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Tracing Matrilineality in Alice Walker's *Meridian* and Gloria Naylor's *Mama Day*

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Abstract

In the article "Tracing Matrilineality in Alice Walker's *Meridian* and Gloria Naylor's *Mama Day*", I will explore the Black Nationalist assumption that motherhood is the sole pillar of communal life, crucial to the physical and cultural survival of black communities through a consideration of Alice Walker's *Meridian* (1976) and Gloria Naylor's *Mama Day* (1988). Notably, individuality and motherhood are locked in opposition in Black Nationalist discourse, as motherhood entailed a sacrifice of selfhood to a degree. Black Nationalists expected their mothers to place their needs behind those of everyone else. I want to examine the role that Meridian, Mrs. Hills, Cocoa and Miranda played as mothers in the cultural construction of their communities. I would like to examine the degree to which these maternal figures are depicted as cornerstones of black resistance and custodians of life-sustaining African American traditions, as well as how these novels position them as individuals. I will attempt to answer the question of how the marginalized flees from systems of subjugation and attempts to dissolve the strictures of white supremacist imperialist patriarchy. In addition, I would like to explore the alternative modes of being available to Meridian's and Cocoa's due to their non-communal or even anti-communal choices.

Keywords:
Motherhood,
American literature,
community,
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Alice Walker'ın *Meridian*'ı ile Gloria Naylor'un *Mama Day*'inde Anaerkilliğin İzini Sürmek

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Özet

Bu makale, Alice Walker'in *Meridian* (1976) ve Gloria Naylor'un *Mama Day* (1988) romanlarını göz önünde bulundurarak, Siyahi toplumlarda fiziksel ve kültürel açıdan hayati önem taşıyan anneliğin toplumsal yaşamın tek direği olduğuna dair Siyahi Milliyetçi varsayımı irdelemeyi amaçlar. Özellikle, bireysellik ve annelik Siyah Milliyetçi söylemde birbiriyle çelişen iki olgudur, çünkü annelik bir dereceye kadar benlikten fedakarlık etmeyi gerektirir. Siyahi Milliyetçiler, annelerin kendi ihtiyaçlarını diğer herkesin ihtiyacı karşılandıktan sonra karşılamaları beklentisindeydiler. Bu çalışmada, Meridian, Mrs. Hills, Cocoa ve Miranda'nın toplumlarının kültürel inşasında anneler olarak oynadıkları roller incelenecektir. Bu anne figürlerinin Siyahi direnişin temel taşları ve yaşamı sürdüren Afro-Amerikan geleneklerinin koruyucuları olarak temsil edilişleri ve bu romanların onları bireyler olarak nasıl konumlandırdığı incelenecektir. Marjinalleştirilmişlerin boyun eğdirme sistemlerinden nasıl kaçtıkları ve beyaz üstünlükçü emperyalist ataerkilliğin kısıtlamalarını nasıl çözmeye çalıştıkları tartışılacaktır. Ek olarak, bu çalışmada, Meridian ve Cocoa'ların toplumsal olmayan ve hatta toplumsal-karşıtı seçimleri nedeniyle varoluşsal alternatif biçimleri incelenecektir.

Anahtar Kelimeler:
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Amerikan edebiyatı,
Topluluk,
Siyahi milliyetçilik.

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> "When she tried to defend herself by telling him the children were just frightened of him because he was drunk he beat her senseless. That was the he knocked out a tooth. He knocked out one and loosened one or two more. She wanted to leave him, but there was no place to go" (Walker, *The Third Life of Grange Copeland* 32).

In this essay "tracing matrilineality", I will explore the Black Nationalist assumption that motherhood is the sole pillar of communal life, crucial to the physical and cultural survival of black communities through a consideration of Alice Walker's *Meridian* (1976) and Gloria Naylor's *Mama Day* (1988). It is confirmed by Simeon-Jones that black mothers "serve[d] as a pillar […] in the community" (90). Notably, individuality and motherhood are locked in opposition in Black Nationalist discourse, as motherhood entailed a sacrifice of selfhood to a degree. As Hill Collins affirms black nationalists expected their mothers "to place their needs behind those of everyone else" (174). I want to examine the role that Meridian, Mrs. Hills, Cocoa and Miranda played as mothers in the cultural construction of their communities. I would like to examine the degree to which these maternal figures are depicted as cornerstones of black resistance and custodians of life-sustaining African American traditions, as well as how these novels position them as individuals. I chose to focus in this chapter on *Meridian* and *Mama Day*, community-oriented, matrilineal narratives because they monumentalize and dignify black women and their culture. I borrow the term 'matrilineal narrative' from Tess Cosslett who defines it as a narrative that "either tells the stories of several generations of women at once, or which shows how the identity of the central character is crucially formed by her female ancestors" (7).[1] Therefore, female bonding across and within one's generation is central. The women at the center of the narratives I have chosen to investigate, exist in a state of conflict vis-a- vis their community that queries the ordering practice of Black Nationalism the privileging of collective self-definition. Black women are particularly vulnerable to the regulating impulse of the communal, especially in a nationalist context. For these black mothers, to be member of a community is "to be posed in exteriority, having to do with an outside in the very intimacy of an inside" (Nancy xxvi). Ultimately, their membership to the community makes them feel exposed.

