culture. In response to white notions of African "barbarity" and imagined sexual licentiousness of African American women, Naxos dresses to contradict sexuality and sensuality in an attempt to garner respectability and status. Helga's strength makes them recoil

in jealous anger, and her insurrection against the white oppression at Naxos is made visible by brightly colored dresses, rich and extravagant evening gowns, and accessories that only belong to a woman who is so deeply in touch with her own pleasures of physical and spiritual identity.

Naxos is supposed to be the Promised Land for African Americans. It is supposedly a place that fosters tradition through a curriculum that powerful Southern whites approve of for black children. Each course educates the students about the importance of dignity, grace, breeding and of course, submission to white approval. The campus is immaculate and green. But there is something demonic and wrong about Naxos and Helga is one of the few to pinpoint its faults and through her dress, to publicly refuse its messages. Because of her refusal to conform, Helga is made out to be a harlot. But their hatred and distrust of her is really because she draws attention to herself as as a complex person, strong in her feminine identity. She is not a one-dimensional person with a simple history that the people at Naxos (as influenced by Southern white ideology) would like to think is true for all African Americans.

Her refusal to conform is rooted in her uncertain history. And this explains why she must find alternate ways of achieving an identity. Helga's mother was a poor immigrant Danish girl and her father was a black man who would

eventually abandon his family. The students and teachers at Naxos take pride in their ability to trace their ancestry back to the "founding families." Helga does not fit into this category at all. Her white mother is not an asset, because mixed marriage is not condoned. Ironically, her skin color is an asset that makes up for her lack of "breeding." As the story unfolds, it is painfully apparent that Helga has no real ties to family until she moves to Denmark, which is a fiasco. Her Danish mother married again to a white man, and Helga recalls that he hated her because of her skin. She loves the memory of her mother, and she hopes that her mother was happy in her life, but she repeatedly asks herself, "How could she have been? A girl gently bred, fresh from an older, more polished civilization, flung into poverty, sordidness, and dissipation" (23). Helga resented her mother's second husband, a white man, even though she came to understand that this was a marriage of necessity. "Even foolish, despised women must have food and clothing, even unloved little Negro girls must somehow be provided for" (23). She remembers those pictures of her mother's careful management to avoid those ugly scarifying quarrels which even at this far-off time caused an uncontrollable shudder, her own self-effacement, the savage unkindness of her step-brothers and sisters, and the jealous, malicious hatred of her mother's husband. (23)

These are her only recollections of her history and while she is able to forgive her mother, there is a void that never leaves her no matter where she goes. Her search to fill the void manifests itself in her constant search for a community.

But she never quite finds a community though she searches her entire life. Helga's childhood was dominated by feelings of "strangeness, of outsideness, and one of holding her breath for fear that it wouldn't last" (24). Her feelings of relative belonging at a school for black children did not last, because even in a school with other black children, their obvious difference from her make her isolation even worse in many ways. The other students have families who come to see them on the weekends, but Helga has no family. Helga had no community as a child. At an early age, it was clear that Helga was caught between two races, and this leaves her without a family or a community in either race. Naxos is supposed to be her community, but she does not fit in there either. The school is a combination of the two races' ideologies, yes, but it is not an acceptable haven for a person trapped between two races because it symbolizes the worst of both worlds. Her room is no longer able to make her feel safe and whole...Naxos is becoming too intrusive for its walls to defend.

Helga returns to her "home" city of Chicago, and this movement between the south and the north represents black

migration in the 20s. Also, her freedom of movement parallels Janie's desire for this same freedom to seek out a place of her own. But her leaving the manicured gardens of the south, and returning to the gray and seething, machine-like structure of Chicago is not a pleasant experience. It is important, though, to remember that despite its sylvan beauty, Helga recalls Naxos as also being machine-like. She is turned away from her only family, her white uncle, and is left in the city without a job or a home. To find a job through the YWCA, she dresses herself carefully, "in the plainest garments she [possesses], a suit of fine blue twill faultlessly tailored, from whose left pocket peeped a gay kerchief, an unadorned, heavy silk blouse, a small, smart, fawn-colored hat, and slim brown oxfords" (31). Feeling the pain of abandonment and of purposelessness while she waits to hear about a job suitable for her education level, she wanders the streets looking in store windows and eating in "appealing little restaurants" because the "thick cups and the queer dark silver of the [YWCA] distressed her" (31). She does not belong in this situation. The women at the YWCA cannot find placement for her because she is overqualified to be a domestic servant. She is too well-groomed and well-educated in social graces to fit in with the urban black community--at least those associated with the YWCA--she is just as out of place as she was down at Naxos.

Even though Helga has always known that she did not fit in at Naxos, it is the speech of the white southern preacher at the school that cement her thoughts about leaving. Her rejection of his message is also a rejection of the white Christian church. Her beliefs do not change after moving to Chicago, but because she needs to feel part of a community, she attends services at the Negro Episcopal church on Michigan Ave.:

Helga Crane was not religious. She took nothing on trust. Nevertheless, on Sundays she attended the very fashionable, very high services...She hoped that some good Christian would speak to her, invite her to return, or inquire kindly if she was a stranger in the city. None did, and she became bitter, distrusting of religion more than ever.

(34)

Helga does not go to church because she longs to adopt the Christian philosophy of living. Instead, she longs for the ritual of adornment and identity through community. High services are full of pomp and wealth. She hopes that members of such a church will appreciate the same adornment rituals as she does. She does not find a community within the church, and this creates an even bigger gap between Western religion and her own identity. Neither the simplicity of the southern Christian church nor the elaborate Episcopal church of the

north makes Helga feel at home. Instead, she feels the continuous satisfaction with her own rituals of adornment. However, her freedom, at least what she perceives as freedom, is at risk because her lack of finances forces her to be immobile.

The job with black scholar, Mrs. Hayes-Rore, allows her to become mobile once again. She makes her way to New York as a traveling secretary for Mrs. Hayes-Rore, and their relationship develops as the train takes them to their destination. To help her out, Mrs. Hayes-Rore takes Helga to her niece, Anne Gray, and sets her up with job interviews intended for educated black people. Helga is invited to stay at Anne's house, though she is not free to discuss her family history with anyone in New York. Mrs. Hayes-Rore advises her to keep her mother's race a secret because "colored people won't understand it" (42). Helga feels "like a criminal" because she must lie to Anne, a woman she respects very much because she respects her fashion sense, and because she is not allowed to take any pride in her mixed heritage.

But this is a beginning for Helga as it was for many African Americans who migrated to Harlem in the 20s. For many, it was like coming home to a ready-made community. Not only was it a homecoming, but "the Great Migration was itself a deliberate flight not only from countryside to city, but from medieval [feudal] America to modern" (Wall 3). For many,

the modern meant a chance to redefine the self, but as Cheryl Wall says of Locke's *The New Negro*, "ironically, the new positive sense of self was motivated by a 'deep feeling of race', not altogether unlike the one that had inspired the self-hatred it replaced" (Wall 3).

Though it might be a plunge into the modern for Helga, it is not really coming home because she cannot fit into a community that hates a part of her own heritage. Therefore, Harlem can't be a place where Helga can define "self" in the way she needs to. Instead, she is forced out of that community because of her biracial existence. But this dissociation makes Helga an accurate portrait of a modern urban psyche. For, as Back argues,

[an] important aspect of modernism was a parallel dissolution in the unity of content, the splitting up of the self...The variables that lead to a concept of self-unity are weakened and counteracted in mass society. Heterogeneity of life in metropolitan areas may lead to ambivalence in norms, even in norms of perception. (Back 9)

Helga does split herself as soon as she enters Harlem. She has always been a split self, but her experiences in Harlem heighten her awareness of her own biracial existence because she has to choose one side of her identity over the other. Though many people in Harlem consider themselves to be

members of a homogeneous race, their coloring and cultural tastes represented by various characters such as Helga, Anne, and Audrey Denney, indicate a heterogeneous mixture of race and cultures.

Although Helga eventually becomes alienated in Harlem, at first, it seems like the Promised Land that she left Naxos in search of. She finds peace in Harlem, a peace that she has not known previously:

New York she had not found so unkind, not so unfriendly, not so indifferent. There she had been happy, and secured work, had made acquaintances and another friend. Again, she had had that strange transforming experience, this time not so fleetingly, that magic sense of having come home. Harlem, teeming black Harlem, had welcomed her and lulled her into something that was, she was certain, peace and contentment. (43)

Even more importantly, Helga feels comfortable in Anne's home because it is as fashionably decadent as her room at Naxos was--except on a much grander scale. Here, Helga enjoys the extravagant styles she has always enjoyed, and no one criticizes her sense of style as being unsuitable. "Gradually in the charm of this new and delightful pattern of her life she lost that tantalizing oppression of loneliness, which always, it seemed, had been part of her existence" (45).

She is finally free to establish her existence through dress and adornment, and to watch other dark-skinned people enjoy color, skin, and dress freely, and without judgment. She shuts out the white part of her history by rationalizing that this part of her brought her nothing but shame and exclusion. She hides these memories of her past away from the people of Harlem, but also from herself. Helga begins to look toward a future even though she is hiding from her past; she thinks that someday she will, "marry one of those alluring brown or yellow men who danced attendance on her. Already financially successful, any one of them could give to her the things which she had no come to desire, a home like Anne's, cars of expensive makes such as lined the avenue, clothes and furs..." (45). In Harlem, these things (once thought to be the birthright of white people,) are attainable by black people as well. Carby's point about consumerism clouding self is understandable here, beyond her desire for material things, Helga is really just looking for ways to ensure her future adornments and existence. Her desire for these new things also marks her as a modernist in search of a new identity because, after all, "new fashions may be indicators as well as precursors of new types of adjustment" (Back 13). For the modern African American, new fashions are integral to forming a new identity, and this of course works on a personal level for Helga as well.

Through her ability to freely dress and adorn herself, Helga finds a space of peace and contentment:

She did not analyze this contentment, this happiness, but vaguely, without putting it into words or even so tangible a thing as thought, she knew it sprang from a things such as freedom, a release of smallness which had hedged her in, first in her sorry, un-childlike childhood among hostile white folk in Chicago, and later during her uncomfortable sojourn among snobbish black folks in Naxos. (46)

Helga feels that she has finally found her Promised Land, the place where she can freely be herself. But she is repressing many memories about her family history and is not being completely honest about her identity. Without full acknowledgement of painful history, it is not possible to build a true and meaningful identity.

As we will see, both Celie and Janie have to confront those pasts that they had made silent before they can come to a place of true peace and contentment. But, because Helga does not permit herself to come to terms with her family and race history, her contentment begins to crumble. It becomes more apparent as time goes on that because she is not allowed to be true to her history, she can't reveal her true spirit. This manifests itself in her own restless greeting of Spring

in Harlem. Instead of it being a season of rebirth and joy, she feels stifled because her true identity is not permitted to bloom. "Little by little, the signs of spring appeared, but strangely, the enchantment of the season, so enthusiastically, so lavishly greeted by the gay dwellers of Harlem, filled her only with restlessness" (47). She begins to feel more and more isolated, and wanders to the far outskirts of Harlem, indicating that she is ready to move away from whatever fences are holding her in.

The reason behind Helga's displeasure stems from her inability to embrace both parts of her American identity-- African and European. Many people of Harlem, the intellectuals whom Anne represents, openly claim to despise white culture and all white people. But Helga sees their hypocrisy as easily as she saw all that was hypocritical at Naxos. Anne asserts that "the most wretched Negro prostitute that walks One Hundred and Thirty-fifth Street is more than any president of these United States...but she turned up her gently carved nose at their lusty churches, their picturesque parades, their naive clowning on the streets" (49). These two quotations both show Anne as unable to accept black ways. Though she hated white people, and would never want to live outside of the black belt, Anne "aped their clothes, their manners, and their gracious ways of living. While proclaiming the undiluted good of all things Negro, she yet disliked the

songs, the dances, and the softly blurred speech of the race" (49). Harlem, like Naxos is unable to acknowledge the obvious blend of cultures that has created the African American. Helga represents that blend, and she constantly feels like she has to choose between one side or the other, and regardless of which side she chooses, she is alienated and isolated in some way.

This split in one's self is represented in the irony seen in Helga's skin color. She is supposed to be ashamed of her white heritage, though she is praised for her light skin. In the middle of her Harlem identity crisis, Helga receives an inheritance from her white uncle Peter, whose wife turned her away in Chicago. He is not dead, but his intention is to pay her to be removed from his conscience. Feeling confused and ostracized, she decides to take his advice and go to Denmark. Even though she feels the rebuff from the white side of her identity, she still feels alienated from the black community. "Why" she asks, "should she be yoked to these despised black folk?" (55). She questions her relationship to them, and in a feeling of guilt, she begins to accept that they are her people. But as she walks through the rain, she comes to the conclusion that "she didn't, in spite of her racial markings, belong to these dark segregated people. She was different. She felt it. It wasn't merely a matter of color. It was something broader, deeper, that made folk kin"

(55). She can't belong fully to a black community because of her white ancestry, and likewise, she cannot belong fully to a white community because of her "racial markings." Once Helga realizes that there is a certain futility in pretending to create a homogeneous racial community in the United States, she moves on to Denmark. She decides to go to Europe where she doesn't need to face this American predicament, and she can fully immerse herself in her Danish ancestry.

Money, this time from her Uncle Peter, grants her the freedom of mobility once again. "And now she was free" Larsen writes, and "fleeting memories of her childhood visit there flew through her excited mind...she gave herself up to daydreams of a happy future in Copenhagen where there were no Negroes, no problems, no prejudice." Helga wishes to go back to her roots in order to find the original community that she assumes will take her back. This is similar to the theme of returning to Africa found in many African American texts, but this time, the protagonist wishes to embrace her European instead of her African heritage as an escape from the the difficulties of establishing an American identity.

Helga's need for a change is cemented at Anne's coming-home party which takes place on the eve of Helga's departure. Despite the awkwardness of racial position, Helga continues to find security in her own rituals of dress and adornment. She can not decide what to wear as she sorts out what she

thinks everyone will wear: "everyone would wear white, Anne would wear green," and she feels that she wears her blue dress too often. She comes across her black net dress with a touch of orange in it, that she "bought last spring in a rush of extravagance, but had never worn, because upon getting it home, both she and Anne had considered it too *decollété* and too *outré*." Anne's opinion at the time had been "There's not enough of it, and what there is gives you the air of something about to fly" (56). In remembrance of these words, Helga decides to wear this dress to Anne's party because "for her it would be a symbol. She was about to fly" (56).

This party ends up at a jazz club where they all drink and dance. Helga is so mesmerized by the dancing and music that she almost forgets herself. She loses herself in the whirling heat of the club. "The essence of life seemed bodily motion. And when suddenly the music died, she dragged herself back to the present with a conscious effort; and a shameful certainty that not only had she been to the jungle, but that she enjoyed it, began to taunt her" (59). Helga knows that she is about to leave her African heritage behind, and feels shame at having taken pleasure in "the primitive." But, she also feels guilty about concealing her European heritage as well. This split in herself always surfaces as feelings of guilt. But she cannot reconcile both parts of herself.

In light of her journey to Denmark, she reminds herself

that she isn't a "jungle creature" and watches with disgust as the others dance. But she does take interest in the variations in skin, hair, and eye color. This only emphasizes the depth of denial in those who reject white influence, but a connection that she *doesn't* make is that these people are not "from the jungle" either. Her eyes fall on Dr. Anderson who is with a very light-skinned woman named Audrey Denny. Anne's dislike of Audrey Denney has largely to do with her skin color, and the fact that she gives mixed-race parties. She describes Audrey as revolting and worthy of being ostracized because she does not live in the black belt and this makes Anne's circle of people think she is a traitor. Helga's fascination with Audrey suggests that she can see their similarities, but she is fascinated also because Audrey seems to embody a perfect harmonization between black and white. She dances with black and white men alike, and does not care whom she upsets in the process. Helga is and has been part of black communities that have either unsuccessfully tried to combine white culture with black, or have unsuccessfully tried to separate the two. But Audrey is the embodiment of the person she would like to be--someone who bravely lives in between both cultures. Still, the fact is that Audrey's lifestyle is not widely accepted. Helga longs to escape from this hypocrisy to go to a country where there are no race issues. As she looks around the room and

tallies up all of the different skin colors, she notices that there is no "pure" black race. Instead, there is only an African American "race," according to Larsen, and there is still no clear and satisfactory definition of that in the 1920s.

Helga gets on the boat to Copenhagen feeling "sad, forlorn, and misunderstood." When she arrives in Copenhagen, "A smart woman in olive green came toward her at once. And, even in the fervent gladness of her relief, Helga took in the carelessly trailing purple scarf and the correct black hat" (65). Helga is relieved that she is not left standing on the pier and that her aunt and uncle seem so overjoyed to have her there. Also, she immediately compares herself to her aunt, something she will be asked not to do starting the next day. She is not to try to imitate her aunt or white European culture, instead, she must enact her difference. The next morning, Helga decides that Denmark is where she belongs. She thinks that race will no longer be a burden she has to bear. Also, her identity here is known; she does not need to try to fit in anywhere. Her difference is obvious, and there does not need to be any conformity. "She felt consoled at last for the spiritual wounds of the past" (67). Here, she feels like she has been readmitted to her Promised Land. These are her people now, and she gladly trades Harlem for Copenhagen. In Harlem, Helga was on the outside from the very beginning,

because unlike many people of the black community, she was a direct product of a mixed union as opposed to the mix having occurred at the time of slavery two or more generations previous. She does not have the same distance from the past that the others do.

It seems fitting that Helga should be living in Denmark because she is, after all, only one generation removed from this country. She is eager to fit in here as much as she can, but the most important thing she can do is acknowledge this part of her history. She has been hiding it in Harlem and at Naxos for so many years.

When the aunt comes in to wake her and to tell her that they are going to tea and later to dinner, the first thing they must decide on is what Helga should wear. This is the beginning of her identity transformation in this new country. Her aunt is wearing a dark purple dress so Helga, using her aunt as a model to follow, chooses the plainest thing she has. The aunt immediately proclaims it as being "too sober." "Haven't you something lively, something bright?" In response to Helga looking at her aunt's plain dress, she says, "Oh, I'm an old married lady, and a Dane. But you, you're young. And you're a foreigner, and different. You must have bright things that will set off the color of your lovely brown skin. Striking things, exotic things. You must make an impression" (68). Right away, the aunt intends to make Helga a spectacle.

She intends to exploit Helga's skin for her own social gain. Immediately, Helga is set up as someone different and it is made clear that she will never be a Dane. Aunt Katrina wants Helga to wear clothing that advertises her African origins, clothing in this case, is less a ritual than a performance. While her aunt Katrina does echo Helga's thoughts about bright colors on dark skin, this is not a freedom. She is required to make a *show* of her skin, not necessarily adorn it out of pleasure.

