

Missing Mom:

The (Re-)Assessment of Gender and Motherhood in Richard Wright's *Black Boy*, Toni

Morrison's *Sula* and *Jazz*, and Audre Lorde's *Zami*

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English 493 – Honors Thesis

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3 April 2006

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## I. Introduction

In her essay "Reconstructing Black Masculinity," bell hooks defines the series of characteristics that constituted the gender roles for children in her specific community:

"In our southern black Baptist patriarchal home, being a boy meant learning to be tough, to mask one's feelings, to stand one's own ground and fight—being a girl meant learning to obey, to be quiet, to clean, to recognize that you had no ground to stand on" (87).

Patriarchy dominates hook's community just as it dominates our contemporary society.

Yet hooks goes beyond the mere existence of male dominance in order to identify a more racial-specific trope of masculinity; she examines the formation of the ideal of black masculinity, and the ways in which it was constructed in a world dominated by whites.

As hooks writes, "The extent to which a given black man absorbed white society's notion of manhood likely determined the extent of his bitterness and despair that white supremacy continually blocked his access to the patriarchal idea" (91). hooks evaluates black masculinity at the intersection of racial and gender expectations. She then suggests that the African American feminine ideal is formed out of an African American male desire for "black women to conform to the gender norms set by white society" (92). After all, the very idea of patriarchy necessitates sexist gender norms.

The hegemony of a white male-dominated society underlies hooks' assessment of African American gender roles—man comes first, white comes first. Like the children hooks describes in her essay, mothers also face certain social expectations. Stereotypical beliefs suggest that mothers should love their children regardless of circumstance, and in most cases, this ideal of unconditional love comes to constitute not just society's ideal of adequate mothering, but also the child's. At the crossroads of gender norms, racial

attitudes, and the expectations of one's children, mothering may come under fire from many directions. However, "motherhood, complicated and threatened by racism, is a special kind of motherhood" (Washington 6-7). Andrea O'Reilly writes:

[African American] mothers pass on what I have called the motherline: the ancestral memory and ancient properties of traditional black culture. In doing so, cultural bearing or motherline mothering confers affirming images of black people and their history that, in turn, impedes the internalization of controlling images of blackness put forward by the dominant culture and allows the child to develop a strong and authentic selfhood as a black person. ("Disconnections" 47).

O'Reilly's description suggests that mothers pass on to their children a sense of belonging as a vital member of a family and community. In turn, this sense of belonging gives the child a feeling of security and self-worth that allows him/her to develop a firm and grounded sense of self. The mother's role thus symbolizes the child's access point to a sense of culture and heritage.

This paper will examine the dynamics of mother-child relationships within African American literature and the ways in which children internalize socially constructed gender roles within not just a male-dominated society, but a *white* male-dominated society. Richard Wright's *Black Boy* (1945) and Toni Morrison's *Jazz* (1992) present examples of works that invest heavily in the relationships between mother and son; Morrison's *Sula* (1973) and Audre Lorde's *Zami: A New Spelling of My Name* (1982) deal with the ties between mother and daughter. The following study will focus on these four works and the way their protagonists—two real people, and two fictional

characters—evaluate the extent to which mothers fulfill their children's expectations of mothering.

As children, Richard Wright, Joe Trace, Sula Peace, and Audre Lorde assess their mothers based on the mainstream expectation of attentive, unconditional love. Judging that the mother does not fulfill their expectations for maternal affection, each child ambivalently turns away from her. Because of this dissociation from the motherline, the child loses the sense of belonging and becomes unsure of their sense of self. Self-knowledge and security can only be returned to the child once he or she comes to terms with the lost mother.

The purpose of examining the breaches between these characters and their mothers is to show the potential hazards associated with a child's permanent dissociation from the motherline. As O'Reilly suggests, "The deep psychological wounds of unmothered children remind us of how essential mothering is for our own emotional well-being" ("In Search of" 377). In these narratives, the break with the mother constitutes a sort of "protective numbing" associated with the experience of trauma, "a trauma that cannot be separated out from the embodiment of a raced and gendered existence" (116, 117).