I identify Walker and Naylor as Black Women Renaissance writers. Black Women Renaissance writers began writing in the 1970s and reached their peak in the 1980s. BWR narratives paid homage to black women and specifically to black mothers because of their quintessential role in the cultural construction of their communities. By commemorating strong black foremothers and by honoring their contribution to their respective communities, Walker and Naylor imparted their imprint on black cultural nationalism. Cultural nationalism is more directly

[1] "In feminist matrilineal narratives there are two time-frames going on at once. There is a synchronic horizontal plane, on which the generations of women are united by a common femaleness; and a diachronic, vertical axis of descent, leading back into the past and forward into the future" (Cosslett 7).

relevant to my discussion due to its palpable impact on the black literature of the 1960s and 1970s.[2] Walker and Naylor's focus on female matrilineal tradition could be seen as a response to the masculine nationalist tradition of the previous decades, underscored by the Black Power Movement in America, disrupting it. Masculine nationalist tradition valued women solely for their services to the patriarchal black family, castigating them as a "womb" of black fighters (Cleaver 208). Robert Staples also argued that "from her [a black woman's] womb have come the revolutionary warriors of our time" (346). Black nationalists saw value only in reproductive femininity. According to Robert J. Patterson, all they wanted was black women to give birth to "(male) babies (warriors) for the revolution as a way to consign black women to the role of mother and force their economic dependence" (93). In addition, Hill Collins states that motherhood "working on behalf of the new Black nation" was considered to be the ultimate benchmark of women's value for the African American community (174).

The themes central to matrifocal nationalism that will be explored in this chapter are the passing down of knowledge of black resistance from generation to generation, the exploration of diverse forms of mothering and the issue of female bonding. In the 1970s, black female writers were in dialogue with the tenets of black cultural nationalism. Their goal was to provide "unbiased and full characterizations of black women", whereas black nationalists aimed at depicting black communities solely positively (Dubey 2). The BWR female writers of the 1970s aimed at constructing fully-fledged psychological profiles of female characters to reveal the full nature of black female subjectivity. The BWR novels written in the 1970s depicted black communities realistically on the most part, introducing a "productive interplay of differences" to "subvert ideological celebration of a unified black community" (Dubey 153). The communities described were in the most part replete with anxiety about the roles of women as "Obedient Daughter[s]," "Devoted [Wives]," and "Adoring Mother[s]" (Walker, *Meridian* 19). BWR novels of the 1970s disheveled these assumptions about black womanhood, "imagin[ing] a different script for women" (McDowell, "The self in bloom" 103). BWR writers explored the parameters of community belonging. They declined to be bound by the black cultural nationalist assumption of women being "degraded matriarchs who "emasculated" black men" (Penier 5).

Matrifocal Nationalism and the Fear of Disinheritance in the 1980s.

According to Gloria Wade-Gayles, the BWR novels of the 1980s "recite black matrilineage" (8). Contrary to the 1970s, when black motherhood had been subject to relentless scrutiny, the 1980s novels were "packed full of female achievement" (Ogunyemi 29) that was the effect of "motherwork" (Hill Collins). These novels lavished praise on black mothers and

[2] For the sake of brevity and convenience, I have used the term black nationalism throughout the chapter to refer to cultural, and not revolutionary, nationalism.

foremothers, evoking a womanist ideology that sprang from African dreams, myths, histories and memories – what Toni Morrison called the "discredited knowledge" of black people.[3] BWR novels of the 1980s firmly placed motherhood and matriliny at the center of communal and national life; they used what Elleke Boehmer called "a strategic matrifocal nationalism" to forge unity and provide continuity between ancestral and modern times (101). Home was rendered as the central locus of the reproduction of black culture and black foremothers its guardians. Female writers of the 1980s "celebrated matrilineal roots, emphasized the iconic status of the Black mother and underlined the importance of female networks" (Penier 3).

Whereas novels of the 1970s depicted the devastating repercussions of structural oppression on black motherhood, the 1980s novels reinstated black motherhood as a site of possibility. In other words, in the 1970s "female possibility" was viewed as "massacred on the site of motherhood" (Rich 13) whereas the novels of the 1980s pose a different treatment of black motherhood, as the trope of "motherwork" was re-evaluated (Hill Collins 213). A possible reason for this ideological shift could be "the pressures of negative publicity" in reciprocation to the unfavorable depiction of black motherhood and specifically of the black community in the novels of the 1970s (McDowell, "The self in bloom" 135). BWR literary criticism of the 1980s embraced Walker's theories about the role played by black mothers in insuring black cultural and political survival and also praised the strength of the mother-daughter bond. Braxton argues that black mothers "remain sources of consciousness and personal strength: models of independence, self-reliance, perseverance, and self-determination" ("Afra-American Culture" xxv). What I find troubling is that critics such as Braxton, argued that it is only through the experience of mothering that black women can form their sense of self. The implication of such assertions is that the black women who do not have a child or do not mother a child, are denied membership in the community. Only if they embrace the role of the mother, they can be accepted. Bell Hooks is also concerned about this legacy of marginalization and claims that womanists were "promot[ing] monolithic notions of black female experience" based on suffering (232).

The questions that I will attempt to answer in this chapter are to what extent are mothers central or peripheral to identity formation, both for the individual and the collective? How does the marginalized flee from systems of subjugation and attempts to dissolve the strictures of white supremacist imperialist patriarchy? What alternative modes of being do Meridian's and Cocoa's non-communal or even anti-communal choices suggest? Ultimately how do such freedom practices disrupt Black Nationalist theorizations of the individual and the community? To what extent is the mother-figure central in social and political resistance? In order to answer these questions, it is

[3] See Trudier Harris for a detailed discussion of the deployment of culture-bearing women and the transmission of popular memory. Harris, Trudier. *Fiction and Folklore: The Novels of Toni Morrison.* U of Tennessee P, 1991.

important to consider "what choices are available to black Women outside their own society's approval and what are the risks of individualism in a determinedly individualistic" community? (Glover xiii). I will examine how Walker and Naylor construct, deconstruct, and reconstruct motherhood and the significance of those gestures for the political implications of their writing.