The aunt goes through all of her clothes, and she chooses the most dramatic and exotic of dresses. She has some of them altered to make them more brightly exotic and revealing, if not island-primitive. Aunt Katrina is planning the way to use Helga's skin and clothing to advance her own social standing; she is her aunt's show piece. She longs to play down any Danish or even white American influence, and emphasize some sort of African carnival-type style. But Helga needs to be the one who decides how she should be dressed. She does not need to exaggerate her racial identity by dressing in "parodies" of ethnic clothing. But now that Helga is part of a different community, a different fragment of her disunified self is exaggerated in an attempt to define her. Her compliance with Aunt Katrina's wishes suggests that Helga is having a difficult time defining herself in Denmark. This situation marks her as a modern woman of the 1920s struggling

with new definitions of racial and other identification categories brought about by modernity. "The dissolution of the self makes the presentation of a unitary person questionable, but certain fragments may be asserted to an extreme degree. Thus, exaggerated clothes, which may look like parodies, assert a part of the self and make a person feel at home in a mass society." (Back 10)

However, Helga is able to reason to herself that there is a difference between celebrating one's skin and being put on display. She does not feel comfortable in this society precisely because her African-ness is being showcased.

Left alone, Helga began to wonder. She was dubious too, and not a little resentful. Certainly she loved color with a passion that perhaps only Negroes and gypsies [a Larsen stereotype] know. But she had a deep faith in the perfection of her own taste, and no mind to be bedecked in flaunting, flashy things. (68)

She despises the fact that she is not free to dress herself according to her own sense of style, that she is being defined by others. However, she is eventually wooed into believing in her aunt as she joyously begins to embrace the attention and praise in this new land. She eventually feels comfortable presenting one side of her own "dissolved" self. Still, even though she feels accepted because of these

clothes, really she is not. She is accepted by the Danes as an accurate representation of a black person, but that is all they see. They do not see her as anything but a stereotype and because they think they know who she is just by looking at her, they are able to place themselves as opposites. They know who they are not because they think they can see who she is.

Just to reinforce her difference, before going out, Helga has to make appearances to get the aunt and uncle's approval. Unlike Naxos, however, the bolder and more extravagant dresses the better. Her identity is still based on the impression that she manufactures through her clothing, but in Copenhagen, she is the least herself of all the places she has been. Ironically, her clothing is the most elaborately African (or rather, a parody of African) that she has ever worn. Her intention in moving to Denmark was to lose this burden of mixed-race heritage. Instead of making her feel more white, however, the Danish make her feel more black and more different than any other community she has been in. She is nothing but a painted doll for her aunt and uncle, and is sort of entertainment, a conversation piece for the society people of Copenhagen. "Helga herself felt nothing so much as some new and strange species of pet dog being proudly exhibited" (70). In this case, Helga's clothing is used to sell her skin as an idea to other; it is not meant to enhance

her joy in her own skin as she has always used it before.

Helga feels this "sale" of her skin happen on the evening that she wore the green dress that was cut down so low that her entire back was exposed. Helga notices that no other woman is as exposed as she is, and this makes her feel like her flesh is being marketed. "She was glad for all the jewelry and the rouge because it covered her a little." While adornment can be read as being a protective shield in this instance, this reading is not entirely correct considering that Helga has never before been in such a compromising situation with her body. As in the time of slavery, where female slaves were marketed for their passionate sexuality and reproductive capabilities, so too is Helga being marketed as having some sort of innate sexual difference from the other, more modest white women in the room. She is a living, breathing stereotype of black female sexuality on display against which others can note their own contrasting skins and moralities. "True she was attractive, in an exotic, almost savage way, but she wasn't one of them. She didn't count at all" (70). Though the clothes themselves are attractive, the fact that they dishonestly represent her inner-self makes them a blatant and stereotypical lie. From the very beginning Helga feels that sense of isolation she has always felt, except in this case, she is so flattered by the attention her clothing receives that it takes her considerably longer to

act on her displeasure.

When the painter Herr Olsen is brought over to admire her features, the tableau is reminiscent of slaves standing on an auction block having their teeth examined. He compliments her features, not directly to her, but instead to her uncle--as if he is to be commended for her skin color, eyes, and bone structure. He never introduces himself to her, so when she asks someone who he is, she is told that he is a famous painter who has agreed to paint her--and she is supposed to be flattered. Helga's humiliation is almost unbearable at this point because the degree of her being on display has just deepened, and she has absolutely no say in how her body is regarded. Eventually, she gives up her own body to be painted and displayed at breakfast, tea, and dinner. During the afternoon, she also sits for hours as Axel Olsen determines who she is by painting his own definition of her. Previously, Helga has taken great pride in presenting her own definition of herself, but she has lost that power in Copenhagen, and this is the real beginning of her downward spiral.

Helga is overwhelmed with outsider representations of her and her people. Though she begins to miss Harlem, she decides that her surrender of her self-identification in Denmark is worth not having to face any of her memories of America. She starts dating Axel, and together, they attend a

black vaudeville show where the black dancers and actors perform stereotypical savage and slave dances and songs for the white audience. She realizes that the people of Copenhagen link her with these performers, and she has to keep on returning to this show again and again to coax herself into conscious acceptance of this fact. Shortly after seeing the performers' display of stereotypical blackness, Axel asks her to marry him. Or at least, that is what Helga assumes he is asking. He actually asks her to have sex with him because this would fall directly in line with the distorted image of Helga that he is painting. He is painting a voluptuous, heathenistic, dark, lusty woman. When asked, Marie provides the judgment, "It looks bad, wicked" (89). "Anyone with half an eye could see that it wasn't she" (89). But, in accordance with twentieth-century white western ideals about black people, he believes that this is the true Helga. Helga regards this portrait of her with a strong abhorrence since it does not represent her own idea of herself. However, she realizes that this painting represents how white people see her, and this causes a tremendous identity crisis that has been burgeoning since her birth. Helga's idea of herself is fragmented because she is not only caught between two races, she is also caught between her definition of self and what others see. This is all represented in Axel's painting of her. Kurt Back provides an

excellent definition of exactly what modernist authors like Larsen attempt to reveal in their characterizations of the split self:

The fragmentation of the self is easily seen in literature, where a person can be analyzed into many heterogeneous units. The same result can be shown in painting; for instance, a person may be seen from several perspectives or appear several times in the same picture. the nightmarish quality of surrealist and expressionist work derived from the loss of the familiar unity of objects.

(Back 10)

While a painting like the one described above could more accurately reflect Larsen's characterization of Helga, Axel's one-dimensional, flat, stereotypical reproduction of the old ideas about black femininity does not represent the complex and fragmented figure Larsen has created in Helga. When Helga rejects the painting as being an inaccurate portrayal of her real self, she is in fact rejecting the white world's perception of her. Also, on the level of the plot, this means that she rejects Axel.

After this rejection based on her refusal to allow him to judge her by his own stereotypes about black women, Helga decides that she must return to New York. She realizes that Copenhagen, while an interesting diversion, cannot really be

a home to her. At least, not without frequent visits to New York where she is able to blend in a bit more. Her desire to blend in at this point is interesting in that she never wanted to conform while she was at Naxos. She did however, want to conform and reject her European heritage in Harlem. Her dignity and search for identity and community necessitates this trip back. She promises the very nervous Dahl's that she will return, but she doesn't return. Helga has the ability and freedom to move back to New York, and also to get away from the white world if she wants to. This is an important difference in identity structure between the nineteenth- and twentieth-centuries.

When Helga returns to New York, she does not feel the return to a Promised Land that a part of her anticipates, instead, it is the feeling of satisfaction that she escaped from Denmark. In some ways, this idea is similar to the slave escaping from the white world into the black community, or the black southerner escaping to the northern cities. But this feeling of satisfaction quickly fades. She goes to witness Anne's marriage to Dr. Anderson, and Helga realizes that she is in love with him. He is the one person in this entire novel that Helga could attach herself to without terrible consequences, but he marries Anne instead. They actually do have an affair and afterwards he snubs her. She meets her former fiance from Naxos, who tries to convince her

to marry and mate with him so that they can breed an improved type of child for the race. They would be light-skinned and educated. This notion that the elite of the black race should reproduce to make up for the ignorant southern blacks is a popular idea in the Harlem Renaissance. But just as Helga rejects Anne's (Harlem's) ideas of maintaining a hypocritically segregated black culture, and Naxos' ideas of immersing the black youth in white culture to improve the race, so too does she reject James Vayle's belief that an elite group of black people should work on out-numbering the ignorant branch; this branch of course applies to the communities that Hurston and Walker use as examples for their own fictional communities. Here, Nella Larsen attempts to find fault with some of these elitist ideas. However, it would seem that Larsen finds fault with just about any scenario for a mulatto woman.

Helga is distraught that Dr. Anderson does not want her, but instead has chosen a woman who thinks she represents the very opposite political views from those of Naxos. This is important to Anderson because he fled from there just as Helga did and for the same reasons. Helga's political ideas complement his more than Anne's do, but this is part of the tragedy and confusion of identities that Larsen maps out for us. Distraught, Helga wanders the streets in her red cocktail dress and coat. It begins to rain so Helga steps into a

doorway to get out of the rain. She opens the door to a storefront church and goes in. The rain has caused her make-up to run, and her dress is clinging to her body. Everyone in the church is crying and singing violently, and Helga decides to watch. Soon, she begins to cry because she is a lost soul who takes comfort in hearing other people cry over their own lost souls. She is tired of living in the margins between black and white. She is tired of searching for a place where she can truly be herself. But because her love of dress and adornment has been seriously violated in Denmark, she has lost touch with the only stable part of her identity. Because of this, she succumbs to her feelings of detachment from the various communities with which she has tried to ally herself, and finally gives in to the convulsing bodies in this church who are united "in a wild appeal for a single soul. Her soul" (117).

They think she is a prostitute because of her clothing, just as the people of Naxos thought her desire for adornment compromised the purity of a black Christian soul trying to be white. Once again, a group of people are trying to take her over, and unlike Janie, she decides to succumb to the group, and leave her own self-identity behind. Her happiness, she decides, will be in Jesus and a simpler, less urban life. If she had just been able to enjoy the clothes and material things as she had wanted to in the beginning, if she had been

allowed or allowed herself to continue identifying herself by adorning herself, this "fall" would never have happened. But the ritual of dress and adornment has never been regarded as a serious gesture of one's identity. And in her desperation to have a community, she gives up her only claim to her individual identity.

She leaves the "sins of New York" behind to 'labor in the vineyard of the Lord" (118). These are undoubtedly brainwashing chants spoken to her by her new husband, Reverend Pleasant Green. She decides that things weren't "enough for her. She'd have to have something else besides...It was a chance at stability, at permanent happiness" (117). Helga is still in search of that Promised Land where she can finally feel comfortable in her own skin and with her own identity. Previously, she vehemently rejected the church and its hypocrisy, but she is at the point of desperation. Almost as if she is in a hallucinatory daze, she marries this Reverend, with a name that must only help convince her that she is headed to a land of milk, honey, and freedom. The idea that she is returning to the south also reflects some ideas of the time about southern country purity for African Americans. Rural black communities are often romanticized by Harlem's philosophers because they represent a kind of pastoral innocence as opposed to urban jadedness. As expressed by Alice Walker in her discussion of

southern black writers' reactions to the north in *In Search of Our Mother's Gardens*:

For the black Southern writer, coming straight out of the country...there is the world of comparisons; between town and country, between the ugly crowding and griminess of the cities and the spacious cleanliness (which seems impossible to dirty) of the country. A country person finds the city confining, like a too tight dress. (Walker 19)

Helga hopes that the country will be the answer she has been searching for because she thinks she has not found answers in the city. But it will become clear to her that it is this country community that is confining like a "too tight dress" and she longs for the dresses she wore at previous stages in her life. Helga's inability to find answers in the country or in the city only cements what can be assumed is Larsen's opinion that no matter where one goes geographically, or who one sides with politically, the only guarantee for self-identification is in the self--not in a community, or in religion. But Helga has not yet come to this realization. Instead, she is caught up in the newness of change and her mobility to a place that will offer a different perspective. "As always, at first the novelty of the thing, the change, fascinated her. There was a recurrence of the feeling that now, at last, she had found a place for herself, that she was

really living" (118).

But she eventually realizes that as with all of her other changes, this place does not hold any more truths than any of the other places, because it doesn't possess her truths. She does not play an active role in defining herself here. She is always looking for a group to associate herself with, to attach herself to. "Helga's search [leads] to the burial, not the discovery of the self...[her] only question [thus far has been] to what social group does [she] attach herself in order to be saved?" (Carby 173). All of this will become apparent to Helga as she revives herself from yet another false sense of peace and security. But this time, it will be too late.

Unlike Hurston's Janie, Helga's mobility does not lead her on a path of self-discovery. Instead, it is a journey to find people who are similar to herself. Just as people like Charles Chesnutt and the character Mrs. Turner in Hurston's novel wanted to define themselves as part of a new mixed race of people, so too does Helga want a group of similarly mixed and similarly self-aware individuals so that she can feel comfortable in her own skin. What she forgets, but that Janie remembers in time, is that she has already found a way to be comfortable through bodily adornment and mobility. But Helga has either let people talk her out of this ritual by making it seem less important than other rituals, or they have

violated the rituals that she held sacred. When she tries to revive those old rituals (almost as if she were reviving rituals from her African past) to share with others, her message falls on ears that are deafened by the white message of Christianity. Instead of having enough strength to go against these intense and pervasive waves of sound, she accepts their religion, and this makes her so weak that eventually, it kills her.

As a preacher's wife, Helga tries to combine her sense of herself with this new role. Part of her duties, or so she thinks, is to utilize her own sense of style and sense of self to be helpful to her new community. This would give her a self-defined place within that community:

She meant to subdue the cleanly scrubbed ugliness of her own surroundings to soft inoffensive beauty, and to help the other women to do likewise. Too, she would help them with their clothes, tactfully point out that sunbonnets, no matter how gay, and aprons, no matter how frilly, were not quite the proper things for Sunday church wear. (119)

Her message is only politely received, and largely ignored. Though she is trying to dress other women according to her own definition of style, and this is in fact something she has struggled against in her past, Helga is just trying to weave her own ideas of beauty, perfection, and salvation into

this new place. But here, just like everywhere else, she is not permitted to do so. Perhaps they are right not not allow her to change them, but their refusal only highlights the fact that Helga does not belong in this community. This weakens Helga so much that she does not have the strength to move herself away from the situation as she had always done before. She is a slave in this southern community of people willing to accept their own enslavement. Their attitude toward fashion mirrors their subservient attitude and acceptance of a rural, feudal life over a modern, urban life--all in the name of the white man's god. Lind's research on religious communities that have separated themselves from society sheds some light on Helga's new community. Lind writes: "Religious communities that have isolated themselves from society at large by rigid rules of conduct sometimes stay outside fashion's reach for centuries (Lind 184). Helga's dislike of the Christian religion manifests itself in her dislike of the women's lack of fashion sense. As Lind suggests, religious communities that define themselves by the rigidity of rules and God-fearing "self"-discipline tend to regard a woman's delight in fashion as a distracting creation of the outside world. In this case, Helga's love for adornment is considered to be a frivolous hobby practiced by city people--not by true followers of God.

In their opinion, being followers of God means hard

labor, servitude, meekness, selflessness and poverty. Like Celie's original perception of God and Heaven, this community's belief is that the world is a hell, but that labor is eventually rewarded in heaven. Helga succumbs to this strange faith for, "Faith was really quite easy. The more weary, the more weak she became, the easier it was. Her religion to her was like a protective coloring, shielding her from the cruel light of an unbearable reality" (126). Her search has led her to a male-dominated community and household, and to a male god. The result is complete and total undermining of all things feminine and strong. This religion is a protective coloring for Helga, the way family or community or skin color have failed to be for her thus far, and the way clothing failed to be in Denmark. Her discomfort in her own skin has led her to adopt a false skin. This new skin of faith is supposed to be enough, and therefore, this male-centric religion denounces any other ritual for woman. This includes the most important feminine ritual, the use of "devilish, frivolous, weak, and selfish" dress and adornment to create a feminine identity.

Helga accepts her fate. Before, the idea of "fate" never really entered into any of Helga's thoughts about moving or accepting a community as her own. But here, she resigns herself to other people's definitions of who and what she is supposed to be. She does suffer from bouts of consciousness

from time to time, but "in the morning she [is] serene again" (121). Peace returns day after day, but instead of achieving this feeling of peace and satisfaction through adornment as she had done in the past, she goes "about the mind numbing tasks and found the glory of God in darning socks. She could even ignore the ugly brown plain house, white walls etc. She was completely lost in herself" (121). Instead of just being lost "in" herself, Helga is also lost to herself. She has no idea who she is, and often forgets who she was. Her husband is not a consolation or a benefit to her self-exploration project. She ignores him as much she ignores her house behind this unfulfilling ritual of darning socks.

As far Rev. Pleasant Green's preaching goes, "In some way, she was able to ignore the atmosphere of self satisfaction which poured from him like gas from a leaking pipe." Though Helga acknowledges the fact that her reaction to her husband's (and now her own) religion is similar to her reaction to religion throughout her life, she chooses to ignore it rather than fight it. She is over-worked, both physically and mentally. This African American woman figure, by the 1920s, is completely emotionally drained from constant questioning and constantly defending her own need for an identity. She is also physically fatigued because of extensive migrations from south to north, to "her origins", to the south again. Also, her body is put through the same

rigorous breeding process as her slave-women ancestors, except for Helga, it is more in submission to God's (i.e., her husband's desire) will than to a white slave-owner's.

We watch as Helga steadily loses her strength to search for her identity, but it becomes painfully clear that she already possessed her personal identity at the beginning of this process. Her quest for a community that truly represents her own sense of herself has worn her out. Unlike Hurston's Janie, Helga has five children in five years. Unlike Walker's Celie, her devotion and attachment to her children resembles a delicate and transparent strip of gauze. She admires the idea of them from a distance, but does not love them "too thick" like Linda Brent, Celie, and Sethe do. The difference lies in the fact that unlike Linda Brent, Helga doesn't have to prove her capability to be attached to her children emotionally. Celie and Sethe, too, are characters written with the white and black community's acceptance of a black woman's natural ability to feel the attachment of motherhood. But for Helga, a woman of the 1920s, there has to be something more than motherhood and religion to define her feminine identity as well as what it means to be human. Jacobs tried to establish black womanhood through her connection to her children. Hazel Carby writes that "a woman's pride and a mother's love for her children" in conjunction with Christianity is the foundation for womanhood

in the nineteenth-century" (Carby 56). But for twentieth-century Helga, motherhood and religion are parasites eating away at her strength as an individual, and they hamper her ability to find peace in her own soul. After a few months of this new experience, Helga loses energy. She can barely stand up let alone carry out all of her plans. She bears three children in twenty months and they "used her up" (123). Her body is constantly tired and her physical body weakens just as her soul has done. "For she, who had never thought of her body save as something on which to hang lovely fabrics, had now constantly to think of it" (123). Now that she has been beaten down by the institution of an oppressive religion and social idea of woman, "the light, carefree days of the past, when she had not felt heavy and reluctant, or weak and spent receded more and more and with increasing vagueness, like a dream passing from a faulty memory" (123). The memory of herself is what is fading away from her.