Richard and Sula dissociate from the mother because they see her as a locus of vulnerability and oppression. Each detaches from what they view as the mother's imprisoning characteristic—her femininity—and attempt to gain more agency by adopting stereotypically masculine characteristics. However, neither Richard nor Sula ever reconciles his/her self with the lost mother. Through a psychoanalytic reading of Wright's novels and by evaluating Morrison's response to Sula, it becomes clear that in

these authors' view abandoning a connection with the motherline is unfavorable, and in some cases, even dangerous.

Joe and Audre also experience similar detachment from the mother at a young age because they feel that their own mothers do not fulfill what O'Reilly calls "the myth of unconditional motherlove" (O'Reilly "Disconnections" 58). Like Richard and Sula, Joe also adopts stereotypically masculine characteristics to regain the control he feels he loses when his mother abandons him, and this attempt to gain authority leads to an act of violence. However, *Jazz* and *Zami* both provide endings which supply the protagonist with the reconnection they need to regain the sense of security and belonging they lose in turning away from the mother. Their reconciliation with the lost mother comes through meaningful relationships with other people—Dorcas and Afrekete—who affirm their sense of self worth. In fact, by retrospectively re-imagining her own coming of age in *Zami*, Audre Lorde shatters the three other characters' assessments of mothering, and ultimately reformulates the gender expectations set by contemporary American society.

## II. Abandoning the 'Motherline': Richard and Sula

### A. Richard Wright, *Black Boy*

Richard Wright's memoir is, as Jerry Ward, Jr., writes in his "Introduction" to *Black Boy*, "one man's record, partially authentic and partially fictional, of how literacy enables one to emerge from harrowing experiences with integrity and balance intact" (xvii). Yet beyond Wright's narrative, it is what is hidden in his words that is of most importance. From the text emerges not only "a book that nicely blended the meaning, the challenge, and the significance of being Southern, black, and male in America," but also

the psychological development of a young boy with an absent mother (xi). Wright's mother does not disappear in the same way that his father does within the text; she is physically present throughout most of his childhood. Yet Richard's disgust toward his mother's perceived weakness—her reliance on other people, her illness, her inability to fulfill his expectations of unconditional motherlove—causes Richard to separate himself from her at a young age. Wright's mother's status as a black woman in the patriarchal, white-dominated South stresses both her and Richard's ties to oppression, and he thus chooses to adopt heavily masculine ideals in order to gain more personal agency. In other words, Richard views his mother's submissive role as a source of vulnerability, which reminds him of his own delicate role as a black male in a racist society. Wright distances himself from his mother and adopts a mind-set of deep-seeded ambivalence which eventually transforms into the attitude of violent misogyny that emerges in his novels.

Wright paints a picture of weakness in his mother in his description of her reaction to their father's rejection of the family. After his father's initial absence, Wright stresses the image of a crying and sick mother to suggest a sort of mental and physical breakdown in the absence of the patriarch. When Richard's mother first asks him where his father is, "she paused and looked at me with tears in her eyes" (15), upon returning from her first job as a single mother "she would be tired and dispirited and cry a lot" (16), and at the child support trial Richard remarks that "It had been painful to sit and watch my mother crying" (27). From the viewpoint of a male in the background of what O'Reilly calls "normative gender ideologies" ("Disconnections" 47), tears appear as a physical manifestation of weakness. In this sense, Wright suggests that his father's absence mentally breaks his mother. Wright extends the illustration of his mother's

weakness by associating her chronic illness with the flight of his father. Immediately after Wright discusses the child support trial, he states that his mother “fell ill” (27). This spell predicts the stroke that will debilitate Wright’s mother for the rest of her life and place her in a state of perpetual dependency. During the trial, the father not only abandons his role as husband, but also as the family’s source of income, and his departure from the family is approved by the “white face[d]” judge (27). This fraternal approval of abandoning one’s family strikes Wright’s mother as the final blow to her physical constitution—the father’s desertion breaks the mother physically. Wright’s remembrance of his mother’s weakness in reaction to his father’s absence suggests his view that his mother not only depended upon his father, but could not exist without him.