I would also like to engage with the question raised by Bell Hooks who argued that "black females must 'invent' selves - what kind of self?" (224). I argue that this question has been overlooked and mostly remains unanswered. Even though "black women [were portrayed] being wild in resistance, confronting barriers that impede self-actualization" this new self is rarely defined (Hooks 224). Departing from hooks who thought that BWR writers were "not able to express the wider, more radical dimensions of themselves, in sustained and fruitful ways" (Hooks 224), I will argue that these black mothers developed a new form of feminist consciousness, creating what I call an oppositional Black aesthetic countering patriarchy. What I intend to do is question and rethink how the black mother's positioning can be understood both in parts and as a whole. A process of interrogating this 'new' self that hooks proclaims will enrich hooks' quest of radical subjectivity. I want to extend her idea of selfhood by moving away from merely interrogating the individual's self-awareness to examine the communal aspect of the interaction of mothers. To what degree the idea that "the individual story, the individual experience cannot but ultimately involve the whole laborious telling of the experience of the collectivity itself" applies to motherhood narratives of the 1980s (Jameson 85-86)? It is interesting to investigate whether this paradigm of the individual's experience as a collective experience is rather an overgeneralization, a vast homogenization of the nationalist experience.

Personal and political subjectivity in *Meridian*.

Set during the U.S. civil rights movement, Alice Walker's second novel *Meridian* is the coming-of-age story of Meridian Hill. In general in her novels, Walker examines the dynamics of being a black woman. In *Meridian,* Walker explores the notions of individual autonomy, self-reliance and self-realization central in the tradition of the Bildungsroman. She accounts for Meridian's relationship with her mother in her effort to find her identity and develop a completeness of being.

Existing literary criticism focuses on the novel's political context and points towards Walker's feminist critique of Black Nationalist discourse. Karen F. Stein views *Meridian* as "a fictionalized political essay, with the result that the inwardness of the characters is sometimes sacrificed" (130). In "Teaching Alice Walker's Meridian : Civil Rights According to Mothers," Brenda O. Daly states that *Meridian* "tells the story of the Civil Rights Movement from the point of

view of a mother - or, more accurately, from the point of view of a variety of different mothers, old and young, white and black, violent and nonviolent, self-denying and self-defining" (240). Her reading focuses on the maternal discourse that informs the novel and draws a careful distinction among the different constructions of motherhood in the novel. However, what I find troubling is that she ultimately essentializes Meridian's identity, castigating her solely as a figure who "mothers the community", overlooking her involvement to the Civil Rights movement (Daly 253). In the same vein, in her reading of *Meridian*, Susan Danielson focuses on the civil rights movement, casting aside Meridian's "personal development and salvation" (Danielson 317). She perceives Meridian's subjectivity as solely linked to the rediscovery of her personhood through her membership to her community. In my reading, I do not wish to set an opposition between Meridian's personal and political transformation which seems to privilege personal subjectivity over political praxis but I would like to show instead the connection between these two discourses and how they inform each other.

In the beginning of the novel, Meridian is in a state of decay. She is experiencing dizzy spells and has no hair. Her face is "wasted and rough, the skin a sallow, unhealthy brown, with pimples across her forehead and on her chin. Her eyes were glassy and yellow and did not seem to focus at once. Her breath, like her clothes, was sour" (Walker, *Meridian* 25). One of the most prominent obstacles that Meridian faces in her quest of selfhood is the traditional images of women. She struggles because "she lives in a society that domesticates conformity that censures individual expression, especially for women" (McDowell, "The self in bloom 263). Nevertheless, she flourishes into a prototype of individual autonomy. In her community, the traditional image of the 'mummy' is deeply valued. She exists in sharp contrasts to the image of the "Obedient Daughter", "Devoted Wife" and "Adoring Mother" (Walker, *Meridian* 20). This image of woman as "a mindless body, a sex creature, something to hang false hair and nails on" is challenged by Meridian who is a human rights activist (Walker, *Meridian* 70).

Mrs. Hills, Meridian's mother is one of these women who pay attention solely to appearances, as she embodies the devoted wife type. "Her children were spotless wherever they went. In their stiff, almost inflexible garments, they were enclosed in the starch of her anger, and had to keep their distance to avoid providing the soggy wrinkles of contact that would cause her distress" (Walker, *Meridian* 79). Mrs. Hill does not acknowledge her children's emotional needs, instead they become "stiff, almost inflexible", keeping their distance from their mother and from the rest of the community. Especially Meridian, is emotionally unavailable. She is basically left motherless because her mother is psychologically incapable of mothering her. The mother embodies Adrienne Rich's assertion that "the loss of the daughter to the mother, is the essential

female tragedy" (Rich 240).

Meridian does not receive the fundamental knowledge about sex from her mother. She only learns about it when she gets raped in a local funeral home and subsequently forms a relationship with Eddie because she needs to feel protected from the men surrounding her. Their relationship ultimately fails because Meridian does not enjoy having sex with him. Sex for Meridian is not pleasureable nor does it signify self-fulfillment. Eddie complains about Meridian that her legs are "like somebody starched them shut" (Walker, *Meridian* 57). He forms an affair with another woman because of his wife's disinterest in sex. Meridian views sex as a conduit primarily linked to procreation and subsequently motherhood as a "ball and chain" (Walker, *Meridian* 63). Motherhood further signifies for her the means through which she becomes further cut off from life.

Have you stolen anything?