Like Joe with Janie in *Their Eyes Were Watching God*, Pleasant Green is proud of Helga because she is a showpiece, but he takes no personal interest in her outside of that. He sees her as a breeder as well, and when she expresses concern over having more children, he tells her, "We must accept what God sends, the Lord will look out for you, my mother had nine and loved every one of them." It is decided that her "doubt and uncertainty were stupendous ingratiitudes" because she

forgets too often that God saved her soul. In actuality, his god ruined her soul, and she has no real defense because at this point, "there was no time for the pursuit of beauty" (123). In other words, Helga has no time to practice her own religious rituals that truly celebrate and replenish her feminine soul. In addition, his revolting hypocrisy is a comment on the effects of Christianity's affect on the African American woman. She is over-worked, and instead of helping her with the children that he created, he goes to other houses where the women are better servants to his needs. Any complaint from Helga is dismissed as being a remark of "ingratitude" and blasphemous against God and *His* order.

Helga is so beaten down by her husband's "religion" that she eventually falls into a coma as a result of her fourth pregnancy. Pregnancy is Helga's new feminine ritual, but it is a fatal ritual instead of celebratory. When she comes out of the coma, she thinks about her life's journey to this point. She remembers her life at Naxos, in Harlem and in Denmark. "It was refreshingly delicious, this immersion in the past" but it is ruined by the reality of her present life with Pleasant Green in this land of false promise (129). Her realization comes to her as she lies in her bed in a crepe dressing gown she refused to abandon in New York. The gown serves as a physical reminder of her lost freedom--as well as

an emblem for her rejection of the white man's god. Just as Walker's Celie comes to realize (with Shug's help), Helga realizes that this white man's god can't be relied on. She thinks to herself in the protection of her feigned coma:

The cruel, unrelieved suffering had beaten down her protective wall of artificial faith in the infinite wisdom, in the mercy, of God. For had she not called in her agony on Him? And He had not heard. Why? Because, she knew now, He wasn't there. Didn't exist. (130)

Helga knows now that she has allowed herself to be fooled into a life of servitude because she ran out of energy. The more energy that leaves her, the more indentured she becomes. This theme of recurring enslavement returns again and again in twentieth-century African American fiction, but in this case, as a theme well-represented in works by women of color, religion is the new oppressive force that stems from and buttresses the institution of slavery.

Therefore, as all of these authors seem to argue, a different type of religion must be reclaimed by the African American woman, but by the time Helga realizes she already possesses the secret of personal joy and identity, it is too late. She loses faith in the value of her own life because according to her experience, "life wasn't a miracle, a wonder. It was, for Negroes at least, only a great

disappointment. Something to be gotten through as best one could. No one was interested in them or helped them. God! Bah!" (130)

Helga realizes that she and other African Americans have been fooled into believing that their racial identity in the United States works for them. And if it doesn't, then there is always God to turn to until heaven comes. Either way, African Americans, whether they be light or dark skinned, cannot escape their fate of feeling inferior by either physical or spiritual means. She replaces her native spiritual sense with the white man's God and it ultimately leads her to destruction because this God is just an extension of white tyranny:

With the obscuring curtain of religious rent, she was able to look about her and see with shocked eyes this thing that she had done to herself. She couldn't, she thought ironically, even blame God for it, now that she knew he didn't exist. No. No more than she could pray to Him for the death of her husband, the Reverend Mr. Pleasant Green. The white man's God. And his great love for all people regardless of race! What idiotic nonsense she had allowed herself to believe. (130)

Helga is amazed that the entire black population could have been so deluded all of their lives, and she intends to

stop the trend before it reaches and destroys her children. Instead of worrying about how to free her children from slavery, the twentieth-century African American worries about freeing her children from the lies told about freedom. She is sure there is no freedom in practicing religion when it is a white man's religion.

While thinking about freeing herself and her children, she hears a prayer service being held in her honor. When her husband asks her what she would like them to pray for in specifics, Helga smiles and tells him "nothing at all" and goes on to say that she just hopes they enjoy themselves. During their prayer service, Helga asks her nurse to read from "The Procurator of Judea", Anatole France's anti-Christian tale where he discusses the benefits of non-western religious practices. This is an important realization for Helga, because it is becoming clear that she had once been on the right track with her alternative religious rituals, but because of social circumstances and prejudices, she is ending up in ruin. She does not reach her Promised Land because the route she has chosen never had any intention of leading her there. According to Helga, "This fatuous belief in the white man's god, this child-like trust in full compensation for all woes and privations in 'kingdom come'" is the downfall of all African Americans. The white man's god as an extension of white tyranny provides no safety for those dealing with

issues of skin color and bodily freedom. Dress and adornment on the other hand, directly address these issues for Helga, but she has given them up. She has given up her only link to the spiritual place she seeks. It is not necessarily New York that she misses, or Naxos, because she felt alienated there as well. But she misses the person she was while living in those places and the dresses she wore:

It was so easy and so pleasant to think about freedom and cities, about clothes and books, about the sweet mingled smell of houbigant and cigarettes in softly lighted rooms filled with inconsequential chatter and laughter and sophisticated tuneless music. It was so hard to think out a feasible way of retrieving all these agreeable, desired things. Just then. Later. When she got up. By and by. She must rest. Get strong. Sleep. Then afterwards, she could work out some arrangement. So she dozed and dreamed in snatches of sleeping and waking, letting time run on. Away. (134)

Helga does not have the strength to get herself away from this rural neo-slavery, nor does she have the strength to even think about her children. The history of slavery has left its mark on her strength, and because she as a twentieth-century woman has failed to take charge in fully establishing her identity as a newly tragic mulatto in the

face of social oppression, she faces certain death. She suffocates in the history of the African American people's oppression, and in the history of the world's oppression of women. She never finds the community she is looking for. Her family does not fulfill her, and her spirit is weakened by calling on the wrong rituals and guides. We can assume that she dies as a result of her fifth pregnancy. Therefore, she can never again experience the truthful sense of peace and security that she felt in her own body and skin as she adorned it with rich fabrics and gentle accessories while reclining in that first exquisite room that she created in her own image.

CHAPTER 3

OVERALLS: ZORA NEALE HURSTON'S *THEIR EYES WERE WATCHING GOD*

Hurston's *Their Eyes Were Watching God* begins with the declaration that "women forget all those things they don't want to remember and remember what they don't want to forget. The dream is the truth and they act accordingly" (1). This novel is Janie's story of self identification that is achieved by going through the same four steps that Celie goes through: an understanding of motherhood, marriage, and community; an acceptance and appreciation of her skin; defining God for her very own; and securing a place to celebrate all of these female freedoms that take a lifetime to achieve. As with Helga, Janie's relationship to dress and adornment changes as she passes through each stage in her life.

We first meet Janie through the eyes of the porch-sitters in Eatonville. Much as Shug from *The Color Purple* is introduced to the reader, we learn about Janie by hearing the jealous judgments made on her character. The porch-sitters do not directly discuss her past actions or transgressions. Instead, they pass judgment on the most visible presentations of Janie's identity: her clothing and hairstyle. But part of understanding Janie's complex identity is understanding the psyche of her community. The porch-sitters are slowly becoming human again at the end of the workday. Evening is

their time to comment on the world because they are
tongueless, earless, eyeless conveniences all day
long. Mules and other brutes had occupied their
skins. But now, the sun and bossman were gone, so
the skins felt more powerful and human. They became
lords of sounds and lesser things. They passed
nations through their mouths. They sat in judgment.

(2)

Three major issues present themselves immediately. First, these people live two separate identities as "brutes" and "lords", brutish qualities mean that they are not allowed to comment and appreciate the world they live in. Second, to become a lord means to feel human in one's own skin. Third, this double identity is a prison whose only reward is the ability to pass judgment on women--as is evident by their summation of Janie: "What she doin' coming back here in dem overalls? Can't she find no dress to put on?--Where's dat blue satin dress she left here in?...What dat forty year ole 'oman doin' wid her hair swingin' down her back like some young gal?" (2). As with most people, our first impressions of Janie are in response to what she is wearing and how she wears her hair. Much like Walker's Shug, Janie gives the initial impression that she is going to be a provocative character just because something so seemingly insignificant as her overalls appears to inspire jealous rage.

The men take in her still youthful body with thinly veiled lust, while "the women took the faded shirt and muddy overalls and laid them away for remembrance. It was a weapon against her strength and if it turned out to be of no significance, still it was a hope that she might fall to their level someday" (2). Janie's inner strength is obviously offensive to those who have chosen to accept the work of limiting their "horizons." She has freshened her spirit by rejecting the limitation that the porch-sitters accept for themselves. This inspires jealousy as well as fascination in others in the community, and Janie is held accountable for shoving her freedom in their faces. The women look at her clothes to find fault with her spirit. The men look at her clothes to find some piece of themselves that was lost in adolescence. For the reader, clothing is an outer window that looks in on Janie's spiritual strength.

Phoeby is the only person not crippled by jealousy, and she is the only person to actually walk across the street to talk with her. She takes us right along with her as she sits on Janie's steps and listens to Janie's history-- a chapter in the history of an African American female identity.

Janie's life story begins with the house built in the yard of an old plantation where she and her grandmother lived and where her grandmother once was a slave. They are not slaves, of course but their circumstances make it seem like

time hasn't moved since the times of slavery. Janie lives with her grandmother instead of her estranged parents on plantation property owned by southern white people. We are supposed to get this feeling of stagnancy because time for Janie has not moved and she feels some of the effects of slavery as acutely as if it had never ended. Hurston is writing this narrative from a granddaughter's perspective of slavery. Janie is living in the lingering history of slavery, while experiencing a burgeoning identity within the family and community. The emotions and realities are similar to those of slaves, but Janie's movement away from this situation is proof that one can at least try to escape from the memory of slavery. But she will learn throughout her life's journey that the voice of history is never silenced completely.

Janie's grandmother's voice is this voice of history; she tells a young Janie about her past as a slave woman and about Janie's parents who were never a part of her life. Women learning about their parents from a grandmother figure is a common theme from Jacobs to Morrison, and so is the fact that their parents are the missing key to each woman's full comprehension of her history. Janie learns that she is a mulatta because her grandmother was impregnated by her white owner and her mother was attacked by the white school teacher because of her "high yellow" beauty and presumably, because

of prevailing gross misconceptions about black female sexuality. In the case of both her grandmother and her mother, neither woman owned her own body nor could she fight to protect it. Janie is the product of these two rapes. The feeling of separation from her mother and her inability to really fit in with either the black or white community is the basis of her fragmented identity. As a child, Janie plays with white children while her grandmother works at the plantation. She dresses in their hand-me-downs and lives behind the big house. Her clothing and ribbons inspired jealousy in the other black girls at her school. And as Janie tells Phoeby,

Dere wuz uh knotty head gal named Mayrella dat usseter git mad every time she look at me. Mis' Washburn useter dress me up in all de clothes her gran' chillun didn't need no mo'. Which still wuz better'n whut de rest uh de colored chillun had. And then she useter put hair ribbon on mah head fuh me tuh wear. Dat useter rile Mayrella uh lot. So she would pick at me all de time and put some others up tuh do the same...they'd tell me not to be takin' on over mah looks...(9)

This jealousy and criticism sets the stage for the rest of Janie's life because it tells Janie that there is no real place for someone who has a split identity because of their

racial mixture. She sees a picture of a group of girls all dressed similarly, but one girl is considerably darker than the others. She is shocked to find out that she is staring at herself. An identity crisis takes its root at that moment and continues to grow more complex as she interacts with both white and black people. She dresses "white" and is white compared to her darker-skinned classmates, but she is still considered black according to her picture.

This fragmentation of the self is a common theme for those writing in the modernist/ pre-WWII time period. The clothing in this segment of Janie's life represents that American place of being caught between two cultures. She is not good enough to wear new clothes like the Washburn children because she is still considered black, though she has many Caucasian features. Darker skinned people secretly (or not so secretly) resent Janie because her lightness is more valued in both the white and black community. Her face and hair (both accented by the clothes and ribbons she wears) are constant reminders of colorism. Jacobs calls attention to the plight of the light-skinned slave girl in her novel, and Janie is her figurative daughter. The one difference between Janie and her light-skinned mother or grandmother is that she has considerably more mobility and freedom to define her own identity. Janie's grandmother moves her off the plantation and into a home of their own once she is aware of the

ridicule Janie is subjected to in school. Janie begins to blossom sexually and this is symbolized by the flowering pear tree in the grandmother's yard. When her grandmother catches her kissing a boy, she hurriedly marries Janie off to "protect" her from the traditional fate of violation that light-skinned black girls like her daughter are subject to. After Janie complains that her marriage is passionless and loveless, her grandmother tries to explain her actions and tries to justify why she pressured Janie into marrying Logan Hicks. "Ah was born back due in slavery and it wasn't for me to fulfill my dreams of what a woman oughta be and to do." The slave narrative is present here, though it is a modern version of it. The ex-slave (like Jacobs) is trying to change the fate of her granddaughter by buying a house, and marrying her to a black man who owns his own land, instead of waiting for her to be raped by a white man. But here is where old and new ideas about a black female identity collide. Janie wants to find her out what her purpose in life is, and to move freely as she sets out on her search. Her grandmother, who was a slave, is not able to fathom that type of project for a black woman living in the south.

Janie leaves the man who wants to work her like a field hand to marry Joe Starks. As she makes her way down the road to meet him, she takes off her apron and rejoices in this act of freedom. Even though she is only walking toward a new kind

of slavery, she is still active in making her own decisions to move. Mobility is an important quality for a free American identity. For Janie, this liberating walk down the road gives her time to reflect on the joyous feeling of complete freedom. She compares this freedom to changing a uniform for a new dress. For her, "the day was like a new dress. That made her feel the apron tied around her waist. She untied it and flung it on a low bush beside the road" (31). Upon meeting Joe at the end of the road, they were immediately married in "new clothes of silk and wool" (31). Janie casts aside the traditional hopes and dreams that her grandmother's generation has. She removes her apron, which represents a passionless marriage, and endless domestic servitude, and leaves it hanging on a bush like a flag announcing her departure. She is filled with strength and determination, and as she admires the weightlessness and newness of freedom. She twirls, and shifts down the road with the same excitement that one feels when wearing a new dress for the first time in years. The thrill that Janie feels in taking her fate into her own hands is complemented by rich materials that wait for her at the end of this first journey, but these rich materials will soon represent the opposite of freedom.

Right away Joe dresses her as if she was a doll, and later, it becomes apparent that Joe marries her because her skin color and hair texture are attributes to his image of

power. But, Janie just knows that she wants to escape the physical work of a slave, and even this change in husbands is a physical escape. Eventually, her escapes will be more spiritual, but on any level, there is a spiritual renewal when "escaping constricting ideas of self. Therefore, Janie searches for a new freedom, a new idea of what a woman should be and do, and eventually she creates her own values" (Jones 132).

When they arrive in Eatonville, Joe quickly jumps on the fact that there is no mayor of the town and he maneuvers his way into the position of mayor (or tiny king). After he builds a store to keep the town's business inside the black community (and inside his own pockets), he builds a two-story house across the street. The store and the house are visible testaments to his power, and his last move is to put Janie on display. People fall over themselves when they first see her, but Joe intends to make her strictly off limits by setting her above everyone else in the town. He does this by telling her what to wear.

Jody told her to dress up and stand in the store all that evening. Everybody was coming sort of fixed up, and he didn't mean for nobody else's wife to rank with her. She must look on herself as the bell-cow, and the other women were the gang. So she put on one of her bought dresses and sent up the

new-cut road all dressed in wine-colored red. Her silken ruffles rustled and muttered about her. The other women had on percale and calico and here and there a head rag among the older ones. (39)

Janie is placed above all of those other women by the way she is dressed and by her silence. According to proper politician's wife codes, she looks great, smiles, and keeps her mouth shut. The problem is that Janie is not aware that this is going to be part of her contract with Joe. When the people in the store chant for Janie to make a speech, Joe quickly tells them that his wife does not speak in public and that her place "is in the home." Ironically, Janie's place is where he tells her to be, and she spends most of her life standing in his store. "Home" for Janie is wherever Joe decides. Janie forces a compliant laugh, but inside she considers that "she had never thought of making a speech, and didn't know if she cared to make one at all" (41). Once again we are reminded that Janie is after something much more than riches and marriage. She is also after much more than ruffled, wine-colored, silk dresses, if those are to be like prison garb instead of self-expression. She knows right away that her marriage is in jeopardy because her voice is immediately snuffed out by her husband, and the dress that she wears, no matter how elegant, fails to express her individuality and identity as much as the sound of her own

voice would.

Joe makes Janie run the store all day long, but she is not in charge. Instead, she is a well-dressed figurehead who functions as a reminder of Joe's power; in the eyes of the community, he would have to be powerful to win a woman like Janie who is 3/4 white. But demanding that Janie be an ornament backfires. Out of jealousy, he tells her what to wear and when he catches a customer admiring her long, soft hair, he commands that she tie her hair up in a head rag like the old women wear. This head rag is a symbol of lack of self-expression. She is instructed in everything she says and does, and this begins their very public marriage. Jody asks her "Well honey, how do you like bein' Mrs. Mayor?" He doesn't ask her out of curiosity or anxiety over her happiness, but as a request that she pay him homage. Honestly she answers "It's all right Ah reckon, but don't yuh think it keeps us in uh kinda strain?" (43). Her hesitant feelings toward upsetting Joe and criticizing their marriage have everything to do with the fact that she is afraid of the absolute authority that he has over her. The porch-sitters comment on Janie's dress even from the very beginning; they are curious about Joe's power over her and why she wears the head rag. "Nobody couldn't git me tuh tie no rag on mah head if Ah had hair lak dat...Maybe he make her do it. Maybe he skeered some de rest of us mens might touch it round dat

store" (47). They sympathize with Janie because they feel the same sort of awe in Jody's presence. The head rag, or veiled femininity, is the most prominent symbol of patriarchal oppression of women--at least by standards of dress.

Her head rag marks her body as his; it is not a badge of self-ownership. Further, her silence serves as a physical testament to her inferiority. Joe forbids her to talk to any of the porch sitters. "She was there for *him* to look at, not those others" (51). And only he would hear her voice as well, though he never thought to ask her her opinions on any subject unless he was fishing for compliments. Meanwhile, Janie becomes as invisible as she can be, but she takes in all she sees and hears. She witnesses the porch-sitters ogling the first girls of spring, walking down the street in their bright white dresses that complement their black skin. She loses herself in listening to their stories, and stocks away any stories or speeches she would like to share. She suffers Joe's violent punishments in silence when she does not perform her wifely duties well. And she realizes that "she had a host of thoughts she had never expressed to him, and numerous emotions she had never let Jody know about" (67). Instead of trying to remedy the situation by insisting that he change, she recognizes his weakness and inability to change. She waits out her time, tying her hair and identity up in a head rag day upon day "saving up her feelings for

some man she never knew" (67). As a way of forcing herself to patiently bide her time, she regards each new day by hiding her inside self under a "fresh dress and head kerchief" (67). She knows that she is not able to mix her inner identity with her outer identity--at least, not in this marriage.