Wright further describes his mother’s subordination to men through her capitulation and overzealous dedication to Christian religion. Christianity prioritizes devotion to Jesus, usually depicted as a white male, and thus it constitutes not only a committal submission to patriarchy, but also a submission to Euro-American culture. After his father leaves, Wright states that his mother’s “ardently religious disposition dominated the household” (25). Her devotion to the eternal patriarch manifests in the Sunday dinner that she serves to the preacher. By inviting the preacher over immediately after her husband’s departure, Wright suggests that his mother tries to replace the void of the absent household patriarch. The ritual of feeding him “*all* the chicken” suggests her desire to please him with domestic chores (26). This episode transposes the mother’s yearning for her husband onto the preacher, and it is as if the preacher tests the domestic (and thus matrimonial) qualifications of Richard’s mother. Moreover, the preacher constitutes “God’s representative” (25). Wright suggests that his mother’s feeding of the



preacher represents her desire to entice and please God. Her yearning to fill the void left by Richard's father with the enduring patriarch suggests the mother's inability to exist on her own—without a man or a sense of conformity.

Besides her inability to exist without the support of others, Wright depicts his mother as failing the maternal role with her inability to provide adequate sustenance. Near the beginning of the novel, Wright's mother associates the presence of food with his father because in her view, the father as the family breadwinner should "bring food into the house" (16). However Richard rejects this view—"I did not want my father to feed me" (27). Instead, Richard yearns to be nurtured and fed by his mother. Because human (and all other mammal) mothers nurse their young, they constitute the sole provider of sustenance for children in their earliest days. After Richard's mother beats him unconscious for setting fire to the house at the age of four, he mentions:

Whenever I tried to sleep I would see huge wobbly white bags, like the full udders of cows, suspended from the ceiling above me. Later, as I grew worse, I could see the bags in the daytime with my eyes open and I was gripped by the fear that they were going to fall and drench me with some horrible liquid. (7)

The mental image of udders suggests Wright's desire to be nurtured, yet the danger of the "horrible liquid" of breast milk also suggests fear of and hostility toward the mother. Richard's longing for maternal affection is heightened by the distance he experiences from the anger of his mother. Wright extends this fundamental association of feeding and nurturing into his later childhood. He obsesses over the ironic fact that his mother constantly takes jobs as a cook for white families yet is never able to provide him with adequate provisions. For example, he states that he "always loved to stand in the white

folks' kitchens" but his "nostrils would be assailed with the scent of food that did not belong to me and which I was forbidden to eat" (19). Richard's hunger haunts him, makes him "weak" and "breathless" (127). He feels that his mother, by the sole fact that she is biologically his mother, should be a food dispenser, yet even though she constantly deals with food, this food cannot be extended to him. Wright resents his mother's inability to feed him, yet he also resents the hegemony that prevents him from eating the food. Not only does Richard not have the money for the food, but the food is intended for the white family for whom she works—the socialized racial hierarchy prevents Richard from eating his mother's cooking. Because of this system Richard's mom must take domestic work, because of this system she cannot obtain enough money for food, and because of this system Richard cannot be nurtured by his mother.

Wright also depicts his mother's chronic illness as preventing her from performing what he perceives are her duties as mother. Upon her first hint of illness and the departure of the father, Richard's mother "in despair...made the rounds of the charitable institutions, seeking help" (28). Eventually his mother places Wright and his brother in an orphan home to be looked after by another woman, Miss Simon. Wright comments that his mother "had no choice" but to leave them in the home, yet this does not alter her course of action (28). After Wright's mother stops her frequent visits, he begins "to wonder if she, too, like my father, had disappeared into the unknown" (29). Naturally, Richard yearns for his absent mother. Her absence during this part of his life teaches him to "distrust everything and everybody" (29). He begs her to take him away, and eventually he runs away to find his mother. Later, as Richard's mother succumbs to the first of a series of chronically debilitating strokes, he wonders if she will die: "Was

she dying? It seemed unthinkable” (85). As a small child, Richard’s mother’s presence affirms his own sense of belonging in the world, for he feels he cannot exist without her. Yet her illness causes her to seek the help of her own family. Wright’s grandparents can sustain enough income to maintain a household, but his mother cannot. Thus she becomes a child-figure to be looked after and nurtured by *her* parents and siblings, leaving Richard feeling that he is without a mother.