The opening chapters' events commence Walker's textual construction of black female subjectivity. Meridian is a daughter, however not an obedient one and a mother who denounces motherhood because the demands of the role of the mummy are stifling. It is in her role as daughter that Meridian's independence surfaces. She views her mother as "black motherhood personified" due to the self-sacrifices she makes (Meridian 97). For her insurgent self-awareness to surface, Meridian needs to break free from her mother's possessive hold. She aims freeing herself from her mother's shadow, a "willing know-nothing, a woman of ignorance" (Meridian 30). She discredits her mother's personal choices as she believes that she "was not a woman who should have had children" (Meridian 39). Even though Mrs. Hill was a woman who valued her personal independence as a schoolteacher and wanted "more of life to happen to her", she felt as if something was missing, as if she should have had a "secret mysterious life" (Meridian 39). She became married to Mr. Hill, Meridian's father because she thought that this way she would experience some excitement in her personal life. She perceived motherhood as a distraction and for this reason passes on to her daughter, Meridian, a sense of guilt.

While many critics have pointed out the theme of guilt as the driving force of Meridian's actions, I would like to argue instead that Meridian's mother never forgive "her community, her family, the whole world, for not warning her against children" is herself a victim of the myth of black motherhood[4] (Meridian 40). Mrs. Hill is aware of "the fact [that mothers] were dead, living enough for their children" (Meridian 51). Meridian becomes aware through the discursive construction of black motherhood that it robs a woman of her life, both literally and figuratively speaking. Meridian realizes that she has stolen something. She felt guilty because she realized that

[4] Barbara Christian uses this term – myth of black motherhood- to expose the essentialization of black women as "earth mothers", women who sacrifice themselves in order for their children to be able to thrive (465). Other literary critics and scholars have also used this expression.

she was “stealing her mother’s serenity […] shattering her emerging self” however, she did not how (Meridian 51).

Even though Meridian denounces Mrs. Hill’s mothering abilities, her own experiences align with those of her mother. “The ambiguous designation [of motherhood] applies equally to and beyond [Meridian and her mother], universalizing and specifying simultaneously” (Collins 178). At the age of seventeen, Meridian is left on her own to consider what to do with her life and her child's life. She was forced to get married because she got pregnant however, struggles to embody the role of the devoted wife. Due to her involvement in activism, she earns a scholarship for Saxton college. However, in order to attend college she would have to give up her child for adoption. When Meridian says no to motherhood and decides to give her baby for adoption, she offends and loses her mother, her family, and her community. She feels guilty for leaving her baby, and cannot adequately explain why. Meridian's rejection of the role of motherhood could be viewed as a denaturalization of the legacy of "enslaved women [who] had been made miserable by the sale of their children […] and the daughters of these enslaved women [who] had thought their greatest blessing from 'Freedom' was that it meant they could keep their own children" (Dubey 91). Women during slavery did everything within their power to have their children with them. They were willing to even sacrifice their own lives for the sake of their children. They were feeling morally obliged to take on the sole responsibility for their children. Meridian’s situation is different from that of her foremothers as in her case giving away her child signifies freedom. She feels guilty about giving away her child yet acknowledges that “she had saved a small person's life" (Meridian 76). She knows that he would have more opportunities in life by being mothered by someone else but this does not acquit her of her guilt. She feels "condemned, consigned to penitence for life" (Meridian 77). Meridian makes the choice to protect her child by giving it away, she adopts a moral stance but ironically she feels alienated from her foremothers’ legacy, even though she is herself is willing to give her life for her child.

Meridian feels unworthy of her maternal history because she gives away her own son whereas, black women had fought to keep their own children. She is aware of her foremothers’ hardships – as they have been slaves and were often denied their children even though they would do anything for them. Meridian is aware of the gap between her foremothers’ endorsement of motherhood and her own ambivalent thoughts about this institution. Meridian’s mother thinks of freedom as slave women do; as having the ability to “keep [your] own children” (*Meridian* 91). She believes that “as far as she knew,” she was “the only member” of “an unworthy minority, for which there was no precedent” (Meridian 91). Meridian is tormented by the memory of the slave mothers who were forced to sacrifice their own needs, starve themselves to death in order to

provide nourishment to their children. She believes that these women "had persisted in bringing them all (the children, the husband, the family, the race) to a point far beyond where she, in her mother's place, her grandmother's place, her great-grandmother's place would have stopped" (Meridian 121). Mothers who need to live a life full of personal sacrifices are seen as the norm. Motherhood is depicted in a way that limits the options available to women. These women are valued because they give up their independence, their personal life in order to raise their children.

Meridian feels that she cannot confront her mother alone to inform her about her decision, so she brings with her two women that function as her supporters; Delores Jones, a movement worker and Nelda Henderson, an old classmate of hers. These women have different qualities, yet support the same cause. Delores is intrepid, exclaiming to Meridian that "You have a right to go to college" (Meridian 83). Nelda shares her own personal experiences with Meridian. She was forced to help her mother to take care of her younger siblings. She became pregnant when she turned fourteen years old as she was not adequately informed about sex. Not even Mrs. Hill, her neighbor did not inform her adequately about sex. In *Meridian*, no adult talks about motherhood and the changes it inflicts in one's life because sex remains taboo. The community's attitude is reflected in the statement "Everybody else that slips up like you did *bears* it" (Meridian 84). Mrs. Hill accuses Meridian about her decision to give her child for adoption, exclaiming that "It's just selfishness. You ought to hang your head in shame. I have six children […] though I never wanted to have any. And I raised every one myself" (Meridian 75). She shames her daughter for her decision even though she is aware of the opportunity that opens up for her. Meridian is having herself some conflicting thoughts and is second-guessing her decision after arguing with her mother but ultimately gives away her child.