It becomes clear that Joe is probably impotent. They sleep in separate beds and he becomes increasingly sensitive to any remarks made about his own aging. He buys Janie more and more clothes, but they are meaningless to her. She takes no real pride in them because she didn't choose them, and Joe is not interested in her when she puts them on. Her displeasure in the ostentatious clothing that is supposed to give the perception of a happy marriage is a sign that she will not give herself to Joe, but instead, that she will search for something better.

Janie's asexual marriage marks a major difference in the black woman's narrative, because usually the female protagonist defends her children and herself against sexual molestation. Janie does not deal with any of this. In fact, she is looking for a passionate relationship, though she never really acknowledges a desire to have children. Janie is still trying to find and establish an identity for herself, and has not even begun to look back into her past to question the mothering relationships in her life. There is no apparent desire in Janie to help another generation of black

women define themselves as both Linda Brent and Celie try to do. Perhaps this is because Janie, as a character of the 1920s, is a product of the self-absorbed age of Modernism. Possibly, this is why her primary agenda is to "find herself" instead of "give" herself to children. She is interested in moving on to find and define her horizons. Janie is part of a new modernist era, and new experiences are opening themselves up to her.

Her relationship with Joe is not allowing her to grow spiritually at all, and therefore, is not a relationship conducive to modern ideals. They cease talking altogether except in the store where he takes out his insecurities on her. Janie has been growing for years in silence, and her newly mature spirit is growing too large to contain in dainty dresses and silence. The most obvious account of this growth happens when Janie makes a mistake in cutting tobacco. Joe yells jeeringly at her,

I god amighty! A woman stay round uh store till she get old as Methusalem and still can't cut a little thing like a plug of tobacco! Don't stand dere rollin' yo' pop eyes at me wid yo' rump hangin' nearly to yo' knees!"(74)

He takes out his own insecurities about his aging and deteriorating looks on her--and he aims his attacks at her body, the only part of her that is her identity for him. The

people in the store laugh nervously at first, but then reconsider Janie's feelings. "It was like somebody snatched off part of a woman's clothing while she wasn't looking and the streets were crowded" (74). Violating his wife's body is a way of combating his feelings of anger and insecurity; a woman's body is often the site for expression of her husband's dissatisfaction with anything from scorched rice to his own fat stomach. Eisenstein suggests reasons why the female body is often a site for this kind of violent expression of male insecurity: "The female body operates as spectacle; its physicality is given meaning by marking its differences...[it is a] body on which an inferior status has been inscribed" (Eisenstein 32). He violates her physical body, but in this instance, he does it verbally. The head rag is a physical symbol of his domination over her *difference*. When it becomes obvious that veiling her is no longer keeping her in silent submission, he considers stripping her verbally in order to assert his domination with humiliation tactics. He thinks that because she belongs to him, he has the right to dress her and undress her in public.

Instead of taking his wicked criticism, she rises up out of herself and lets him have all that has been building up inside her. But she doesn't rant and rave without direction; she is intelligent enough to know how to be as direct and brutal as possible.

Janie took the middle of the floor to talk right into Jody's face, and that was something that hadn't been done before. 'Stop mixin' up mah doings wid mah looks, Jody. When you get through tellin' me how tuh cut uh plug uh tobacco, then you kin tell me whether mah behind is on straight or not.

(74)

To this insurrection, Joe replies, "Wha-whut's dat you say, Janie? You must be out yo' head" (75). She has gone out of her head--instead of suffering silently, she blasts Jody with stored-up irritation. She convinces him that she has not gone crazy, and when he continues to act so upset, she reminds him that after all, he was "the one started talkin' under people's clothes. Not [her]" (75). Until now, Janie has been able to hide her true identity under the clothes that she is forced to wear. Jody puts a stop to her using clothing as a protective shell by metaphorically removing her dress. This action actually frees Janie, rather than further imprisons her, because she has wanted to remove this fake identity for a while. This freedom, much like her discarding her apron on the side of the road, allows her to move without restriction.

Janie uses her unveiled power to launch an attack against him for talking about her age and her looks when he is older than she is. He tries to take away her femininity and her still-youthful desirability that he lost a long time

ago. But in reality, she will always be beautiful and this makes him jealous. She says "Ah'm a woman every inch of me, and Ah know it. Dat's uh whole lot more'n you kin say" (75). Janie has reached a point of strength and uses her voice that she always knew was inside her to defend her body and soul. Clothing has been a shield used to protect her personal dignity in public, but her voice has to kick in when the shield is removed. He has been able to choose Janie's public persona by limiting her contact with people and telling her what to wear. She reduces him even more in front of everyone by describing publicly what he looks like naked and the fact that his penis is flaccid among all of his hanging fat. "Janie had robbed him of his illusion of irresistible maleness that all men cherish, which was terrible" (75). Yes, it was terrible for Joe, but a mark of real triumph for Janie. She finally puts him in his place by treating him as he had treated her.

Jody dies after ignoring an illness that he assumes Janie is a fault for. He refuses to see a Western-medicine doctor because he is convinced that Janie, as a result of her mystical female powers is at the root of his disease, and that it has little to do with his physical health. He refuses to see her, but when he is weak and near death, Janie enters his room with a rush of pure strength and power and forces him to listen to many of those feelings that she kept packed

away. This scene is similar to Celie's triumph over Mister. She makes sure he understands her great disappointment in the way her life has turned out with him, and that he was not the man she ran off with in the beginning. She says, "Ah run off tuh keep house wid you in uh wonderful way. But you wasn't satisfied wid me de way Ah was. Naw! Mah own mind had tuh be squeezed and crowded out tuh make room for yours in me" (83). When he dies, she makes sure that he takes all of his influence on her with him. She spits out all of the ugliness that he has planted in her, and welcomes her "girl self" back into her body. As soon as Joe is permanently removed from her inner self... in other words, after she kicks his body and words out, she sits in front of the mirror to remind herself of her own existence.

Years ago she had told her girl self to wait for her in the looking glass. It had been a long time since she had remembered. Perhaps she'd better look. She went over to the dresser and looked hard at her skin and features. The young girl has gone, but a handsome woman had taken her place. She tore off the kerchief from her head and let down her plentiful hair. The weight, the length, the glory was there. She took careful stock of herself, then combed her hair and tied it back up again. (83)

The weight of her hair reminds Janie of her passion and her

physical presence. For years, she has been a spirit floating around without much consequence, but now she removes Jody's head rag that has kept all of her human passions and spiritually tied up and out of view from everyone--including herself. It is no coincidence that the first thing she does to reestablish her existence and to free herself once again is to look at the reflection of her physical self in the mirror. She adores the "glory" of her hair, and feels herself come out of hiding.

At Joe's funeral, she hides behind the black folds of her veil. Her veil allows her to give a public perception of an obedient wife, but behind the veil, a "resurrection and life" takes place. "She sent her face to Joe's funeral, and she herself went frolicking with the springtime across the world" (84-85). Similar to, though strangely different from the head rags, this veil serves as Janie's cocoon. And after the funeral, Janie gathers up all of her old head rags and burns them. She emerges from her veil like a butterfly and from then on, she walks around with her hair swinging freely in one long braid. This is her only physical change, except that she starts sitting on the porch and listening to people tell stories. There is no need to hurriedly change everything around because, "she would have the rest of her life to do as she pleased" (85). Burning the head rags marks the destruction of any force that holds Janie back, or stifles

her desires to continue searching for her identity.

Like Celie's search, Janie's search leads her back to her past, and she decides that she is angry at her grandmother because she did her best to force Janie into a life that she herself had hoped for. She shaped Janie's associations between freedom and wealth. For her grandmother, money buys freedom, and clothing represents that achieved freedom. But for Janie, these things mean slavery. The dissatisfaction that Janie feels represents that place where women of the early to mid twentieth-century resided--halfway between slavery and freedom, with no real road map telling them which way to go to achieve freedom and identity. The unstable past, as represented by Janie's grandmother, does not help in this process because it is a weight that pulls against a modernist desire to obtain something *different*; however, guilt over disloyalty is a weight that pulls with as much force as history. Janie's rejection of her grandmother's beliefs about freedom mirror a general definition of modernism: "The stylistic movement that dominated the early and middle [twentieth] century can be summarized under the name *modernism*. It represents a conscious break with the past and a definite shift of cultural communication with nineteenth-century styles" (Back 8). Rejection of nineteenth-century slave ideals of freedom is exactly what propels Janie's journey. Janie is angry at her grandmother

and had hidden it from herself all these years under a cloak of pity. She had been getting ready for her great journey to the horizons in search of people; it was important to all the world that she should find them and they find her. But she had been whipped like a cur dog. And run off down a back road after *things*. (85)

As Janie will come to realize later in the novel, her grandmother's slave condition of owning nothing led her to appreciate things as opposed to ideas. *Things* publicly proclaim freedom and existence, not soul searching. Clothing is an art form that expressed a slave's desire to own her own body by adorning it. As Jacqui Malone suggests in her book about African American art traditions, "slave literature shows that the importance ascribed to self-presentation and style was preserved in the Americas. Whenever possible, slaves created special attires for parties, festivals, and Sunday activities" (Malone 30). Janie's grandmother is a part of this slave tradition, and taught Janie that rich clothing is equated with freedom.

For Janie, clothing is a way to express herself, but it is not necessarily an art form as it is with Helga Crane, or even Celie. And her desire for the right clothes is not the same as her grandmother's desire for wealth--though for both women, the right clothes do equal freedom. Like we will see

with Celie, Janie eventually dresses down instead of up so that her inner self is represented honestly on her outer self. "She had found a jewel down inside herself and had wanted to walk where people could see her and gleam it all around" (86). The dresses that Jody forced her to wear did not enhance that jewel (her inner self); they covered it up. She also was unable to show off her true self because Joe made sure she had no way of expressing what went on inside her. Just as Linda Brent liked to wear the clothes her grandmother made her because they set her apart from other slaves, Janie wanted to wear something that complemented her own feelings of freedom.

Ironically, Janie will eventually choose the muddy overalls of a field worker over the beautiful dresses of a middle class white woman to enhance her soul and skin. But herein lie the problems she has with her grandmother and Joe. *Things* for these two people mean power and freedom. Janie's jewel is a sign of spiritual wealth. For her, the ability to move around and ask as many questions and tell as many stories as necessary will prove her existence because these things will allow her to reach her horizons. This is Janie's definition of power, and Hurston's as well. Mobility, urbanization, and female documentation are the primary concern of women writers in the Harlem Renaissance. Janie is one woman looking for her spirit, which was bartered by her

slave grandmother and sold to the highest male bidder. She longs to be around people--lots of them--away from the rural south. Or at least away from a closed community too terrified of her husband to consider her worth addressing. But with Joe's death, this terror is coming to an end, and it is no wonder that his passing leaves room for her to find fault with her grandmother.

By pinning the blame on Nanny, Janie is actually blaming the institution of slavery. Her past is to blame for her feelings of entrapment, loss, and detachment. Her present is the time to move away from the old and plunge into the newness of the modern. This act is symbolically represented by Janie's mourning clothes--beginning with the veil, and ending with the emergence into the soulful purity of white clothing. "Six months of wearing black had passed...and when Janie emerged into her mourning white, she had hosts of admirers" (87). This cocoon of the past has kept her in place long enough; when Janie is reborn in the bright light of modernism, she is more appealing to those who want to tame her than she was when she was beaten down. But, she refuses them because she "was just basking in the freedom for the most part without the need for thought" (88). She tells her friend Phoeby that it isn't because she is still upset about Joe dying, but that she "jus' loves dis freedom" to which Phoeby replies "sh-sh-sh! Don't let nobody hear you say dat,

Janie" (89). The traditional (for white women anyway) is not what Janie is looking for at all. Unlike for her grandmother, marriage does not represent freedom for Janie.

She finds non-traditional newness in TeaCake, who is considerably younger than Janie and certainly younger than Joe. She rejects old tradition for young excitement. She abandons the Christian church at this point as well, because it doesn't fit in with her search for newness. Instead, her relationship with TeaCake is all about youthful bodily pleasure, and is the embodiment of what Janie first hoped for when she lay under her grandmother's flowering pear tree. TeaCake helps Janie find physical pleasure again after long years of an asexual existence. Asexuality was important for her grandmother, because she and Janie's mother were denied sexual self-determination or respect. Her grandmother pushed Janie towards a life of non-sexual relations by promising her to an old man with money. Janie left Logan for Joe, and that marriage also turned into a quest for money and power instead of a sexual union. TeaCake helps Janie reclaim her own body and her sexuality. Unlike Joe, TeaCake is not jealous of Janie's beauty and has no real desire to control it at the start of their relationship. He actually spends time introducing Janie to her own physicality. He compliments her hair; he notices that she is not satisfied with her physical self, and he wonders why she isn't. He tells her "Ah betcha

dem lips don't satisfy yuh neither." Janie answers, "They's dere and Ah make use of 'em whenever it's necessary, but nothin' special tuh me" (99). Just like Shug has to teach Celie to feel and to experience pure joy and ecstasy in her body, TeaCake has to teach Janie how to regain her forgotten sensuality. Once she is able to feel comfortable experiencing physical pleasure, and is able to recognize the beauty of her own skin and hair, she is able to commit her entire life to building up her soul and letting it show like a "gleam" on her skin.

The townspeople notice this gleam and don't like it one bit because she is a reminder of their stagnancy and powerlessness. They are jealous of Janie's freedom, and are also jealous that a man like TeaCake can take their prized "bell-cow." Just as they will do upon Janie's return, they hide their jealousy of Janie's newness and freedom by discussing her clothing. It is their hope that by criticizing her outer self, they can break down her inner strength, just like they have seen Joe do in the store.

Joe Starks hadn't been dead but nine months and here she goes sashaying off to a picnic in pink linen. Done quit attending church like she used to. Gone off to Sanford in a car with TeaCake and her all dressed in blue! It was a shame. Done took to high heel slippers and a ten dollar hat! Looking

like some young girl. (105)

Just as Mister's sisters are jealous of Shug's inner strength in *The Color Purple*, so too are the townspeople who envy Janie's transition into the newness of a modern identity while staying immersed in the rich soulfulness of a hereditary culture.

They are jealous of her passion, and her ability to find joy in it rather than shame. They link Janie's new self-expressive way of adorning her own body to her shame-free approach to living and loving. While TeaCake is her lover, he is not making her transform; he complements her new existence. But the townspeople cannot accept that Janie is changing on her own and that she is in control of her own transformation. For them, it just has to be that a man is telling her what to do; they don't believe Janie is capable of distancing herself from them by herself. The porch-sitters try to discuss Janie's visible changes, but they end up talking about her in terms "combing" and dressing instead of what is actually taking place inside her:

It's somebody 'cause she looks might good dese days. New dresses and her hair combed a different way nearly everyday. You got to have something to comb hair over. When you see a woman doin' so much rakin' in her head, she's combin' at some man or 'nother.' (106)

While it is true that she is adorning herself to give TeaCake pleasure, it is important to remember that before, she was never able to express her own sexual desires through dress and adornment because Joe wouldn't allow it. Her relationship to adornment here is directly linked to her newly found sexual identity.

Clothing is also finely wound with her feelings of love for TeaCake. When she leaves Eatonville with him, she feels a supreme sense of freedom because she is leaving the stifling town with the man with whom she finds passion. Their mobility not only promises to move her from a stagnant death in the town that Joe built, but toward something freer. To mark this passage and her wedding, she wants the outfit she wears to be perfect. She describes the outfit to Phoeby, "Wait till you see de new blue satin TeaCake done picked out for me tuh stand up wid him in. High heel slippers, necklace, earrings, everything he wants to see me in" (108). At first glance, TeaCake seems like another Joe telling her what to wear, but this situation is different. Janie is commemorating her sexual reawakening by adorning herself in an outfit that is sure to erotically please her new partner. Joe never chose intimate dresses, he chose public dresses. Janie will soon reject TeaCake's dress suggestions, but he does not insist that she abide by his fashion tastes.

After they marry, Janie and TeaCake seek a place that

fosters their love and Janie's newly found identity. Instead of moving to an urban center, Janie and TeaCake move deep into the "muck" of the Everglades. At first, it seems like Janie finds her Promised Land, or in her own terms, the place that allows her to find her horizons. But just as the Everglades are thick with lush swampy ground and trees tall and leafy enough to block out the outside world, the muck will become too stifling for Janie. The muck is home to a community of migrating black people searching for work. The freedom of living in an enclosed space away from the white world is also appealing. Unlike Eatonville, which mimicked the white world, the Everglades is an example of what an ideal black community should be like. But like Eatonville, the Everglades community falls short of this ideal. Here, Janie enters into another stage of her process of self-definition. Through her relationship with TeaCake, she has reclaimed her need for physical pleasure which completes her own resurrection of self after Joe's death. She is able to express her anger at her grandmother for using their history to keep her safe in the present. But here, she must return to another part of her past that has been left untouched since those days at school with Mayrella.

Though this is a black community closed off from the white world, colorism is a poison that has inescapably infiltrated their community. Clothing can no longer be a

viable way of establishing an identity--at least in quite the same way. Janie trades her fine dresses for overalls and work boots just like everyone else living on the muck. There is nothing left for people to "read" on her except her skin, and this is the next step that Janie must surmount before she can feel honest in her own identity.

As discussed previously, fragmentation is a problem with the modernist identity, and Janie's mixed-race heritage only compounds this division. Janie rejects traditional Euro American dress, for more casual and masculine attire. This is representative of the new modern self because as Back discusses in his article on fashion in the modern world, the rejection of tradition indicates a desire to form new definitions of the self as defined by clothing. Just like burning the head rags after Joe's death killed one tradition, so too does Janie's "kill off" another tradition of femininity by replacing dresses with overalls. Back writes:

Modernism tried hard to change the communication patterns...[and rejected] the complacency that redundancy, including traditional norms can bring...In the rejection of cultural traditions and creation of new ones, two features are important: the split between representation and communication, and the dissolution of the unity of the self.

(Back 8)

Janie's break with tradition is symbolized by her choice to wear overalls while living in the 'Glades, a community that definitely breaks with white mainstream ideas of living. But both of these breaks, clothing and community, are closely intertwined with Janie's division of self in terms of race, class, and gender, and the people in the 'Glades read all of these things on her *skin*.

Hurston's concentration on Janie's delicate balance between her many separate identities is representative of common interests at the time she wrote this novel. Though the book was first published in 1937, at the tail end of the Harlem Renaissance and the modernist period, Janie's inability to fit in anywhere, and her drive to find that place where the individual self is able to function, is characteristic of the period. Living on the muck, a seemingly natural and "true" black community, gives Janie new insight into her identity because even this society is affected by colorism and classism, both products of the white world they want so desperately to shut out.