Wright notes in “Southern Night” as he attempts to sell his dog for a dollar that the absence of his mother causes him to locate her as a center of “moral blame” (Wright 70). He blames her for his “aggressiveness” and turns away from her in an act of emotional ambivalence, constituting a symbolic break with the mother and an adoption of a rebellious doctrine of self-reliance (70). In her article, “Rage, Race, and Desire,” Claudia Tate cites “the lost mother” as “a trauma of a more personal nature...that forms a significant part of the subjective nucleus of Wright’s stories” (“Rage” 88-9). She uses psychoanalytic theory to suggest the deeply imbedded psychological trauma of the absent mother as the trigger for “Wright’s compulsive plots of violence” (“Rage” 91). Tate claims that it is, in fact, Richard’s resentment of his own mother that drives the aggression of his plots. Thus, although her article focuses on *Savage Holiday* (1954), it applies to Wright’s memoir because *Black Boy* provides the most reliable depiction of the actual relationship shared between Wright and his mother. Tate writes, Wright’s “primary narrative—plotted sequentially with maternal betrayal, filial ambivalence, and infantile rage...lies at the heart of his protest fictions and problematic depictions of female characters” (“Rage” 93).

Wright's ambivalence toward his mother causes him to finally turn away from her and what he views as her position of helplessness. Even though his mother's fragile condition awes him, Wright ceases to sympathize with her. One night, he stays with her while she begs for death. Her unwillingness to live represents for him the ultimate weakness—she is helpless. He writes, "That night I ceased to react to my mother; my feelings were frozen" (100). After he moves to the North, Richard writes that he used to "lay awake at nights...tracing my mother's life...wondering how she had apparently been singled out for so much pain" (156). Instead of reaching out in compassion, Wright turns inward to himself and shuts out the world: "My mind could find no answer and I would feel rebellious against all life" (156). Wright's mother's weakness symbolizes his personal helplessness—when she cannot earn money he cannot go to learn and remains hungry. Her inability to adequately provide for him adds to his already vulnerable position as an African American male in the racist South. He was powerless then, and his mother's weakness reminds him of this insecurity. He writes:

My mother's suffering grew into a symbol in my mind, gathering to itself all the poverty, the ignorance, the helplessness; the painful, baffling, hunger-ridden days and hours; the restless moving, the futile seeking, the uncertainty, the fear, the dread; the meaningless pain and endless suffering. Her life set the emotional tone for my life, colored the men and women I was to meet in the future, conditioned my relation to events that had not yet happened, determined my attitude to situations and circumstances I had yet to face. (100)

Moreover, Richard's mother's invalid state literally compromises the legitimacy of his position within the family. He states that in Jackson his "position in the household was a

delicate one; I was a minor, an uninvited dependent” (103). With no father and a mother almost as much a child as he is, Richard feels threatened that he does not and cannot belong.

In order to secure a place of strength to counter his own disenfranchisement, Wright adopts the credos of fighting to secure clout, working to secure money, and learning to secure knowledge. Richard views the first of these character traits as a rite of passage into masculinity. For example, he obtains his first taste of fighting before the age of six when his mother places the responsibility of doing “the shopping for food” upon his shoulders (16). In order to get to the store and back with the items, Richard must defend himself against a “gang of boys” (16). Richard realizes that he must fight at all costs, for as he says, “I had the choice of being beaten at home or away from home...If I were beaten at home, there was absolutely nothing that I could do about it; but if I were beaten on the streets, I had a chance to fight and defend myself” (18). Richard’s mother “must use violence to teach him violence in the form of self-defense...negating the traditional view of the mother as pacifist and nurturer” (King 14-15). Wright points to this inevitability of physical violence and adopts fighting as a way to assert his strength and presence among his peers. Physical aggression thus becomes a right of passage for him, and after he beats the other boys he states, “That night I won the right to the streets of Memphis” (18). Wright also views fighting as a means to securing his place at a new school and bonding fraternally with other African American boys in the neighborhood (124-5, 78). Aggression gives Richard the means to exert his power over others; it affirms his independence and his will to survive and exist on his own. The need for this self-reliance stems from a rebellion against a state of dependence on an “absent mother” that