In the chapter "The Happy Mother," Walker describes the teenager Meridian's experience of motherhood as slavery. Although she was told by everyone that she was an exemplary young mother, it took "everything she had to tend to the child" (Meridian 63). Meridian is well "aware of patriarchy's desire to 'encase' her, to 'process' her according to the secular code of the media" (Pifer 83). Meridian rejects embodying the figure of the happy mother as it would stunt her growing individualism. Meridian starts thinking about committing suicide and considers self-harm because she cannot enjoy the experience of motherhood. She does not have the necessary resources to raise her child and cannot tend for her child's needs. No one is aware of Meridian's feelings of inadequacy that led her to contemplate suicide as a viable choice because she feels excluded from her community.

The Saxon Type

Meridian needs to forsake any memory she has about having sex in order to be part of the university's community. "The knowledge of sex was only acceptable when tempered by the institution of marriage" (Meridian 111). She wanted to maintain this façade especially in front of Truman, a sophisticated Black man who she starts dating because she is aware that "had she approached him on the street dragging her child with her by the hand, he would never have glanced at her" (Meridian 89). She did not even stand a chance to form a relationship with him if he had known that she had given birth to a child. Mrs. Hill castigates Meridian as morally reprehensible uttering "I always thought you were a good girl and all the time you were fast" reflecting the views of the wider community (Meridian 87). Even the doctor who performs an abortion on Meridian assumes that Meridian is 'fast' to be in need of such an operation. He angrily states "I could tie your tubes […] if you'll let me in on some of all this extracurricular activity" (Meridian 112). Meridian needs to be viewed "as chaste and pure as the driven snow" at college (Meridian 89). The emphasis at Saxon was on form, and the preferred 'form' was that of the school girl who "knew and practiced all the proper social rules" (Meridian 95). The concepts of Ladyhood and chastity are contradictory and therefore, Meridian rejects both. She distinguishes herself as a "willful, sinful girl" (Meridian 94).

The extent to which Saxon upholds tradition in its emphasis on form, is dramatized in the account of Meridian's choice to become a substitute mother for a pregnant homeless girl with learning difficulties known as the Wild Child. This decision of hers comes in contrast to her earlier decision to abandon her own son. When Meridian sees the so called Wild Child, a thirteen year old girl for the first time, she goes on a death-like trance. She started hearing "a voice that cursed her existence; an existence that could not live up to the standard of motherhood that had gone before" (Meridian78). This was the moment that led to the beginning of her spiritual degeneration. She feels obliged to help her even though she embodies the opposite of every ideal that Saxon represents. The Wild Child is independent and unkempt, a threat towards Saxton's social etiquette. The house mother "the only person in the honors house that Wile Chile trembles and cowers at" confronts the girl telling her that she cannot stay there any longer as "this is a school for young ladies" (Meridian 37). Frightened by the house mother, Wild Child storms out of college and gets run over by a speeding car. The girl could not have survived anyway in that environment due to her independent spirit. The Wild Child does not get buried on campus because such an action was not tolerated by its administrators. When the other members of the Saxton community feel that they need to rebel, they are so compelled in maintaining their membership to this group that they do not know how to do it. Rioters for Wild Child's death destroyed the statue of Sojourner truth, the

most potentially subversive object on campus. It should be noted that while figures such as Sojourner Truth provide Meridian with significant strategies for coping with everyday life, her own mother, Mrs. Hill fails to do so.

Wild Child's death signifies Meridian's transition from motherhood to a subjectivity that revolves around her life as a student centered on her political activism. She explores the alternatives available to her during the civil rights movement and explores what it means to be a mother not just in a biological sense but in a figurative way as well, in terms of justice. By shedding her prescribed "happy mother" role and standing up for her own needs, Meridian takes the first steps toward becoming a "revolutionary petunia."[5] She stops living by others' standards, learns to bloom for herself, as her rebellious acts will alienate her from the rest of society. Meridian commits herself to the civil rights struggle and disengages from motherhood, a deterrent to her growing individuality. Meridian's decision to become a motherless revolutionary suggests that "there is a forgotten tradition of black women who should be valued for their recalcitrant spirit that puts them on a par with revolutionary black men" (Penier 114). Meridian, who refuses to have children, is a "symbol of a non-reproductive black femininity that refuses to be bound by reproductive determinism" (Penier 114).

In the chapter "Battle Fatigue", contrary to conventional notions of womanhood, Meridian looks like and acts like a male. She has little hair, she wears a cap and does not conform to conventional notions of femininity. I would like to argue that Meridian experiences a queer subversion of identity, as she escapes her position as a woman. She exemplifies Toni Cade Bambara's assertion that "You find your Self in destroying illusions, smashing myths ... being responsible to some truth, to the struggle. That entails [...] cracking through the veneer of this sick society's definition of 'masculine' and 'feminine'" (108). Meridian exposes leadership qualities, typically associated with males. Although she is hindered by police men from completing her mission, "she bravely marches on […] kick[ing] open the door", leaving every man staring at her (21). A symbolic inversion of roles occurs in this scene and Meridian triumphs over tradition and patriarchal authority.