Mrs. Turner, the most outspoken woman on the muck, is fascinated with those whose features are "improved" with white blood including herself. "It was so evident that Mrs. Turner took black folk as a personal affront to herself." She cries out, "Look at me! Ah aint got no flat nose and liver lips. Ah'm a featured woman. Ah got white folks' features in

mah face." She certainly is a "featured" woman in Janie's life on the muck, because she expresses her colorist opinions about light-skinned supremacy. This voice of colorism calls attention to dark-skinned insecurities, and Mrs. Turner only adds to Janie's feelings of exclusion from the black community because of her coloring. While Janie's looks are admired, her ivory skin makes her resemble an ivory statue that is to be admired, but never talked to or considered real. This is why she eventually casts off her dresses and replaces them with plain working clothes. These clothes are meant to speak for Janie; she means to proclaim her desire to fit in with the muck-workers because that is who she feels she really is, but she is still a divided self. "As a form of nonverbal behavior, clothing is often used by the individual in their self-presentation strategies to communicate a particular image to others. This image is assumed to reflect the "true self'" (Davis and Lennon 117). She is seen as "too good" for the darker people living on the muck and people's skepticism puts Janie in danger. In order to present herself as being more like them than a white privileged woman, she uses the overalls to make a deliberate statement about her acceptance of dark people, and her longing to be part of them.

Mrs. Turner rants about the unfairness of living between two identities, and though she is detested by the people

living on the muck, there is something pitiful about her that inspires sympathy. She has completely lost her own identity, and has little opportunity to identify herself as a member of a group or race. Though she has white features, she still has to be "lumped in wid de rest" (136). "It ain't fair," she complains. Even if dey [whites] don't take us in wid de whites, dey oughta make us uh class tuh ourselves" (136). Her longing to be separated from the fate of dark skinned black people is a product of racist ideas that initiated the act of enslavement. Through Mrs. Turner's character, Hurston is attacking those who are traitors to their African origins and who are so corrupted by false ideals of white beauty that they are willing to disassociate from those who appear to be less "improved" with white blood. Charles Chesnutt, a popular fiction writer in the early 1900s, voiced the same opinions as Mrs. Turner does, the very ones under attack down on the muck. He writes:

I have no race prejudice...but we people of mixed blood are ground between the upper and the nether millstone. Our fate lies between absorption by the white race and extinction in the black. The one doesn't want us yet, but may take us in time. The other would welcome us, but it would be for us a backward step. (Walker 300)

Janie does not choose this philosophy. In fact, she chooses

the black community that accepts her only because she is married to one of "their kind." Really, they see her as a trophy to their own improvement instead of as an accepted individual. She does not want to create a race of those "trapped between the upper and nether stone." In fact, she rejects the idea that there is an upper or a nether; she is concerned with her own self-preservation. Chesnut also argues for self-preservation, but he is not looking for internal identity as Janie is, he is looking to create a unity based on a community of mulattos where the color line is blurred.

Janie is admired for her Caucasian beauty, but she admires herself for her strength as well as her beauty, not because whiteness makes her beautiful, but because her body makes her human and, therefore, free. The pain of the Grandmother's history and her mother's history brings shame and anger to Janie. For Mrs. Turner, her mother's past is a source of pride because she is susceptible to the disease of colorism that is permeating the post-slavery black community. Mrs. Turner, just like all the men who admire Janie's skin and hair, never once thinks about "Janie's isolation because of her looks she did not choose, or of her confusion when she realizes that the same men who idolize her looks are capable of totally separating her looks from herself" (Walker 304). She is an empty vessel to be admired, but also to be despised. To the rest of the community, Janie's presence

reminds them of their domination, and that their own skin color is reviled.

Mrs. Turner tries to pair off Janie with her own light-skinned brother, so that their children will be lighter in color. She can't understand (nor can anyone in Eatonville) why Janie would take "a backward step" in marrying a man so dark as TeaCake. Besides Mrs. Turner's genuine interest in being part of a race that she creates for herself, making Janie family would somehow improve her own status. Mrs. Turner "paid homage to Janie's Caucasian characteristics as such. And when she was with Janie she had a feeling of transmutation, as if she herself had become whiter and with straighter hair" (139). Mrs. Turner is eventually run off the muck, because her words echo the community's own silent thoughts, and it is far too painful to listen anymore. But before she goes, Janie pays the price of those silent insecurities.

TeaCake beats Janie to reassure himself and others that she has chosen him. He hears that Mrs. Turner repeatedly encourages Janie to marry "better" by marrying whiter. This is the most disturbing part of the book, because there is a sort of ceremony in this beating that the whole community takes part in. Janie submits willingly and silently. The men envy TeaCake's canvas (Janie's skin) that shows bruises so well. This means that TeaCake can mark her for his own, much

like branding. For, "women are symbolized and represented ...as docile bodies that are used as ornamental surfaces...She represents our deepest fears and longings of sexual desire, obligation and duty and uncontrolled passion" (Eisenstein 41).

TeaCake reminds her and the entire community that her body belongs to him, and though he does not require her to dress herself in a certain way like Joe did, he does require that she provide him with assurances that will settle his own insecurities about the black man's lack of power. Her weakness is admired by both men and women because it is a sign of her whiteness and vice-versa. Powerful, dark, and strong women are not examples of white femininity as Sop-de-Bottom reminds TeaCake, but Janie is a "true" woman.

"TeaCake, you sho' is a lucky man. Uh person can see everyplace you hit her. Ah bet she never raised her hand tuh hit yuh back, nither. Take some uh dese ol' rusty black women and dey would hit yuh all night long and nex day nobody couldn't tell you ever hit 'em" (140). He goes on to say that he never hits his wife anymore because he can't leave a mark on her skin that shows up. There is no way to own her, but to own a white-skinned woman is to increase social standing-- anyone, even the lowest man, can beat a black woman.

But Janie does not feel pride in knowing that she can be owned, though she feels sorry that TeaCake is so insecure.

She does her best to assure him that she loves and is dedicated to him, thereby assuring the dark skinned community that she is loyal to them as well. Her femininity is incorrectly described in her skin color, for to have whiteness means to be weak, frail, and dressed to emphasize her delicacy. But Janie refuses this identity once she gets down on the muck. She replaces dresses with muddy overalls and work boots and she works alongside the men. TeaCake continues to support Janie no matter what image she chooses for herself, as long as she continues to be devoted to him. Her identity in the community is based on his possession of her body, but she gives herself to him willingly until the end.

When the storm comes, a symbol of the coming apex of Janie's identity crisis, a new respect for God enters the picture. Janie stopped attending church after Joe's death, but while Janie and TeaCake are huddled against the terror of the storm, he says to her, "Ah reckon you wish now you had stayed in yo' big house 'way from such as dis, don't yuh?" He is talking about the storm, but he could mean the fact that he brought her away from the stability of mimicking white people (the town of Eatonville) and that she has faced colorism and a possible identity crisis. She tells him that she has no regrets and that this storm is just a storm, not a symbol of their relationship. But the storm rages beyond

their imaginations' control, and there is a presence of God that reminds Janie that it is more than just a storm, that the search inside of her is not over. God is rarely mentioned until this point, but the dramatic intensity of God is felt in this passage:

The wind came back with triple fury, and put out the light for the last time. They sat in company with the others in other shanties, their eyes straining against crude walls and their souls asking if He meant to measure their puny might against His. They seemed to be staring at the dark, but their eyes were watching God. (151)

"God," for Janie, is her drive to find her identity and that great unknown identity of the new African American community. The past rages against the modern, reminding the muck dwellers that though they are isolated in the Everglades, there are forces powerful enough to expel them from this garden. The white world is inevitable, and there has to be a conscious blending of both white and black cultures. God is the reminder that an identity must be defined, and that hiding away does not bring safety, it just brings silence that leads to destruction. God is the unexplainable force which is located somewhere beyond the horizon, the goal which Janie is constantly seeking (King 125).

"The name God is not defined by Hurston in the way that it is used in the Western literary tradition. Hurston's renaming of this force (or potential) places her novel outside the white male literary canon, and creates a powerful new place for black women writers to rename their experience" (King 125). Also, the destruction of the 'Glades is representative of the shattered illusion that the black south is the Promised Land because it is the opposite of ugly, gray urbanization in the north. This act makes Janie reconsider where her Promised Land will be; the muck may not be a suitable for her as she had imagined.

The lake floods, pushing them out of the 'Glades, and for many, this is a reminder of being expelled from Eden. But for Janie, the muck is just a "great expanse of black mud," a mere ruin that is a reminder of only one part of Janie's identity. TeaCake has to die, leaving Janie with the problem of finding that last piece of her identity alone.

While on trial for shooting TeaCake, Janie is clearly put between each side of her racial identities. The courtroom is run by white men, and white women sit in judgment. The black community stands in the back yelling for her crucifixion. They distrust her, and to them, her skin color is a mark of her disloyalty. The white women weep for her, and because she shot a black man and not a white man, they can see her whiteness and feel a bond with her. She is

pronounced innocent, but overhears the black men discussing the injustice and suggesting that her racial impurity is the cause of TeaCake's death, just as Janie's strong femininity was thought to be the cause of Joe's death. Janie's identity is based on impurity, both in terms of her gender and her race. This is cause to hold her responsible for all the wrongdoings against the black community. Janie, or those of mixed race, are the most visible emblems of oppression. Hurston does not dwell on faulting white people, who are virtually nonexistent in this text, as the cause of black oppression; instead, she focuses on internal politics which are the direct result of white enslavement of black people.

Janie buries TeaCake in a vault, more like royalty than the casketless graves TeaCake was required to dig for black casualties of the storm. She dresses in her overalls and does not bother dressing the part of the mourning wife in black veils. "She was too busy feeling grief to dress like grief" (180). For her, dresses can no longer be used to express her identity, because they are linked to only one side of her gender and race. To be faithful to her whole skin and body, she dresses in work clothes, because they represent her true definition of herself. Dresses only accentuate her external femininity, whereas overalls and muddy boots remind her of her difficult life journey. She is also mourning for that feeling of TeaCake's love and admiration that is attached to

blue satin.

Janie must leave the muck, despite the fact that the community eventually forgives her. She is still not part of their community, because TeaCake was the only link between Janie and this black laboring community. She gives away all of her possessions except a packet of seeds that she puts in the pocket of her overalls. "The seeds reminded her of TeaCake because he was always planting things" (182). She leaves because she is free to continue moving. She considers going back to tend her grandmother's grave, an act of homage to and forgiveness of her history. She makes her way back to her house in Eatonville.

She is satisfied with her journey, and has seen the people she wanted to see and let them see her; this makes her free. Dresses can't cover up the real jewel she has worked hard to uncover--her true spirit. Her overalls and her swinging braid enhance her inner and outer beauty. They complement her skin color because together they combine both the identities of a free woman of gentility (historical mistress) and a woman who works in the soil (slave). She decides how she will dress her grief and her joy. This is self-ownership.

When she plants those seeds that are symbolic of her life journey, she plants them in her own garden behind her house. "Now that she was home, she meant to plant them for

remembrance" (182). She will never forget the trials of her journey, and by planting her own garden, she has defined herself by selecting which memories will form her future. Despite the jealousy and hatred she receives based on her color and her femininity, she can bask in the freedom that she has fought for. Even though she knows the porch-sitters are bitter about her found freedom, she is able to forgive them and stand unaffected before them. She tells Phoeby not to feel caught between the community and their friendship.

Now Phoeby, don't feel too mean wid de rest of 'em
cause deys parched up from not knowin' things. Dem
meat-skins is got tuh rattle tuh make out they's
alive. Let 'em console theyselves wid talk.

'Course, talkin' don't amount tuh uh hill uh beans
when yuh can't do nothin' else. And listenin' tuh
dat kind uh talk is just like openin' yo' mouth and
lettin' de moon shine down yo' throat. (183)

For Janie, great oratorical skills were once important so that she could vocalize her existence. Dresses were important for similar reasons. But now that she has found her identity, and is comfortable in her skin, she is able to dress herself as she wishes, and no longer needs to "rattle" to prove to herself that she is living. Instead, she sits in peace and finally tells the story, the story that is *really* about *living*, that she has been waiting to share.

This story is indicative of the fact that she establishes an American identity, complete with her own house that is her Promised Land. She returns to her origins, and makes her peace with them. All the while, she embraces the joys of her present physical and spiritual identity. The only proof of this identity she now needs is seeds growing in her garden and her pockets filled with soil. They are proof of her long journey, and she has lived through it to tell her story, the most important part coming at the end .

In the end, "She pulled in her horizon like a great fishnet. Pulled it from around the waist of the world and draped it over her shoulder. So much of life in its meshes. She called in her soul to come and see" (286). She dresses in the beauty of her own truth. This is not "morbid resignation, but instead, heightened consciousness" (Story 135). This last act of calling in her soul is an "invocation of herself" (King 126). Janie becomes a model of powerful self-identification when she calls herself in, and she is an important figure that documents the African American quest for identity that influences later African American women writers.

By the tale's end Janie Crawford is a fully developed, complex black female character. Indeed, Hurston revised, as Barbara Christian contends, "the previously drawn images of the mulatta, (and)

the author's rendition of her major characters beautifully revealed the many dimensions of the black woman's soul as well as the restrictions imposed on her---that she, like all others, seeks not only security, but fulfillment. (Story 135)

Janie is a character whose quest for the "horizons" of herself finally leads her to a place where she defines herself, despite a society which wants to deny her power because she is a black woman. But even more importantly, Hurston shows that Janie is able to combine all of her selves, to create an African American woman, a balanced being that is able to dwell in her own Garden of self-definition. Her dream was to find the truth of her own identity, and her tale of the journey is the compilation of all of those memories, both those memories of her grandmother that she wanted to forget and those memories of her journey that she wanted to remember.

CHAPTER 4

PANTS: ALICE WALKER'S *THE COLOR PURPLE*

Alice Walker's *The Color Purple* and Toni Morrison's *Beloved* share similar points of view as late twentieth-century writers looking back on the African American experience in past decades and centuries. To use Morrison's phrase, Walker's "rememory" of the 20s and 30s in the American South provides valuable insights into just how much Hurston's and Larsen's characters shaped the later twentieth-century African American woman's consciousness as expressed in literature. Walker's rememory of this period in the history of African American identity is a declaration of independence [of sorts] from the falsehoods told by white America. This novel, like the others discussed in this study, reclaims those lost stories that contribute to the African American identity with a sense of cultural and psychological vindication. But also, as Walker reminds us in her book *In Search of Our Mother's Gardens*, these novels speak to the fact that black women "have been poorly prepared to cherish what should matter most" (Walker 306). These books document those lost memories and histories ensuring continuous growth, strength, and pride for those who read them.

Though there are many similarities between the two, Celie and Janie fundamentally differ in some areas of their lives. Their differences mirror the generational difference

that affects Hurston's and Walker's points of view as twentieth-century documentarians of the African American feminine identity. But an identity is built on the previous efforts of others, and this is a reminder of just how important each generation of writers is to building a history of the African American female consciousness.

The Color Purple (1982) is a useful place to pick up this twentieth-century because the sixty year time difference between the writer and the characters has given the novel's narrative perspective a unique though not completely omniscient vantage point. Yes, Walker relies on anthropological and cultural evidence that was not available to Jacobs, for example, but she also relies on earlier African American women writers: Larsen, and especially Hurston. In many ways, she is also contributing, and certainly conscious of, her own experience as a contemporary American black woman. Therefore, the plot for this book, while more complex than Hurston's *Their Eyes Were Watching God* or Larsen's *Quicksand*, provides so many valuable black cultural insights.

Like Helga and Janie, Celie's relationship to dress and adornment reflects what is happening to her character throughout the novel which unfolds through her letters to God and her sister Nettie. Walker's epistolary narrative represents Celie's need for a free space where she can

reflect on her feelings about motherhood and family relationships, her own skin and body, religion and spirituality, and finding that lost land of freedom or the Promised Land. Barbara Christian argues that Black women's literature is not just a matter of discourse, but a way of acknowledging one's existence: "It has to do with giving consolation to oneself that one does exist. It is an attempt to make meaning out of that existence" (Bobo 106). Celie's letters represent this necessity for black women to document their histories, and to reflect on their own perceptions of the world. If those letters do not survive, then those stories and proofs of existence will be lost. Celie writes her letters to assure herself that she is still alive and breathing--and that her opinions and thoughts are worthy of being expressed. It is important to watch how Celie changes in her letters over the years, and even more important to watch how her shifting relationships to dress and adornment reflect those fundamental changes in character. As sociologists and anthropologists suggest, dress and adornment often mark the transitions humans make in life. "Life-cycle events--birth, puberty, marriage, and death-- are the occasions where the individual must make a transition from one status to another. Dress and adornment are a part of this change" (Rubinstein 251). For Celie, it is no different. She goes through many stages--though not all physical as

suggested above--hers are mostly psychological), and her use of dress and adornment truly marks those transitions. Celie must first accept and redefine her relationship to motherhood. She must find her way to understanding and reclaiming her lost history. Then, she has to learn to love her own skin; after this, she is able to express her creativity and her own definition of God. She is able to combine all of these patchwork pieces of her identity and her final step is to "build" a home that will house her new spiritual and physical identity as a woman. Clothing accents each of Celie's transitional life moments.

These transitions revolve around the shift in her position in Mister's home and the promised return of her missing children; her discovery of value in her skin and body--perhaps the largest accomplishment in the book--and her eventual rejection of the white man's god she has been writing to for her entire life. It took a new spirituality and a new strength to deal with her history: a sexually abusive childhood, a physically abusive marriage, and a divorce from the God (western white misogynist ideals) who allowed it all to happen. She is able to free herself because she embraces the changes she feels within her body and soul. She finds a respect for her skin that she has been lacking. As this respect surfaces and restores the forgotten beauty of her skin, so too does her ability to express this new found

freedom in the form of clothing. Her clothing is the brightest, most colorful symbol of her success in defining a new African American female identity, both for herself and for her community.

We first meet Celie by reading her first few letters to God. We are not invited to read these letters, but instead, it is as if we have found a dusty metal box containing unread histories--similar to the letters from Nettie that Mister so ruthlessly hid from Celie. In these letters, a hidden history of an African American women's consciousness is revealed. Within the first few letters, we learn that Celie has been raped at least twice by the man who is supposedly her father. Both children who were products of that physical and psychological violation were taken away by Celie's father. After the father takes the children away, he looks at Celie (whose ugly and dirty dress is stained with her milk) with disgust because she has no way of covering up his indiscretion. He tells her to cover herself up, to which she replies, "But what I'm supposed to put on? I don't have nothing" (5). She has no options, no basic freedoms, no ability to lie or pretend; neither she nor he can transform.