Tate deems a “fiery response to fantasies of maternal persecution” (Wright 70, “Rage” 118).

Wright’s intense desire for self-reliance also manifests in his desire to work so that he may secure enough money to eat and eventually to leave the racially oppressive South to support himself. During his younger days, hunger constantly tugs at Richard’s physical and mental well-being, and Wright vows to commit himself to eradicating this internal weakness. He writes, “Again and again I vowed that someday I would end this hunger of mine” (126). For Richard, hunger constitutes not only physical agony, but also mental agony, as he refers to it as “apartness” and “eternal difference” (126). He views hunger as the distinction between himself and other human beings. It comes with the absence of food, which comes with the absence of mom, which also reminds him of the absence of dad and money. As a result, Richard adopts a strict work ethic in order to ensure that he has enough money to buy food and sustain himself, yet his grandmother will not allow him to work. He suggests the possibility of earning a bit of money so that he may obtain lunch for himself during school, but “Granny...would have none of it” (125). Wright says, “Though we lived just on the border of actual starvation, I could not bribe Granny...her answer was no and never” (126). Even though Wright’s grandmother forbids him to work, he does it anyway. This action constitutes a state of rebellion, but also a sense of self-sufficiency, self-rule, and personal agency. He takes many jobs, such as selling papers, doing chores, working as a janitor, a bricklayer, a porter, and an insurance salesman. Richard’s earnings represent a step toward patriarchy, and this intense desire to fulfill a self-reliant role reflects hooks’ vision of black masculinity. She writes, “Within a burgeoning capitalist economy, it was wage-earning power that

determined the extent to which a man would rule over a household” (“Reconstructing” 94). Within the masculine ideal, wages associate directly with the amount of personal agency a man possesses over his own sphere of life. By making money, Wright becomes what the Mad Vet in Ralph Ellison’s *Invisible Man* (1952) dubs his “own father” (Ellison 156).

In addition to working, Wright commits himself fiercely to his studies in order to ensure the qualifications necessary to live an economically secure life in the future. As Wright says:

I dreamt of going north and writing books, novels. The North symbolized to me all that I had not felt and seen; it had no relation whatever to what actually existed. Yet, by imagining a place where everything was possible, I kept hope alive in me. But where I got this notion of doing something in the future, of going away from home and accomplishing something that would be recognized by others?...I was building up a dream which the entire educational system of the South had been rigged to stifle. (169)

Richard views education as his means to escaping not only the racial oppression of the South, but also the repressive atmosphere of his home and family. He desires freedom from hunger, religion, and loneliness—things that he does not choose for himself. Wright “burned at his studies;” he remarks that once admitted into fifth grade in public school, he “studied night and day and within two weeks I was promoted to the sixth grade” (125). This sense of personal success gives Richard a new feeling of self-worth. In addition, he defies his family’s expectation that he is a “bad, bad boy” (125). Learning thus becomes a rebellion in the present and a prospect in the future: “Suddenly the future loomed tangible

for me, as tangible as it can loom for a black boy in Mississippi” (125). Wright’s intense desire to fight, learn, and earn money constitute his yearning to be a patriarch, a role which seeks to correct the vulnerability Richard feels as a child due to the absence of his mother.