She is striving towards creating an androgynous, fluid self, deconstructing the prescribed roles stifling her personal growth. She turns into a "man/woman person with a shaved part in close -cut hair, a man's blunt face and thighs, a woman's breast" a woman who helps others "to get used to using their voice" and is not accountable to anyone (Meridian 217). Despite the hardships she has faced, Meridian is able to bring to the forefront the truth of her personal discovery. Meridian

[5] I borrowed this term from Walker's poem 'The Nature of This Flower Is to Bloom' in which she notes: "Rebellious. / Against the Elemental Crush. / A Song of Color/ Blooming / For Deserving Eyes/ Blooming Gloriously/ For its Self. / Revolutionary Petunia" ("Revolutionary Petunias" 70).

"slouches off the victim role to reveal her true powerful and heroic identity" (Pearson and Pope 13). Meridian represents change, finding her own route instead of being an imitative marcher.

Ultimately, Meridian does not decide to resolve her problems by dying. In order to avoid being "the tragic hero", she accepts the sacredness of her own life. As Barbara Christian argues:

> "As many radical feminists blamed motherhood for the waste in women's lives and saw it as a dead end for a woman, Walker insisted on a deeper analysis: She did not present motherhood itself as restrictive. It is so because of the little value society places on children, especially black children, on mothers, especially black mothers, on life itself. In the novel, Walker acknowledged that a mother in this society is often buried alive, walled away from her own life, brick by brick." Yet the novel is based on Meridian's insistence on the sacredness of life" (Christian 90).

Meridian does not object to mothers bearing children, or children themselves but she denounces the role that women are expected to portray once they become mothers. She rejects the figure of the black mother who needs to sacrifice her individual personality and concerns and solely live for her children. The only way Meridian can escape this unwanted role is to leave her child and distance herself from her family, coming to terms with her mother's disapproval. She flees the symbolic death of being killed by patriarchy's standards of the obedient daughter and the devoted wife. She transgresses the bounds of sexism and asserts herself against racist patriarchal hegemony, rather than remaining in the margins.

On the black mother's identity; the case of Miranda (Mama Day)

Gloria Naylor's *Mama Day* revolves around the story of the descendants of a black slave woman named Sapphira Wade. Sapphira Wade's descendants, Miranda also known as Mama Day and Abigail her sister, are Willow Springs' protectors. Most critics have primarily focused on the themes of cultural inheritance and ancestral belonging overlooking the issue of motherhood in *Mama Day*. They center their conversations on cultural identity and overlook Miranda Day's role as a mother. In ""The Whole Picture' in Gloria Naylor's *Mama Day*," Susan Meisenhelder argues that Naylor drafts a love story that "deals with the issue of maintaining black cultural identity in the face of attempts by the white world to order, control, and define black people" (405). In the same line of arguing, Nagueyalti Warren points out that the story focuses on the love affair between George and Cocoa and exposes the tension among the individual versus the community. Both critics place their attention on the primacy of George and Cocoa's relationship, two individuals who struggle to find balance among their communal belonging and personal longings. On the one hand, George has been orphaned at a very young age by his mother, a prostitute and grows up adopting Western

ideas. Cocoa on the other hand, also orphaned by her deceased mother, grows up being surrounded by a group of women and her value system is aligned with her African heritage. George and Cocoa's marriage represents the union of the two different value systems. As W.E.B. Du Bois explained in *The Souls of Black Folk*, black people in America had to face a sense of twoness. He argued that "one ever feels his twoness- an American a Negro; two souls, two thoughts, two unreconciled strivings; two warring ideals in one dark body, whose dogged strength alone keeps it from being torn asunder" (215). This double consciousness prevented them from seeing themselves clearly therefore they form two separate identities; one self that among the public and one self among other African Americans. I would like to argue that this merging is best exemplified by Miranda, widely known as Mama Day. Miranda Day, has been overlooked in academic discourse, yet I submit that she must be the primary character in discussion and therefore, she is at the center of my discussion. I would like to explore the difficulty she is facing finding balance among the part of herself created by her community and the part created by the individual. She is trying to find a way to balance the demands of an identity that calls for allegiance to community and heritage and at the same time for allegiance to individuality. I do not wish to eradicate the primacy of the concerns of critics about cultural belonging but I wish to use their point of view as a departure point to consider to what degree black women maintained their cultural heritage, part of their communal belonging and to what degree they shifted their focus on their individuality. Mama Day is a figure that "functions as an illustration of the psychological tightrope that black people must walk in the creation of their identity" combining her individual needs with her communal positioning (Spears 111).

I want to argue that Miranda's individual standing outweighs her collective standing as Naylor presents to us the pull of the individual in the depiction of her character. Mama Day is the granddaughter of Sapphira Wade's seventh-son, John Paul. She is known by the islanders as Mama Day and she is the last direct descendent of Sapphira Wade, the founder of Willow Springs who is said to have killed her master Bascombe Wade, father of her seven children and returned to Africa walking across the ocean. Miranda is the leader of the Willow Springs community now. More specifically, she is a doctor, a healer and also a midwife, she protects her community from the threats it faces from white lawmen and land developers but most importantly, she is a legacy bearer, keeping the memory of her foremother who has given the people their freedom. The identity assigned to her is important because "of her birthright and because of their very real need for someone to help maintain their sense of self" (Spears 113). Her own mother has abandoned her at a young age after the loss of Peace, her baby. Miranda loses the opportunity to be mothered and this creates an emotional void. She cannot understand why her mother gave her up and gasps

"but I was your child, too" (Naylor 88). Her mother's choice to leave her due to personal reasons, forces Miranda to fight for herself and her sister from a very young age. Her mother's individualistic choice has scared her in the long term, as when she has the opportunity to experience emotional proximity with George, with whom she has fallen in love, she pushes him away. Even though she wants to run away with him because she is in love with him, she refuses to do so because she is aware of her responsibilities towards the other members of her community. She tells him "How can I go with you? […] One foot before the other, he told her; a voice dancing on the fading night wind" (Naylor 89). Naylor interjects this scene in the narrative, to expose the keen understanding of romantic relationships that Mama Day has. In this occasion, Miranda had the strength to choose the community over the individual.