While clothing in this instance does represent the negative act of covering up the truth, Celie's inability to use clothing to metaphorically hide or conceal rape, and the fact that her illegitimate children are taken from her, are

emblematic of the history of the black women's sexual misuse. Clothing, in this case, is a positive strength rather than a negative weakness. For Celie, clothing represents basic freedoms and the concealment of her stolen purity, much like Jacobs' association of clothing with freedom and the a woman's healing from rape and assault. Clothing provides the protective covering that serves as a physical safeguard to a woman's internal dignity. Though she is not able to use clothing to protect herself from being violated, Celie uses clothing as a protective force when she dresses up to lure her father away from attacking her sister Nettie and their sick step-mother. She explains this fact to God, "I can fix myself up for him. I duck into my room and come out wearing horsehair, feathers, and a pair of our new many high heel shoes. He beat me for dressing trampy, but he do it to me anyway" (9). Here, dress can be linked to fashion's sexual oppression of women because of its employment of masculine fantasy. Celie is dressed to entice her father, to sacrifice herself to his domination. However, her clever manipulation of clothing as a protective shield saves her sister and step-mother and this indicates a certain power that Celie has over fashion and men.

Celie's power is rarely seen in the beginning of *The Color Purple*, and certainly not when Mister asks to marry Nettie. Their father insists that he can let him "have" Celie

instead-- supposedly because Nettie is too young and smart to be married. Really, he wants Celie to be taken away because she is a constant reminder of his shame. He puts it to Mister in basic terms of economics. He tells Mister that she has been "spoiled" twice, but that she will work for him. As an added economic bonus, because she is unable to have any more children, he tells Mister: "You can do everything just how you want to and she aint gonna make you feed or clothe it" (10). Celie is essentially sold to Mister as a field laborer who requires no basic needs and freedoms, a nurse to his children, and a prostitute, not a mother or wife. Mister decides to take her, provided he can have a cow to seal the deal.

Throughout the twenty or so following years, the letters reveal Celie's intense attachment to those lost children, her rejection of Mister's kids who are meant to replace them, and her sexual and physical oppression. This story is similar to Jacobs' portrayal of the slave woman whose children (who were also products of rape) were taken away from her and is expected to care for her oppressor's children. Slave owners denied slaves the right to mother their own children, and then assumed that, like animals, they could just take over the mothering of another woman's children without feeling any human emotions. This stereotype of black women being able to sever themselves from their own children because "real" or

white human mothering qualities are not present, carries over into the twentieth-century and into the minds of black men as well. The idea that a black woman is as disposable as any animal is prevalent in this novel. Slavery has infiltrated the American mind set regarding black women so deeply that it has invaded the black community as well. Walker shows proof of this infection in the black community; while she does address how important the white community is in the oppression of Southern black people (for example in the lynching of Celie's real father, Sophia's imprisonment, and Squeak's rape), she spends more time discussing the oppression women experience at the hands of black men.

Jacqueline Bobo addresses this shift of attention from the white community to the black community in her 1988 study of black female audiences watching the film adaptation of *The Color Purple*. She writes,

A major difference in the current period of writing from that of the well known Harlem Renaissance of the 1920s, the protest literature of the 1940s and the Black Activist literature of the 1960s, is that the Black women writers are getting more exposure and recognition today, and the target of their works is different. In the earlier periods of Black writing, male writers were given dominant exposure and the

audience to whom they addressed their works was white. The writers believed that because Black people's oppression was the direct result of white racism, exposing this fact to white people would result in change. By contrast, for Black women writers within the last forty years, the Black community has been a major focus in their works.

(Bobo 104)

The target group has shifted from white to black audiences in African American women's writing, and therefore, the complexities surrounding African American identity--especially feminine identity--is a much more popular theme than in the time of the slave narrative. But perhaps Bobo is taking the efforts of Larsen and Hurston for granted in her article. Both *Their Eyes Were Watching God* and *Quicksand* spend a lot of time discussing the intricacies of the black community, and those books aren't necessarily meant for the white reader. Both authors seem to be overtly conscious that they are documenting the process of establishing an African American female identity, just as much as Walker is. As Hortense Spillers argues, "traditions are made, not born. Traditions do not arise spontaneously out of nature, but are created social events" (Bobo 104). All of these women writers are conscious of building a tradition.

An integral part of this tradition (whether intended for

white or black audiences) includes the theme of separation of the black woman from her children. Celie never forgets her children, despite Mister's efforts to keep them from her by hiding Nettie's letters. When Celie goes into the store and happens upon Catherine, who is buying cloth to make dresses for herself and Celie's daughter Olivia, Catherine's dressmaking is a way of establishing a mother's ownership of her child. "Gonna make me an my girl some new dresses...Her daddy be so proud" she says (14). For Celie, this event furthers the distance between her child and herself because she can't be the one who clothes her own child. Catherine's ownership of Celie's daughter is asserted through dress, and clothing becomes a bigger issue to Celie from this point onward. For example, she has always admired the picture of Shug who is "dressed to kill, whirling and laughing," but it is after this incident in the store that Celie takes an interest in how she herself wants to dress (14).

Before Shug (Mister's long-lost lover) makes her first appearance in the book, Mister's sisters visit with Celie and convince him that Celie needs new dresses. During the visit, though, the sisters speak scathingly about Shug and it is obvious that they disapprove because they are jealous of her freedom. They attack Shug's wardrobe (solidifying the belief that spirited dress and adornment is linked to feminine freedom) as they recite the rumors they have heard about her,

"[People] say she wearing tassels hanging down, look like a window dressing" (20). Kate, one of the sisters, looks Celie over during this conversation, and tells her brother that Celie needs cloth for dresses. He looks Celie over and his eyes seem to say, "It need somethin?" His inability to see her as a human being is even more obvious here than in previous scenes when all he does is beat her. When Kate takes Celie to the same store where she met Catherine, Kate asks her what color dress she would like. Celie wants to dress like the queen she thinks Shug is, so she chooses red material since that is what she envisions Shug would choose. Instead, she is given dark blue because Kate says that her brother "won't want to pay for red. Too happy lookin'" (20). Though Celie is now able to see a little beyond her meager position in Mister's home, and this new insight manifests itself in her choice of material, she is still under his domination. She is not even free to dress in the color that she chooses. But she is beginning to recognize her own individual worth, as evident in her desire to create similarities between herself and her fantasy of Shug's womanhood. The desire to physically show a new sense of self is manifested through the clothing that she chooses but is not yet allowed to wear. There is a correlation between her self-concept and the red material she chooses. As sociologists Davis and Lennon assert, "It appears that

individuals often like, select, and wear clothing that they feel reflects their self-concept. In addition to self-concept, other constructs of the self such as self-consciousness, self-perception, and self-esteem have been related to clothing" (Davis 177). Celie can catch a glimpse of her individual worth and her own importance, but like the red material, it is just out of reach. Celie longs for Shug's freedom to love and adorn herself, and by choosing red material instead of brown or blue, she is beginning to exercise her own desires.

When Shug finally does come into town, Mister takes off with her for an entire weekend. When he returns, instead of being jealous, Celie wants to hear all about Shug; her obsession with Shug's happiness and feminine freedom runs deep. She wants to ask Mister all of these questions, but he is exhausted and depressed. "But I got a million questions to ask. What she wear? Is she still the same old Shug, like in my picture? How her hair is? What kind lipstick? Wig? She stout? She skinny?" (26). All of these questions are about Shug's appearance because these things represent freedom and femininity--neither of which Celie is permitted to indulge in.

Mister brings Shug home for Celie to nurse back to health. This begins Celie's intimate relationship with Shug, both physically and emotionally. Celie's perceptions of the

world change because she is now exposed to Shug's worldliness. She notes that Shug often broods while reading white fashion magazines, thinking that no matter how she dresses, she will never be as carefree and "beautiful" as the white women on the cover "holding they beads out on one finger, dancing on top of motocars." It seems to Celie that Shug is like a "child tryin to git somethin out of a toy it can't work yet" (46). This is the first and only time in the novel where Celie directly questions black vs. white femininity. Though she does ponder the differences between black-skinned femininity (represented by Sophia) which is powerful and seemingly masculine vs. light-skinned femininity (represented by Squeak) which is weak and fainthearted. Before and after this moment with Shug, she is concerned about establishing a strong, black femininity of her own--based on other black or dark brown women like Shug, Sophia, and even Nettie.

Shug is Celie's primary instructor of femininity and identity as a whole. With Shug's help, Celie is able to look within herself (literally, when Shug tells Celie to take a mirror and admire the beauty of her own sexual organs) in order to define her own identity. Through careful lessons about physical and psychological grooming, Shug is able to teach Celie to become more comfortable in her own skin and to compliment her skin through dress and adornment.

Celie tells Shug about her childhood and her incestuous rape by describing how her father always raped her when she was about to cut his hair for him. She recalls that she always did like to cut hair, "since [she] was a little bitty thing." Celie tells Shug, "I'd run go git the scissors if I saw hair coming, and I'd cut and cut as long as I could" (97). She tells Shug how her father eventually made her cut his hair in her own bedroom instead of on the porch, and that was how he hid the fact that he was raping Celie. She tells Shug, "It got to the place where every time I saw him coming with the scissors and the comb and stool, I start to cry" (97). Celie's natural affinity for the process of adornment was linked with rape and forced weakness at a young age. Still, despite this fact, she longs to reclaim that lost freedom of spirit and the genuine joy she felt while dressing someone's hair.

Her desire to reclaim her childhood feminine passion indicates that she is growing stronger, and with Shug's help, she will once again feel the joy of dress and adornment. More precisely, she will feel the joy of female selfhood again. Rook's helpful sociological explanation of the relationship between selfhood and adornment:

The idea that there should be a discernible relationship between individuals' actual grooming behavior and their bodies relies on the fact that

grooming is motivated parasomatic activity: it links psychic with somatic realities. [Or, the effect of cultural influence on one's opinion of their bodies represented by how they choose to adorn themselves...a woman's "need" for makeup, for example.] As such, grooming should reflect the dynamics of the body self-esteem.

(Rook 234)

While Celie wants to dress and adorn herself in a certain way that will make her feel loved and cherished, she is not able to stand up against Mister. That process of building a strong self-esteem is long and difficult, and it is only when she is well on her way to being self-loving that she can challenge the traditional clothes that are symbolic of her enslavement.

At first, self-love is only possible for Celie after she is convinced that Shug loves her. Shug's love is more than just physical affection; she helps Celie to confront her painful history and to challenge her painful present. This relationship represents the need for black women to mentor and cherish other black women's feelings of self-worth. Together, they can combat the mule-like existence they often face within the black community. Shug helps Celie find Nettie's letters; in that way, she enables Celie to get in touch with the positive parts of her past as well as the negative. Also, she helps Celie see that she is living a lie

with Mister, and that there is no need to stay.

This abstract revelation is made tangible by Shug's insistence that Celie should wear pants out in the field. Celie has taken over all of the domestic and field duties; she is both woman and man in her house. But she is not empowered by this androgynous existence at all. Shug recognizes the injustice of the situation and insists that Celie stop wearing dresses out in the fields because not only does it look ridiculous, is dangerous as well. "Let's make you some pants," Shug says. Celie replies, "What I need pants for?...I ain't no man." Shug tells her not to get uppity and tells it to her straight, "you don't have a dress do nothing for you. You not made like no dress pattern, neither" (124). Not only is Shug questioning the rigidity of fashion styles and sex roles, but she goes on to point out that Celie's body does not fit the stereotype of femininity. Celie tells her that Mister would never let his wife wear pants and Shug shows Celie that she should not be imprisoned by Mister's lies and rigid ideas about men and women's roles.

Why not Say Shug. You do all the work around here. It's a scandless, the way you look out there plowing in a dress. How you keep from falling over it or getting the plow caught in it is beyond me. And another thing, I used to put on Albert's pants when we was courting. And he one time put on my

dress... "No he didn't," replied Celie. Yes, he did. He used to be a lot of fun. Not like now, but he loved to see me in pants. It was like a red flag to a bull. (124)

Eventually, Celie will teach a willing Mister about the truth of male and female roles and in the process, will reclaim feminine strengths ridiculed and ignored by sexist men like him.

This entire passage is a direct attack on the enforced *perceptions* of gender roles in the African American community. In actuality, it is the women--Celie, Sophia, and Shug (And Nettie in Africa)-- who keep the farm, businesses and families running. Mister doesn't play around with cross-dressing anymore because he isn't fun or lovable. Celie must wear pants because it is honest; for her, it is not a question of novelty. She is in a dress, but she is doing a man's labor. The "cover-up" has gone on too long; it is embarrassing to continue.

As a child, Celie didn't have enough clothing to cover-up her rape and pregnancy so that she could restore her dignity. During the first months of her marriage, she didn't have enough clothing to feel like a human being, and now, she has the wrong clothing together. Celie's relationship to dress in each of these periods of her life is directly relative to the maturation of her spirit. She needs dignity

in the beginning and has none. She then gets dresses to cover up, but these eventually fail her because they are a feeble disguise for what her gender reality really is--man and woman. Gender roles have been broken; therefore, clothing restrictions should be as well. She now wears pants and grows stronger and stronger in the honest soil of her reality--both past and present.

One of Nettie's letters reveals that the man they thought was their father was actually their step-father. Celie feels an incredible relief, because all of this time, she has worried about her children being products of incest. Together, Shug and Celie go to her childhood home to confront the man who raped her--thereby confronting all of her haunting memories of the past and to some degree the communal memories of sexual assault and injustice in slavery. Celie is not forced to confront him; she wants to. "For the first time in my life, I wanted to see Pa. So me and Shug dress up in our new blue flower pants that match and big floppy Easter hats that match too, cept her roses red, mine yellow, and us clam in the packard and glide over there" (152). Stronger, Stronger, Stronger. It is almost as if we can see Celie growing, and this event is one of the first times the reader sees her truly blossoming. It is no coincidence that her pants and hat are adorned with blooming flowers!

Celie meets her step-father, and learns about her past

that is filled with misery and grief. Both parents are gone: her father was lynched because his business was taking away money from white businesses, and her mother was unjustly killed because of a love triangle. Neither of them have grave markers because "lynched people don't git no marker" and it can be assumed that her mother doesn't have one because supposedly she transgressed sexually against her husband.

Celie has no physical evidence of a history--literally. She cannot find her parents' bones which is reflective of the black community losing its history because of slavery and lynchings. Celie uses her newly found strength to face her tragic history and change her current oppressed position. She is able to recognize the links between the historical oppression of all black people and her own situation; this is a key part in her identification process. When a "subject" or social group can identify with stories about their ancestors, this process is called "Articulation." According to Bobo, "when this articulation arises, old ideologies are disrupted and a cultural transformation is accomplished." She goes on to explain that this transformation is never completely new, or separate from the past. Instead, it is "always in the process of becoming" (Bobo 105). Celie recognizes that she is in the process of becoming, and that this is not only an individual process, but one that she shares with the black community. Perhaps this is why she is so intent on making

her own body and those around her the physical proof of the black community's (especially women's) existence and their ability to overcome the injustice and degradation that is part of their history. She will eventually do this through clothing--namely, *folkspants*.

Before she can start creating for other people though, there is one other thing she must define for herself. She has learned to laugh, love, experience sexual ecstasy, and dress. She has found her children, who will return home to her; she has learned about her past (both from her step-father and from Nettie's letters) and has come to terms with it; she has learned how to become an important link in her community and family; she has learned to love her skin and all that it represents. Now that she has figured out how to function on an earthly level, she has to define her spirituality for herself. Earlier in the novel, Sophia suggested that Celie not accept her burdens and pain in the name of some God, and instead, that she should take control of herself and her life. Celie tells Sophia "Well, sometime, Mister git on me pretty hard. I have to talk to Old Maker. But he my husband...This life soon be over. Heaven last always." To this, Sophia replies, "you ought to bash Mr. head open...Think about heaven later" (39). But Celie was not then strong enough to reclaim her own body and to redefine her own spirituality; it was easier to allow a patriarchal religion

to lull her into quiet submission.

But now, after all she has been through, she has found the truth. Now she is ready to find a unique spirituality. Shug encourages Celie to look beyond the traditional white male God, because this God will never hold the answers for her as a black woman. Just as she was able to find enough inner strength to face her past and to acquire her self-love by looking within for her strength as an African American woman. Celie finds God where Shug does: nature, flowers, color, soulful singing, creativity, clothing, and sex. These are clues to where God resides. When Celie asks if this can really be the case, Shug gives her the answer she has been looking for all along regarding her own feminine identity: "Yes, Celie...Everything want to be loved. Us sing and dance, make faces and give flower bouquets, trying to be loved. You ever notice that trees do everything to get attention we do, except walk?" Shug justifies all they have done to get to this point of self realization because she has found God in doing what makes her happy. This is the type of God that will help Celie, not "no white man's god" (168).

When Celie finally rejects Judeo-Christian dogma (white theories about God and spirituality), she gets even closer to defining her own identity. The final step in achieving this in each of these novels is completed when each woman finds a space, room, or house where she can celebrate her own

creativity. This place is often separate from family members or members of the community. She is free to be by herself and to own herself at all times while she is in this space.

Walker describes the space that her mother found in her garden in her essay, "In Search of Our Mother's Gardens" that must be similar to the space she envisioned for Celie. She writes,

I notice that it is only when my mother is working in her flowers that she is radiant, almost to the point of being invisible--except as Creator: hand and eye. She is involved in the work her soul must have. Ordering the universe in the image of her personal conception of Beauty. (Walker 241)

At first, this place where Celie could be "Creator: hand and eye" was Shug's pink house where Celie was able to sit and live freely with the woman she loved. She orders "the universe in the image of her personal conception of Beauty" by sewing pants, pants, and more pants. She puts all of her creative energy into making the perfect pair of pants for Shug. Not only is sewing a way to adorn herself, it is also a way to create for others, because even this helps define her individuality. As Kurt Back says, "Cultural activities such as arts, crafts, literature, and music are products [that stem from] the need for personal self-expression. They are also the products of individual creativity and of the

structures in which this creativity can be translated into a recognized work" (Back 4).

Celie fulfills her need for self-expression and combines it with her need to show love through sewing pants--initially just for herself and Shug, but eventually for the entire community. For Shug, she wants the pants to be wrinkle-free because Shug is always on the road, and stretchable because she often gains weight while on tour; they must be perky, bright, and fresh, so that they can rejuvenate a tired soul. When Shug tries her pants on, she says, "Miss Celie...You is a wonder to behold." Because of Shug's positive encouragement, she begins to make more and more pants for all kinds of different body types and personal needs. She makes a pair for good hearted Jack who lent her the first material she used to make pants for herself. He needs "big pockets so he can keep a lot of children's things. Marbles and string and pennies and rocks" (181). He also needs pants that fit exactly to his lifestyle: "they have to fit closer round the leg than Shug's so he can run if he need to snatch a child out the way of something. And they have to be something he can lay back in when he hold Odessa in front of the fire" (181).

The joy Celie takes in creating and producing is proof that she has found a way to show love to and accept love from other people. She is also able to respect her own handiwork.