In addition to breaking with a sense of weakness, Wright also disconnects from the feminine heterosexuality associated with the mother figure. Interestingly, *Black Boy* does not possess the blatant sexuality and aggression toward women that characterize all of Wright’s other plots. However, the memoir does possess an undercurrent of hostility in the few sexualized encounters with women. This misogyny—a “sadistic attitude toward women in general” and a “hatred of black women in particular”—is deeply rooted in Wright’s dissatisfaction with his mother (“Rage” 93). Tate writes that Wright’s other novels, *Native Son* (1940), *The Outsider* (1953), and *Savage Holiday*, profess “trauma [that] incites a compulsive plot of murderous aggression that is sexual in origin. And this sexual plot forms a significant part of the subjective nucleus of Wright’s stories” (“Rage” 88-9). These plots contain “sadistic violence toward women,” and this violence is rooted in the need to take revenge on women in retribution for the shortcomings of his own mother (Tate 90). Tate mentions that most of Wright’s novels bear “an original psychological wound” that reflects a perception of inadequate mothering (“Rage” 89). Because they invest in this form of violence as a central narrative, Wright’s novels obsess over women in general. However, Richard barely discusses women in a sexual nature within his memoir. In fact he only mentions females outside his family three times. The first mention is an adolescent obsession with the church elder’s wife (112-13). The second mention comes with his rejection of Bess (217-226), and the third mention is a



“long, tortured affair with...an illiterate black child with a baby whose father she did not know” (289).

This absence of writing about his own sexual encounters with women suggests a personal break with black feminine heterosexuality, the model for which his mother is the icon. Richard sees his mother as a locus of weakness in the context of mainstream notions of gender because she is black and female. In addition, her sickly nature wields more vulnerability. Wright's personal credo is to accumulate strength, money, and knowledge in order to gain more personal agency in hopes of combating racial oppression. He sees his mother, on the other hand, as inviting sexism and racial oppression by submitting to weakness. Instead of fighting disease, she begs for death; instead of earning money, she looks to family; instead of gaining spiritual autonomy, she seeks religion. For Wright, his mother comes to represent the entire African American female sex, for in his childhood, she is his closest means of association. His dislike of his mother's weakness translates to a distaste for female company, and instead of wishing to protect women, he adopts a doctrine of hostility and aggression toward women in his few encounters. For example, Bess's desire to marry Richard frightens him because he feels she and her mother will gain access to his personal emotions. He writes, “I did not like that. She was reaching into my inner life, where it was sore, and I did not want anyone there” (216). Richard's refuses to allow anyone admittance to his feelings, for he shut down these feelings when he turned away from his mother during her illness—Richard seems afraid of being hurt. Thus Wright mentions that when Bess expresses her desire to marry him, he “wanted to either laugh or to slap her. I was about to hurt her” (219). In addition, when he is sitting with the “black child” with whom he engages in a sexual affair, Wright tells her, “I could

kill you” (290). Playing off the model of his mother as the emblem of black female heterosexuality, this threat suggests what Tate calls “matricidal desire” (Tate 96). He bears hidden resentment toward his mother, her illness and oppression, and her inability to care for him. Thus the overall absence of sexual experiences suggests Richard’s distancing from his mother; his violent attitude toward women suggests his yearning to conquer her, and thus to conquer that for which she stands in his mind: weakness, vulnerability, femininity.

The hiatus Wright experiences from his mother at a young age proves dangerous, for instead of associating with women as he associates with men, Wright displays, through the violent undertones of his novels, an attitude of deep-seated misogyny. Such an attitude is alarming, as Wright himself does not seem to recognize the extent to which his mother affects his outlook on a large portion of the human race. Through the evaluation of Tate’s psychoanalysis and the suggestions of violence in his memoir, it seems that Wright does not completely fathom the violence that lies within him. With the inability to understand something comes the inability to control it. The study of Wright’s splitting from his mother and the femininity he believes she embodies proves that a child’s unreconciled break from the mother can bear detrimental consequences. As Morrison has written, “The violence lurks in having something torn out by its roots—it will not, cannot grow again” (Burrows 114).