Ultimately, Miranda is revealed as an older woman who acknowledges that she cannot accomplish everything by herself. Mama Day is one of the most important mother figures in the island, who transmits her memories to the other members of her community. She is the matriarch of Willow Springs, a direct descendant of Sapphira Wade, a defiant figure, who rebels against her oppressor and ultimately kills him, getting a hold of his land for all the slaves of the island. She might not be able to remember Sapphira's name but she carries her memories through her body. "[C]ultural memory is grounded in a collective history that is enclosed on bodes that bear the physical and psychic scars of trauma. This memory is carried by black bodies as well as on the tongue through orality" (Lamoth 160). Sapphira Wade is Mama Day's foremother, as Mama Day is the daughter of the seventh son of Sapphira. She is a bearer of resistance and of the memory of her community's history. Her positioning as a twenty-first subject permits her to consciously assess and maintain her community's traditions. It is obvious that the community of Willow Springs views her as a mother-figure, but her role as mother is even more personal. Miranda is called "mama" although she does not have any children. She mothered her sister Abigail due to their mother's escape and subsequent breakdown, as she was not in a position to mother her daughters herself. Miranda reminisces that her childhood was "no time to be young. Little Mama. The cooking, the cleaning, the mending, the gardening for the woman who sat in the porch rocker twisting, twisting on pieces of thread… Being there for mama and child. For sister and child" (Naylor 88). She ponders "Why, even Abilgail called me Little Mama till she knew what it was to be one in her own right. Abigail's had three and I've had –Lord can't count'em- into the hundreds. Everybody's mama now" (Naylor 89). The need to take up the role of the mother emerged due to her obligation towards her community, her sister and her mother.

Miranda is "an archetypal mother *par excellence"* (Penier 90). Even though Miranda was not Cocoa's biological mother, her communal mothering was more important than merely experiencing

motherhood. Miranda **"**reject[ed] breeding in favor of mothering as a multivalent practice" (Thorsson 49). The BWR is abound with such "maternal archetype[s]" (Braxton, "Ancestral Presence" 303), with mothers whose role was to protect the younger generation. They often "[assume] the mythical proportions of the archetypal outraged mother" (Braxton, "Ancestral Presence" 304-5) to protect their children and nation. According to Washington, the black mother's "sense of herself [is] part of a link in generations of women" (161).

Cocoa is also in need of a mother and is subsequently mothered by Mama Day, who she perceives as her mother. She is mothered by Mama Day although being Abigail's granddaughter. Patricia Hill Collins has demonstrated the critical role that race plays in shaping ideas about motherhood. She has described how African American women have engaged in 'othermothering' – raising children alongside women-centred, community-based networks to make sure that the black community survives. In that context, motherhood was understood more as a communal rather than an individual responsibility.[6] Cocoa believes that Abigail and Mama Day make the perfect mother, as Abigail is comforting whereas Mama Day is organizing. Cocoa is the most appropriate candidate to preserve Sapphira's legacy. Cocoa is "best able to adapt to both environments", western and African (Lamoth 163). Mama Day is the figure that helps her realize that she is necessary for the preservation of the island's cultural tradition. Cocoa is reluctant to accept that her role as a cultural bearer. When she is sick, near to death Mama Day tries to help her heal through reminding her, her connection to the Western world and George. She argues that:

> "he believes in himself.. but she needs that belief buried in George. Of his own accord he has to hand it over to her. She needs his hands in hers… so she can connect it up with all the believing that had gone before. A single moment was all she asked, even a fingertip to touch hers here at the other place. So together they could be the bridge for Baby Girl to walk over" (Naylor 285).

Miranda understands that she is not capable to accomplish everything by herself, she is able to discern when she needs to ask for help. More specifically, when Cocoa is sick she seeks help from George, as she understands that "he's part of her" so in order to help Cocoa she needs to cooperate with him (Naylor 267). She does not act singularly in such crisis situations. She "does not take self-congratulatory stands [n]or [does she] seek to stand alone in the limelight (Spears 112). George helps Mama Day nurture Cocoa back to health and accept her role as a memory bearer. Her experience mirrors the African American women's strife to grapple with their double consciousness that forces them to choose between their individual identities and their communal

[6] Patricia Hill Collins, *Black Feminist Thought: Knowledge, Consciousness, and the Politics of Empowerment*, 2nd ed., Routledge, 2000, pp. 178-183. Also see Stanlie M. James, 'Mothering: A Possible Black Feminist Link to Social Transformation?'. *Theorizing Black Feminisms: The Visionary Pragmatism of Black Women*, edited by Stanlie M. James and Abena P. A. Busia. Routledge, 1993, pp. 44-54.

selves. The question that arises is should they disassociate with the communal aspect of their identity and tune in with their individuality or not? Should they sacrifice the needs of their family in order to tend to their personal professional aspirations or sacrifice instead their professional longings for the sake of their family?

African- American women were forced to make between their own needs and the needs of their families. These women were conflicted between catering to their own needs or sacrificing themselves for the sake of their family. This dilemma is ever-present in black women's communities. Frances Beale in "Double Jeopardy: To be Black and Female" confirms that those women "who feel that the most important thing that they can contribute to the black nation is children are doing themselves a great injustice" (149). She actively reaches out to women to join the workforce instead of merely "sitting at home reading bedtime stories" (149). Her call is not merely circumscribed by making a choice among family and self, but also by thinking through the categories of self and the community. I argue that the black woman is impelled to acknowledge the need of the community in shaping her own identity however, she does not have to choose the community to the exclusion of her own desires as Miranda does. I suggest that it is critical for her find a balance among the stipulations of the individual self and those of the community.