Another important thing happens here as well. Celie is fitting the pants to the person; she is not asking others to conform to her idea of fashion. She kicks aside the Euro American women's dress as being somehow restrictive or a punitive. In addition to redefining fashion to make it more about confidence and comfort, Celie has reclaimed an art that has previously been considered "boring and fatiguing" labor for working-class women. For Celie, sewing is a declaration of her womanhood, motherhood and general female strength and freedom. And it is the place where she can really inspire cultural change.

Celie continues to work in Shug's house, and Shug patiently gives Celie some space to create, but finally, it becomes apparent that Celie really needs her own space--not just the space given to her by Shug. This particular space for Celie is the house she justly inherits after her step-father dies. It is technically her mother's house because it was originally her mother's property. Though her mother is dead, and Celie had no physical proof of her existence, when the house is passed on to Celie and Nettie, this is the most important proof Celie needs. Her mother passed on an American Promised Land to Celie, and it is her intention to use that house as a welcoming place for all those who love her and whom she loves. She and Shug burn cedar sticks from the attic to the first floor to rid the house of any bad memories or

spirits. Celie has claimed that house as her own, and has purified it with a seemingly religious ritual that is not necessarily a borrowed tradition from the Christian church.

Once the house is purified, Celie is ready to call it her own. She writes to Nettie to tell her that "Now us have a house to come home to" (207). She finally has a house that she owns to go along with the fact that she finally owns her own body. Nettie and the kids now have a place to come home to as well, after they leave Africa. Africa is not home or the Promised Land, this house is. Celie owns her own body and the space that surrounds it. This is freedom. It is also why Jacobs wanted to write her story, to own a house of her own that her children could call home, but alas, she could not attain the dream that Celie was able to. Jacobs writes, "I do not sit with my children in a home of my own. I still long for a hearthstone of my own, however humble. I wish it for my children's sake far more than my own" (Jacobs 207). Her literary daughter Celie is able to have her own "hearthstone" and this is the new Promised Land that is a recurring theme in African American Literature. But not until the twentieth-century were black women able to achieve it-- at least as a popular theme in literature.

During the last letters of the novel, we learn that Celie lets the pain of her past go. She sits on her porch and teaches Mister how to sew, and tells him stories about

Africa. As with Anna Julia Cooper, the question for Celie is no longer "how shall I so cramp, stunt, simplify and nullify myself as to make me eligible to the honor of being swallowed up into some little man?" (Carby 100). As Carby points out, "Cooper's reflections on the consequent changes necessary in marriage relations were...directed toward the utopian possibilities for women of partnerships with husbands on a plane of intellectual equality" (Carby 100). Celie is operating on an equal, if not superior, intellectual plane as she educates her former oppressor. She tells him of his own African heritage, and in the process, she teaches him that the white ways of living are not always the best or only ways of living, and that they as African Americans have the right to mix their customs to create a true and good identity. She tells him about African customs of dress when he asks her why women want to wear pants, and why she thinks he should be sewing when he is a man. She tells Nettie the details of those visits, and though these letters, Celie's strength is obvious. She writes about her talks with Mister:

other times he want to know about my children. I told him you say they both wear long robes, sort of like dresses. That was the day he come to visit me while I was sewing and ast me what was so special bout my pants. Anybody can wear them, I said. Men and women not supposed to wear the same thing, he

said. Men spose to wear the pants. So I said, You ought to tell that to the mens in Africa. Say what? he ast. First time he ever thought bout what Africans do. People in Africa try to wear what feel comfortable in the heat, I say...And men sew in Africa too, I say. They do? he ast. Yeah, I say. They not so backward as mens here. (230)

Not only is Celie educating Mister on gender roles in Africa, but she is telling him that it is not African Americans' blackness that makes them backward, it is that their willingness to adopt white culture over African culture is a backward step for them in some ways. She reminds him that women are strong creatures who have great "style" if they are able to be free. She explains to Mister what she loves the most about Shug and listens to his own reasons "He say he love her style. He say to tell the truth, Shug [and Sophia] act more manly than most men. I mean she upright, honest. Speak her mind and the devil take the hindmost...She bound to live her life and be herself no matter what" (228). Celie corrects Mister's belief that Shug's qualities and Sophia's are masculine, explaining that they are actually womanly, "Specially since she and Sophia the ones got it. Sophia and Shug not like men, he say, but they not like women either." To this Celie replies, "You mean they not like you or me" (228). But what Celie doesn't quite seem to realize is

that she now fits into this same realm of strong femininity that Sophia and Shug are members of. And it is not women who are backward, but the culture that tries to enslave them.

Through Nettie's letters, Celie realizes that many African customs are backward as well. Nettie tells her that Tashi's parents were not happy about her being educated. As a subplot to Walker's novel, we learn about Tashi's confusion between western and Olinka culture that is all symbolized in the adornment of her skin. Out of frustration with what was happening to her own people as a result of the white man's war, she goes through the female initiation rights of scarification and circumcision. Celie's son Adam, who is in love with Tashi, is at first disgusted that she allowed these forms of body adornment to be performed on her. When Tashi realizes that even black people in America will look down on her because of her "savage" markings, she tells Adam that she will not marry him and go to America. In Nettie's letter to Celie she tells of Tashi's refusal to be married,

Adam announced his desire to marry Tashi. Tashi announced her refusal to get married. and then, in that honest, forthright way of hers, she gave her reasons. Paramount among them that, because of the scarification on her cheeks Americans would look down on her as a savage and shun her, and whatever children she and Adam might have. That she had seen

the magazines we receive from home that it was very clear to her that black people did not truly admire black skinned people like herself, and especially black skinned black women. They bleach their faces, she said. They fry their hair. They try to look naked [meaning white]. (234-235)

Through Nettie, Walker brings up the issue about colorist prejudices and an abhorrence of anything "primitive" or African in the black community. This topic is often addressed in twentieth-century African American fiction when there is a discussion about skin color. The adoption of the popular white belief that white blood "purifies" black and that this mixture is an improvement for the black race is an issue of great concern for black identity. Mulatto or mulatta consciousness (the idea that there is a separate psychological identity associated with belonging to two or more different races or cultures) is a prevalent issue in the black community as reflected by twentieth-- century African American literature. Even Jacobs addresses the dangers surrounding a light-skinned slave girl, as well as how others perceive her. Tashi, as a voice of African pride in the novel, reminds African American readers that black-skinned women came directly from Africa and represent their mothers. To disrespect Tashi's skin color and her skin markings, is to disrespect their own histories.

Tashi's skin becomes a visible history of black people and adornment, but also of traditional African politics. As Zillah Eisenstein writes in her book on acts of racial and sexual hatred practiced all over the world, "The body is a visual site, which makes it crucial for marking difference, and it is a felt site: one feels one's body. This utter intimacy makes the body unique as a location for politics" (Eisenstein 34). Tashi's circumcision and even her scarification is a violent reminder of the separation between African and American customs. For Africans, this process is symbolic of her acceptance into the community, and a visible presentation of her female Olinka identity. For many Americans, white and black, these acts symbolize primitive misogyny.

The act of performing female circumcision, also called clitoridectomy, originated to control female sexual activity. According to Rubinstein, it was (is) thought that women were completely unable to control their own lust, and therefore, could not be reliable and faithful wives. Ironically, scarification is not only used to mark one's identity as a member of a group. It is also used to

enhance sexual attraction...after menstruation, girls receive incisions on their faces and stomachs, and reportedly...the scars produced by scarification are tender for some years after and f

form new erogenous zones...it is believed that the
scars make women more desirous for sex and
therefore more likely to bear children. (Rubinstein
250)

Strange as these practices seem to the Euro American mind set, this contradictory view of female sexuality and how to control it is similar to American ideas about how a woman (especially a black woman) is controlled by her husband--a common theme in Celie's letters. The idea of physically controlling and altering a woman's sexuality is not alien to Western cultures. In fact, this idea was (is) taught as truth in Christianity. Christian men are often taught to beware of womanly sexual corruption, and women are advised to remain pure for their future husbands at the risk of never being married once purity is lost. A sexually promiscuous woman is often shunned in Christian communities. Celie is working out an identity of her own, and both rejecting and selecting traditional beliefs about race, religion, and gender in order to form her African American identity --all in relation to skin.

Not only does Tashi notice that American women do not have or appreciate scars, but she also notices that they detest dark skinned women. This is an important issue for Walker, who discusses the American rejection of the black woman in her essay, "If the Present Looks Like the

Past, What Does the Future Look Like?" Walker interviews many people who were treated poorly because their skin was dark, with little suggestion of any "white improvement." She uses a question asked by Tallie Jeffers to argue against the rejection of the black black woman. Jeffers asks,

What is a people that props itself up on the color of its skin? And what is a people that excludes the womb-source of its own genetic heritage? For certainly every Afro-American is descended from a black black woman. What can be the future of a class of descendants of slaves that implicitly gives slave holders greater honor than the African women they enslaved? What can be the end of a class that pretends to honor blackness while secretly despising working class black skinned women whose faces reveal no trace of white blood? (Walker 295)

For Tashi to be accepted in Celie's home, Celie has to come to terms with all of these issues of combined ethnicities and traditions that are illustrated on Tashi's skin. To accept her, she must first be able to accept herself. Celie has illustrated self-love and love for her community through bodily adornment; she is able to recognize the preciousness of skin, no matter what shade of African Mother black or American mulatto "high yellow" it is. This is an important change in later twentieth-- century fiction, because

traditionally, "thinking, articulate, reasoning black women were represented only as those who looked white: mulattos, quadroons, or octoroons" (Carby 33). But Celie is an intellectual dark-skinned woman who is now in control of those who detest her skin color, and is stronger than them. She feels comfortable in the skin that she has fought to own and adorn.

Celie won't have to fear her son as she feared other men in her life, either. In an initiation of the skin, to prove his affection and loyalty, Adam goes through scarification to win the trust of Tashi, but also to show that he is able to blend cultures and even gender roles...just as Mister is doing on Celie's porch. Celie is the matriarch who has her own established family and personal identity. And, like Janie, Celie assumes the role of storyteller who teaches other porchsitters.

All of Celie's loved ones come home to the house that Celie owns. It is decorated in red, purple and yellow. She has slowly fought to decorate and adore her own body and to own a space that will allow her to be creative and free. She has gone from owning nothing, not even her own body or a way to cover it up, to having enough strength to clothe an entire community of free bodies. She, who once denied herself the right to feel after having been told that she was an ugly animal unworthy of freedom and love.

When she first receives fabric from Mister, those clothes symbolize a lie--dresses made from this cloth were traditionally female, but she works like a man with none of his freedoms. She longed for Shug's sexual beauty and affection, the process of their relationship is reflected in Celie's relationship to clothing. Finally, when Celie is ready to love herself and to truly accept Shug's affection, and she is also able to creatively adorn her own body. She dresses herself honestly in accordance to her own comfort, passions and lifestyle. Then, she designs clothes that free other people as she was able to free herself. She teaches Mister about the art of sewing, all the while teaching him about the truth of men and women and black and white. She reclaims her past by finding her history and confronting it, all the while establishing her own power. Finally, she inherited her own house from her mother and decorates it as she has always dreamed of doing with Shug. She goes from decorating her own body, to decorating an entire house that was both her Promised Land of freedom and a shelter for all those she loves.

CHAPTER 5

CONCLUSION

EARRINGS: TONI MORRISON'S *BELoved*

This discussion on Toni Morrison's *Beloved* ties together all of the major themes discussed in previous chapters. Morrison's Sethe goes through the same processes of a black woman defining herself as the previously discussed characters do. Though the theme of bodily adornment is not as overt in Morrison's *Beloved* as it is in those books I have previously discussed, the gentle, almost whispered background to the highly dramatic narrative action does contain subtle references to the important role that adornment plays in Sethe's process of claiming self-ownership. Like Linda Brent in Jacobs's *Incidents*, Sethe must deal with the reality of slavery that she experienced. Unlike Helga, Janie, and Celie, Morrison's Sethe is directly affected by the institution of slavery. All of these women contain psychological scars left by the history of slavery, but Sethe bears the physical scars on her back as well. Though Sethe can psychologically deny slavery's influence by forgetting her history, she is reminded by the return of major characters from her past. Sethe confronts her past and weaves it into her present by dwelling with these memories represented by Paul D. and Beloved. Dress and adornment are gentle, yet physical reminders of her past, and are symbolic of just how that past

fits into her future as a woman living during the Reconstruction.

Harriet Jacobs is the only writer actually writing out of the personal experience of slavery, but her influence has inspired these twentieth-century novelists to try to document their histories so that they can assert their human identities. Jacobs's influence, as well as the influence of all these writers who came after her, is so great, that Morrison is able to construct a seemingly-accurate portrayal of what it is like to have to remember the "unthinkable," and to document the process of constructing an African American female identity. Once again, those four themes that make up the process of reclaiming or establishing an African American female identity are: coming to terms with issues of motherhood, family, and community; acceptance and adoration of one's skin color; defining God for oneself; and securing a place to celebrate all of these female freedoms that take a lifetime to achieve.

The memory of slavery and its relationship to the present is the predominant theme running through *Beloved*. While Sethe is a direct survivor of slavery, the reader learns about her experiences through her memory of it rather than her actual, present experience of it. She lives at 124 Bluestone Rd. just outside of Cincinnati, Ohio and the year is 1873--18 years after the abolition of slavery. Morrison's

use of memory as opposed to a more direct narrative of Sethe's experience in slavery is a comment on the fact that experiences too painful to remember are likewise too painful to describe. So, these memories must be described from a distance. Stories about slavery come to us in fleeting images as they drift or flash in and out of Sethe's mind. When she closes down her memory bank so that it won't break her present control, the reader ceases to learn more until Sethe is ready to think about her enslavement again. But just as Sethe dislikes "rememory-ing" slavery, we are also wary about reading more of her rememories. In her fascinating article, "'Tell me your diamonds': Time and the Marvelous in Toni Morrison's *Beloved*," Sharon Jesse writes, "Through *Beloved*'s narrative process, Morrison prolongs our desire for both the end, for illumination, and for the delay of the end, just as Sethe seems to want to know and yet not know who the young woman, *Beloved*, is" (Jesse 204).

When Sethe decides that she wants to stop reliving a memory, we lose out on the rest of the story. The reader is completely at the mercy of Sethe's willingness to feel. There is not a gratifying external narrator that "saves the day" by filling in the cracks of Sethe's narrative. The reader is left wanting to know more just as Denver and *Beloved* are. We are those surviving listeners, generations removed, that are left without a clear picture of the torturous atrocities

committed against enslaved African Americans.

Twentieth-century writers and their female protagonists are the removed listeners as well, but Morrison, through her twentieth-century writing perspective, attempts to reclaim "a previously unwritten portion of black history." In her interview with Christina Davis, Morrison explains that this is a task that is

paramount in its importance: you have to stake it out and identify those who have preceded you--resummoning them, acknowledging them is just one step in that process of reclamation--so that they are always there as the confirmation and the affirmation of the life that I personally have not lived but is the life of the organism to which I belong which is black people in this country.

(Mathieson 230)

Perhaps this is why it is best to end this discussion with a novel that addresses issues of identification processes or those four steps that represent the four major themes discussed throughout this thesis. While Morrison's narrative is not a traditional story of process and progressive or linear movement from point to point in the direction of a conclusion like Hurston's, Larsen's, or even Walker's, it is the most comprehensive narrative that deals with the history that motivates the processes of building an identity that I

discuss in all of these preceding novels. The memory of slavery richly influences *Beloved's* narrative, and the legacy of this memory influences the three novels previously discussed. By reclaiming this history, these authors are reclaiming their own humanity because they elevate their status of living in enforced ignorance. As Ashraf Rushdy notes: "Chattel does not know its history, and part of the strategy of making chattel of humans is to make them ignorant of their histories, both collective and personal" (Patton 130). When the character's (representative of the author's) collective and personal histories are understood and acknowledged, each of these women is able to move toward constructing a strong African American feminine identity.

Baby Suggs is perhaps the most important character to the development of Sethe's identity as a free woman. She embodies that mother-figure that Sethe, (and each of the women in these preceding novels as well) has been searching for. But her presence is unreliable or unstable because by the time we meet her, Baby Suggs is just about ready to die:

Suspended between the nastiness of life and the meanness of the dead, she couldn't get interested in leaving life or living it...Her past had been like her present--intolerable--and since she knew death was anything but forgetfulness, she used the little energy left her for pondering color. (1-2)

She asks for lavender, or pink, anything that will alleviate the stark reality of her past and present as represented by the whiteness of Ohio. It is winter at this time, but it is not just the color of the snow that is oppressive, it is that the snow represents the heavy and domineering presence of white people in her life. Sethe, out of gratitude, love, and respect, honors Baby Suggs' "plea[s] for color," and "would oblige her with anything from fabric to her own tongue" (2).

Her death marks an important event in Sethe's process of becoming a truly free woman because she is Sethe's mother-figure who has shown her how to be spiritually and physically free through adornment and ritual. Sethe's success hangs in the balance because she has no one but herself to rely on after Baby Suggs is gone. Also, Baby Suggs has been her only form of female and familial support. As soon as she decides to leave Sweet Home, Sethe makes her way to the Ohio river. Her children are just on the other side, and her urgency to get to them is marked by the continuous stream of mother's milk wetting the front of her dress. This is not the only reminder of her own motherhood; she is also nine months pregnant, and on the shores of the Ohio River on the Kentucky side, she gives birth to her daughter Denver. The rest of her journey is made with Denver strapped to her front. Sethe's journey is fueled by her desire to get to her children, but she is also running to the security that Baby Suggs, her

mother-in-law, provides. She is an important and necessary replacement because Sethe's own mother was lynched and burned--a horror that Sethe witnessed as a small child. Sethe repeatedly makes comments to Denver, Beloved, and Paul D that she never "had no woman to ask." She was not permitted to know and seek refuge in her own mother, and this has left an emotional scar that is as deep and broad as the cluster of scars on her back.

Motherhood is linked with bodily adornment in this novel, so it is not surprising that Beloved's question "Your woman she never fix up your hair?" launches Sethe into remembering her only real memory of her mother as she debates with Denver whether or not they should unbraid and comb out her hair. She replies, "My woman? You mean my mother? If she did, I don't remember" (60). Sethe doesn't remember having a mother-daughter relationship with her own mother--the kind that involves the loving adornment of hair. Instead, she remembers the brand of the cross inside a circle on her mother's rib. This memory of her mother's bodily adornment is not a peaceful, loving memory. Her mother did not choose this brand to signify her adoration for her own skin. It was forcefully burned into her skin to mark her as "property," not as a "beautiful woman" who adores her own skin.