Quilting to sustain and transmit matrilineal heritage.

According to the family tree at the beginning of the novel, Cocoa is Abigail's granddaughter and Mama Day's grandniece, the last member of the matriarchal lineage of the Day family. Mama Day and her sister Abigail create for Cocoa a wedding quit which signifies the continuation of the Day line, not biologically but culturally this time. Mama Day chooses the double-ring pattern for Cocoa's wedding quilt, a difficult pattern to make: "From edges to center, the patterns had to twine around each other. It would serve her right if it took till next year, and it probably would" (Naylor 135). Mama Day denies settling for a simpler pattern when Abigail informs her that Cocoa does no mind and utters that this quilt "will be passed on to [her] great-grand nieces and nephews when it is time for them to marry. And since [she] won't be around to defend [her]self, [she] do[es]n't want them thinking [she] was a lazy old somebody who couldn't make a decent double-ring quilt" (Naylor 136). Therefore, Mama Day is sewing herself into the quilt, passing on her perseverance to the next generations. Even though the process of quilting most often involves the contribution of many women, Cocoa's quilt is special as it is sewn only by Mama Day and Abigail. Novels such as *Mama Day* celebrated multigenerational black families that were presided over by wise maternal figures, emphasizing "the unity of the tribe [and giving] a new twist on the family plot" (McDowell, "*The Changing Same"* 123).

Given that Mama Day and Abigail are the direct descendants Sapphire Wade, the history of all Day women must be stitched onto the quilt:

> "A bit of her Daddy's Sunday shirt is matched with Abigail's lace slip, the collar from Hope's graduation dress, the palm of Grace's baptismal gloves [...] corduroy from her uncles, broadcloth from her great-uncles. Her needle fastens the satin trim of Peace's receiving blanket to Cocoa's baby jumper to a pocket from her own gardening apron [...] [t]he front of [Cocoa's now deceased mother's] gingham shirtwaist" (Naylor 137).

Every member of the family is included in the quilt, even Cocoa's distant great-grandmother Ophelia and her mother whom has left her. From the way that the quilt is stitched, it is obvious that there is no hierarchy in the piecing of the fabrics, no borders between the center and the margins, as the scraps are overlapping. By stitching the pieces of the quilt together, she creates a cultural web of stories to be passed on from generation to generation. She wonders:

> "Could she take herself out? Could she take out Abigail? Could she take 'em all out and start again? With what? Miranda finishes the curve and runs her hands along the stitching. When it's done right, you can't tell where one ring ends and the other begins. It's like they ain't sewn at all, they grew up out of nowhere" (Naylor 137).

Mama Day decides therefore, to create the double-ring quilt because Cocoa is the last descendant of the Day lineage and she is paramount to the reconstruction of the Day women's stories. In addition, the quilt is the physical thread that connects black women across time and space. By owning the quilt, Cocoa continues this matrilineal lineage and preserves the cultural memory of the Day women. It is also important to note that the quilt is not only a way of making sure that the matrilineal lineage will be preserved but it is also a means through which the communal past can be altered in the future through temporal changes. The quilt is the trope that weaves together the past, the present, and the future.

Conclusion

In conclusion, motherhood was seen as the primary function expected of women during the 1960s and 1970s according to Back Nationalist discourse. Walker and Naylor support the view that such reductionism of women's value occurs because black women had little control over societal structures that interpret this aspect of their potentiality. They agree that motherhood is not merely an issue of the individual but rather an ideology that is interwoven into every aspect of society's structures. Through *Meridian* and *Mama Day* they expose the complexity of the ideologies surrounding motherhood. Part of the reason why I chose to analyze these two novels in this

chapter is because both Walker and Naylor share a profound belief in the value of women as individuals, whether they identify with the communal longing of motherhood or not. Through their novels, Walker and Naylor have challenged the predominant views about motherhood held by their respective societies. They have poised their personal experiences of motherhood, not hesitating to stand in opposition to the literary tradition that preceded them. *Meridian* and *Mama's Day* constitute a highly mediated responses to Black Nationalist utterances on motherhood. These texts "conduct a subtextual dialogue with black nationalist discourse, adopting the several strategies of directly contradicting, berating, appeasing, beguiling, and dodging an assumed and typical Black Aesthetic reader" (Dubey 11). Walker and Naylor produce ideologically incongruous figures of the black mother and the nationalist. By creating this fictional, ideological hybrid they expose the inconsistencies of Black Nationalist discourse. Meridian and Cocoa attempt to question, a maternal heritage that is at odds with their own understanding of their positioning in their community. These protagonists are deprived of a sustained relationship with their maternal ancestors or the personal experience of maternity. They are focused on the present as reclaiming, re-inscribing and preserving community is not their main concern. These women in their continuous refusal to embrace sisterhood, undermine the "bonds of mutuality or coalitions of resistance" that one would expect them to reproduce (Campbell 34). They proclaim societal change through individual awareness in order to transform their society's ideology of motherhood. Walker and Naylor celebrate black mothers' strength and sacrifices they make on an individual level in order to support their daughters but at the same time proclaim their right to fullness of life. Walker and Naylor acknowledge the respect for motherhood that African-American culture professes and at the same time contend that women should be valued for themselves and not reduced to a function. Being a mother, does not necessarily proceed from being a biological mother, it is a state of mind.

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