But Sethe sees this brand as her mother's personal identification because her mother tells her to do so. She

tells Sethe as she points not to her eyes, or face, but to her brand perhaps because she anticipates her own lynching and wants her body to be identified, "This is your ma'am. This, I am the only one got this mark now...If something happens to me and you can't tell me by my face, you can know me by this mark" (61). In a way, her mother reclaims her body after it has been branded by allowing her daughter to use it to identify her. But it must not be left unsaid that this brand represents the fact that her body was not her own, and though Sethe's only memory of her is of her brand and her voice, it is also a memory dominated by the realization that her mother's body was marked as the property of someone else. Her mother's body was not her own, and definitely did not belong to her daughter. This mark was not something "to be cherished, but a symbol of her enslavement: it was the mark of ownership by the master who had as much as written 'property' under her breast" (Patton 131).

After her mother stops talking and desperately pleas for a place in her daughter's memory, Sethe decides that she wants a mark that will identify her as well. She wants her mother to know her. "'Mark that mark on me too'" Sethe pleads, but instead, her mother slaps her face (61). Sethe explains that she didn't understand her mother's reaction until she had a mark of her own. This is in reference to Sethe's own mark of slavery. Scarring her body is the most

dramatic way Schoolteacher could assert his ownership of her, for as Eisenstein suggests,

The physicality of her body becomes a horribly powerful resource for those who wish to conquer, violate humiliate, and shame. The body's power--its intimacy, its creativity against systems of power, its physical dignity and integrity--is also its vulnerability. We can feel our body as we can feel nothing else. Its pain, its illness, its thirst, its hunger demand strength in our attempt to meet their needs, and make us despairingly vulnerable in the process. (Eisenstein 34)

Sethe's "back skin" is made up of a cluster of scars from whip lashings. Her body is permanently marked, and it is a badge of slavery that will always be a reminder that she was once owned by another person. She received this mark after violently struggling against the boys who were instructed by schoolteacher to steal her milk. It was a punishment for asserting her own claims to motherhood and the ownership of her own body.

When Sethe arrives at 124, Baby Suggs helps her to reclaim her right to motherhood and to her own body. The very first act that Baby Suggs does to begin this process of self-identification and self-ownership is to wash her body clean from all marks of dirt and blood that slavery has left on

Sethe. Lovingly, she leads Sethe to the "keeping room" and:

by the light of the spirit lamp, bathed her in sections, starting with her face. Then, while she waited for another pan of heated water, she sat next to her and stitched gray cotton. Sethe dozed and woke to the washing of her hands and arms. After each bathing, Baby covered her with a quilt and put another pan on in the kitchen...[When Sethe was bent over nursing her baby, Baby Suggs noticed] Roses of blood blossomed in the blanket covering Sethe's shoulders... wordlessly the older woman greased the flowering back and pinned a double thickness of cloth to the inside of the newly stitched dress. (93)

Baby Suggs washes away any debris of slavery on Sethe's body, though the evidence is still there. She then burns her old slave dress and sews her a soft, clean dress of her very own. This dress is symbolic of freedom, and once Sethe's body is lovingly bathed and cleared from the ugliness of slavery, she is free to put that new dress on. Her skin is newly "baptized" and Baby Suggs begins the long process of teaching Sethe how to love her own skin.

These lessons are problematic because the ugliness of slavery is not that easily removed as all of these novels demonstrate. Each painful gash in her back is a symbol of the

permanence of the memory of slavery, and how it affects future generations. As Venetria Patton reminds us, "The legacy of slavery survives across time and genres. The legacy that these texts [Patton refers to different texts, but this applies here as well] share is that they all in some way respond to the same assumption[s] developed during slavery" (Patton 124). The themes of forgetting the past and denying slavery's influence manifest themselves as figurative (or in *Beloved's* case, literal) ghosts that haunt them throughout the female protagonist's journey to the promised land of self-identification and self-ownership. Sethe's experience with denial is symbolic of what has been going on for all generations since the beginning of American slavery.

Though Sethe will eventually try to forget her past, the spots of blood that appear on the back of her new dress are from the permanent mark of Sethe's former identity. Silently, Baby Suggs tends to Sethe's back, and alters her freedom dress so that it can handle the blood that is still flowing from Sethe's enslavement. Baby Suggs is taking over Sethe's mother's job by tending to her wounds. She lovingly adorns Sethe's body so that Sethe can learn what it is like to dress the body she now owns. She teaches Sethe to reclaim her body after it has been so grossly violated by previous "owners." She weeps for her daughter-in-law while still being strong for her--all of these motherly acts are represented by this

process of bodily adornment.

After Baby Suggs finishes this process of adorning Sethe and showing her that her body is worthy of this kind of love, she gathers Sethe's old slave clothes together and pronounces that there is "Nothing worth saving here" (95). But before Baby Suggs goes to throw away the the dress and head rag that once marked her as an escaped slave, Sethe tells her to search for the crystal earrings that Mrs. Garner gave her as a wedding present. Baby Suggs promises to pierce Sethe's ears so that she can wear them. The earrings and the new gray dress become emblems of her newly acquired freedom because she had not wanted to wear such lovely things while she was still at Sweet Home. Self-loving (accentuated by bodily adornment) as well as loving her children were not possible while still living in slavery. She left Kentucky because she "couldn't love em [her children and her own body] proper...because they wasn't mine to love" (198). Not only do these earrings function as a symbol of the freedom to love her own body and "every bit of life she had made, all the parts of her that were precious and fine and beautiful" (Jesse 200), but they also serve as windows into past memories.

Once Beloved starts asking Sethe questions, it becomes clear that she is (at least in part) Sethe's baby. One evening, when Beloved is massaging Sethe's neck and

shoulders, she asks Sethe. "Where your diamonds?" (58). Sethe tries to understand what she means, and tells her that while she never had diamonds, she did have "some crystal once. A present from a lady I worked for" (58). Beloved then delivers one of her most haunting lines to Sethe, "Tell me," she says. "Tell me your diamonds" (58). Beloved is desperate to hear about the mother that she was taken from so prematurely. Sethe soon realizes how much Beloved needs these stories; storytelling "became a way to feed her" (58). Telling Beloved about her past is a healing process for Sethe. The memories were quiet inside Sethe before Beloved's arrival, and speaking about them is painful, "because every mention of her past life hurt. Everything in it was painful or lost" (58). Both Sethe and Baby Suggs had decided that the past was too "unspeakable" so whenever Denver asks about the details of Sweet Home and Sethe's life before living at 124, she gives short, uninvolved answers. But with Beloved, storytelling becomes a healing release, much like Janie's storytelling with Phoebe is at the end of her journey.

The earrings, one of the brightest pieces of pleasurable adornment that Sethe owns, light her way as she travels back into the depths of her own memories of slavery and Sweet Home. She begins her story by telling Beloved that the earrings were a wedding present because Mrs. Garner saw Sethe's disappointment when she was told that there would be

no wedding ceremony or huge Canaan-like feast to mark her union with Halle. Sethe really wanted a dress that would serve as a symbol of her joy and rite of passage like Mrs. Garner's dress (and entire ceremony) was for her. Sethe tells Beloved,

Well, I made up my mind to have at the least a dress that wasn't the sacking I worked in. So I took to stealing fabric, and wound up with a dress you wouldn't believe. The top was from two pillow cases in her mending basket. The front of the skirt was a dresser scarf a candle fell on and burnt a hole in, and one of her old sashes we used to test the flatiron on. (59)

She tells Beloved that she could not find anything for the back, so Halle agreed to wait for her to finish the dress. She finally finds some old mosquito netting to make up the back of the dress. Though her dress was a disaster, the effort is what is important. Even though she understands that the white people do not see any reason to mark her new marriage, because according to them, their "coupling" is just a livestock mating ritual, Sethe recognizes her own importance and the need to adorn herself accordingly. When Mrs. Garner gives her the earrings, she tells Beloved that:

I thanked her but I never did put them on till I got away from there. One day after I walked into

this here house Baby Suggs unknotted my underskirt and took em out. I sat right here by the stove with Denver in my arms and let her punch holes in my ears for to wear them. (60)

Mrs. Garner did not perform this ritual of piercing on Sethe. Instead, she tells her to punch holes in her own ears. Baby Suggs, Sethe's mother-figure, makes the piercing a ritual that marks Sethe's rebirth into freedom.

Sethe's story about the earrings is fascinating to Beloved because this story symbolizes the lost conversations held by mother and daughter as a result of Beloved's untimely death. But Beloved is also interested because she, according to Sharon Jesse, is a conglomeration of those ancestors who were forgotten as a result of the painful repression of memories. Beloved's concern about what Sethe remembers about her own mother implies that it is her own mother who is asking these questions to inquire why Sethe has forgotten her even after she told her not to. Just as all of the women in the other novels must deal with their own past ghosts, so, too, must Sethe.

Sharon Jesse discusses the cultural significance of this conglomeration of past spirits and memories present in Beloved's body, "Reconnecting and affirming the ancestral past in order to have meaningful relationship to the present" is one of the most important themes running through *Beloved*.

Beloved is the return of the repressed, the forgotten ancestor who comes to possess her mother, the ex-slave woman who was so possessive and full of pride--she actually escaped from slavery with all her children by her husband Halle--that she killed her baby daughter rather than see her taken back into slavery at Sweet Home. (Jesse 200)

Sethe, unlike Linda Brent has the will and determination to kill her children rather than send them back to slavery. Her claim to her children is actualized in this event. But Sethe denies the existence of the dead, her child and her mother, because her memories are too painful to recall. This is why Beloved comes back--to remind Sethe that she will not be forgotten. She quizzes Sethe on her memories, "Where you diamonds?" because she is hungry for the lost mother-daughter relationship, but more importantly, because she must not forget. Slavery will not be forgotten.

Beloved represents all those who had to be remembered. Sethe's mother showed her the brand of the cross so that Sethe could identify her and would remember her after she was gone. Sethe's dead "crawling already?" baby is also present in Beloved's body. Many would argue that the ghost is only the embodiment of the baby's spirit, but it seems much more convincing that this ghost should be a conglomeration of Sethe's lost history and ancestors. Beloved tells of being on

a ship and being abandoned by her mother as she jumps overboard. She tells Denver that she was "always crouching" in a dark space while lying on top of someone who had already died (211). While this could be interpreted as Beloved's grave, it can also be read as a slave survivor's story about crouching in the dark holds of a slave ship. Perhaps this is all in reference to Sethe's mother who still spoke an African language, and recalls being taken from a garden by white people. Beloved recalls her earliest memories which may also be the memories of a young girl seeing her mother forced into slavery:

In the beginning I could see her I could not help her because the clouds were in the way in the beginning I could see her the shining in her ears she does not like the circle around her neck I know this I look hard at her so that she will know that the clouds are in the way I am sure she saw me I am looking at her see me she empties out her eyes I am there in the place where her face is and telling her the noisy clouds were in my way she wants her earrings she wants her round basket I want her face a hot thing...They are not crouching now we are they are floating on the water they break up the little hill and push it through I cannot find my pretty teeth I see the

dark face that is going to smile at me it is my
dark face that is going to smile at me the iron
circle is around our neck she does not have sharp
earrings in her ears or a round basket she goes in
the water with my face (211-212)

Jesse comments on the similar details of different women's memories of slavery. This points to the possibility that Beloved's ghost is made up of many people's spirits and memories. The mother figure can be Sethe, but it could also be any mother who has been forced into slavery, and forced onto a slave ship. Jesse writes:

Uncannily, the important details of the young woman's narrative of her initial capture and the subsequent horror of the slave ship resemble earlier memories that Sethe and Baby Suggs have of where and when Sethe killed her baby. As a slave-ship survivor, Beloved describes watching her mother tend vegetables on land in Africa, watching the clouds and flowers, and then watching as the 'men with no skin' (white men) come to take her and her mother away. (Jesse 207)

This is "uncanny" because the details are so similar to the event surrounding Schoolteacher's attempt to reclaim his property, and Sethe's eventual killing of her child to prevent him from doing just that.

The cultural and religious significance of Beloved's ghost being a culmination of many spirits is best determined when compared to West African religious beliefs about the dead. According to Mbiti, a scholar of African religions, "The dead, in African religion, want to be remembered. For several generations, they are part of the *sasa* continuum, the present, and are "familiar" to their descendants until they pass away from *sasa* time altogether" (Mbiti 22). If those ancestors are forgotten, then they are permitted to come back and remind you by whatever drastic measures they see fit. Sethe is being punished for forgetting those who have died, but are still living in *sasa* time which is five generations long. After five generations have passed, then these souls go into the "final storehouse" of time, and do not make appearances to their earthly descendants (Mbiti 23). According to Jesse,

In the process of moving toward freedom, which Cincinnati, Ohio, both literally and symbolically was, Sethe, Paul D., and Baby Suggs had to try to forget the nightmare that was being a slave. But that means forgetting your ancestors--possibly something that in their African religion was problematic, and furthermore dangerous: the forgotten relatives could turn on you in spite. (Jesse 200)

Those haunting memories of people forgotten also plague Stamp Paid. He walks in constant remembrance of the dead because he carries a red ribbon taken from a dead child's braid in his pocket. While tying up his boat, he spotted the ribbon floating in the water; thinking it was a fly or some sort of tackle, he fished it out. The object turned out to be a red ribbon tied around a "wet woolly curl" and he could still see a piece of the girl's scalp attached to the hair. He keeps the ribbon to remind him of those who have died and who don't want to be forgotten. When he makes his way to 124, he walks into other people's memories, and hears "all of the 'voices' that clamor for recognition [that] are the sounds of 'people of broken necks, fire-cooked blood and black girls who had lost their ribbons" (172)(Jesse 206).

The red ribbon was at one time a mark of adornment for a young girl. Her "woman" probably tied it in her hair to proclaim ownership over her own daughter to defy her white owner's claims to the girl's body. Or, the ribbon could have been an emblem of the girl's freedom, and the mother's ability to love and adorn her child in the same way that Sethe's earrings were emblematic of freedom. Because Stamp finds this ribbon attached to hair floating in the Ohio river, it is hard to know whether the child who wore it was free and living in Ohio or a slave still living in Kentucky. The river is a sort of purgatorial in-between place, but the

child's end is the same regardless of where she died. This deepens Stamp's depression because it doesn't matter whether black people are on "free" or slave soil, they are still not free to enjoy life--a fact Sethe's "crawling already?" baby must deal with as well. Stamp will not allow himself to forget the dead, for he knows that they want to be remembered. He finds strength in this remembrance, for he often "[clutches] the red ribbon in his pocket for strength" (184). Sethe, on the other hand, learns what happens when the dead are forgotten. When Beloved comes back to her, she does so out of anger and resentment as well as desire. As soon as Sethe begins to forget her baby, Beloved can "fly apart," lose teeth and other body parts representing that "disremembering" really means dismembering the past.

Christianity is an important but incomplete religion for this community of ex-slaves and their children. It is not a religion that helps them remember their dead. Nor does Christianity fully help this community of people live with their memories of slavery and the present reality of racist hatred against their skin color. When Denver asks Sethe what she prays for, while the ghostly white dress kneels with her, Sethe replies, "I don't pray anymore. I just talk" (35). Presumably she talks to her dead ancestors, as an act of remembrance, though this is obviously not enough for Beloved. The overall necessity that each character feels to remember

the dead (even Paul D who has to open that tin can rusted shut inside), is a sign of their dedication to the African traditions of ancestral remembrance that Mbiti describes.

Baby Suggs also proclaims the need for an alternative religious practice geared specifically for ex-slaves and their descendants. Her "parishioners" call her "Baby Suggs, holy," and she leads them to a clearing to show them how to own and love their skin. This clearing is a place of solace that the entire community claims as their communal property; soon Sethe's yard will replace this clearing once she expels all the painful memories of the past. But the clearing is a place where Baby Suggs is free to preach her message and the community is free to listen to her: "She did not tell them to clean up their lives or to go and sin nor more. She did not tell them they were the blessed of the earth, its inheriting meek or its glorybound pure" (88). Unlike these commands and pronouncements often heard after a Christian service, Baby Suggs, holy preaches a religion of self-love and self-ownership. This "unchurched preacher" brings her message to "AME's and Baptists, Holinesses and Sanctified, the Church of the Redeemer and the Redeemed. Uncalled, unrobed, unannointed, she let her great heart beat in their presence" (87). And when the weather warmed up, Baby Suggs, holy brought her message outside. "Here," Baby Suggs holy begins, in this here place, we flesh; flesh that weeps,

laughs flesh that dances on bare feet in grass.

Love it. Love it hard. Yonder they do not love your flesh. They despise it...No more do they love the skin on your back. Yonder they flay it...You got to love it, you! This is flesh I'm talking about here.

Flesh that needs to be loved. (88)

Baby Suggs holy teaches the importance of loving and adorning black skin. She teaches Sethe this lesson as she baptizes her and invites her into a new life of freedom. She teaches the black community how to love their skin and to build their identities and strength on that self-love.

It is almost as if Baby Suggs, in the role of the "woman to ask" who has been missing for Celie, Janie, Helga as well as Sethe, is preaching these words to future generations of female characters in African American novels. Morrison, who in her consciousness of those who precede her could be answering the needs of all those previously written characters by creating Baby Suggs, "the woman to ask." Each woman, Linda, Celie, Janie, Helga, and Sethe yearn to own themselves and to mark that ownership with the loving act of dress and adornment. Baby Suggs reminds those women who have lived through slavery and who are indirectly affected by it to love their children because she was not able to so. She reminds them of the importance of a community, and a remembrance of the past. She reminds them that it is

important to have a house, a garden, or a clearing where they can individually rejoice in their own self-ownership. Also, this place should be a place to remember those who have died, and to build a community with those who are still alive. But the most important thing to realize is that the body is to be cherished and loved. She has to claim herself, for as Sethe ponders, "freeing yourself was one thing; claiming ownership of that freed self was another" (95). Paul D. reminds Sethe of this when she is distraught about the pain she has been through and about Beloved (Sethe's history of enslavement) leaving her. In response to Sethe's statement, "She left me...She was my best thing," he says, "You your best thing, Sethe. You are" (273). By understanding that her own free self is her "best thing," Sethe claims ownership of her freed self. This is a lesson that each character: Helga, Janie, Celie, and Sethe must learn by the end of their journeys if they are to successfully claim ownership of themselves.

Sethe's character shows how necessary it is to face the past and present when looking toward a future identity. She constantly links the past to the present so that she can secure a future for herself and for her surviving daughters--those characters found in African American women's fiction. The lessons that Sethe learns from her experiences with motherhood, history, community, an alternative religion, and love and adornment of her own skin bring her to her own

Promised Land where she is free to cherish her own identity. Each woman in these five African American women novels, not just Sethe, learns this same lesson through a similar process of self-definition, self-ownership, self-adornment, and self-identification. All of these female characters find a way to own their own bodies and space, and this is all represented in how they dress and adorn their bodies. Dress becomes a ritual that marks self-ownership, peace, and the formation of a true twentieth-century African American female identity.

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After receiving her degree, Kirsten will be moving with her fiancé, Rande Daykin, whom she met in graduate school, to Massachusetts to begin a career in teaching. She will continue her pursuit of learning and plans to enter Law School to study Civil Rights and International Law in 2002. Kirsten is a candidate for the Master of Arts degree in English from The University of Maine in May, 2001.