Wright convinces himself that by breaking with his mother and her vulnerability, he may gain more agency in an oppressive society. This view remains consistent with the “so-called men’s movement” (“Maternal Healing” 161). O’Reilly discusses the beliefs of this movement, as outlined by Robert Bly in his book *Iron John* (1990):

Robert Bly...argues that the modern man has left unexplored his true essential masculine identity (Bly 234). Healing occurs only when a man “gets in touch with’ his own masculinity”—frees the wild man inside. The son must “move from the mother’s realm to the father’s realm” (Bly ix). The journey to manhood requires a “clean break from the mother” (Bly 19) because the American male grows up with too much mothering and not enough fathering; he suffers from what Bly calls “father hunger.” (“Maternal Healing” 162)

The idea of “father hunger” provides an interesting link to Wright’s text, since originally the second part of *Black Boy* constituted a separate work called “American Hunger.” However, even though Richard does recognize his loss of fathering, he does not place much regret on the absence of his father in his own life. He writes that when he meets his father on a Mississippi plantation twenty-five years after his disappearance from their family, “I forgave and pitied him” (34). Richard recognizes that because his father possessed no formal education nor any significant financial means, he resigned himself to a position of sharecropping in order to survive. Richard writes of “how completely his [the father’s] soul was imprisoned by the slow flow of the seasons, by wind and rain and sun, how fastened were his memories to a crude and raw past, how chained were his actions and emotions to the direct, animalistic impulses of his withering body...” (34). Wright uses the words “imprisoned,” “fastened,” and “chained” to call upon images of slavery and suggest his father’s powerlessness as an impoverished black man living in the South during that point in history.

Perhaps because he is a male, Richard pities his father and paints his life as a great tragedy, making him the subject of poetic remembrance. He suggests the tendency

to believe that his own position would have been similar had he not vowed to gain education and financial resources for himself. Yet even though Richard sees similar oppression in the role that his mother plays in society, he resents *her*. The distinction Richard makes is entirely based upon constructed gender roles. Because his mother is a woman, Richard views her as the weaker of his two parents. His discriminatory attitude toward his own mother—the woman who stayed with him and his brother, who cared for him—only affirms Wright’s intense misogyny when compared with his attitude toward a father who physically abandoned him in his earliest days. However, even though Wright may profess a greater affinity toward his father, it is mothering that he truly needs.

#### B. Sula Peace, *Sula*

In contrast to *Black Boy*, Toni Morrison’s *Sula*, focuses on the life of an African American girl. *Sula* stresses the relationship of mother to child, yet the focus on female characters differentiates it from the previous novel. As Barbara Christian writes in her essay “Pass it On:”

Toni Morrison [and Paule Marshall and Alice Walker] tell the stories of their mothers—perhaps not specifically *their* mothers but certainly women who came before them. Their novels are the literary counterparts of their communities’ oral traditions, which in the Americas have become more and more the domain of women. (Christian 239)

Yet even though Morrison’s novels deal mainly with the generational mother-daughter relationship, the effect of gender expectations in this context merits evaluation because of an underlying patriarchal structure. As Burrows writes in “Knots of Death”:

Morrison...is interested in confronting her readers with the damaging embodied effects of white dominance on American society—strongly implying that white control of history has created unbearable suffering—she adds a radically gendered critique. In particular, she unravels, often in intricate detail, how the dominant social order of whiteness in its various order of mutations is internalised by her black female characters. (119-20)

Burrows points to *Sula*'s investment in disassembling the dominant white male structure. In order to do this, Morrison—as a storyteller—rewrites a history of her own which reveals the trauma of racism on a community and, more particularly, an African-American female.

In fact, Morrison structures her novel around trauma, for as Burrows writes, “the deep structure of the novel does not progress along the assumed teleological ethos of traditional historical time but moves in the rhythms of the psychic time-frame of trauma” (115). This structure of trauma involves situating “each death at a moment in history suggested by the chapter title” (Burrows 115). Thus the trauma of *Sula* focuses on “knots [or chapters] of death”—the novel centers upon loss.

For the protagonist Sula, this loss comes with the figurative absence of her mother, and more accurately, the loss of the personal history of her motherline. Sula suffers an unreconciled break with her mother Hannah for paradoxical reasons. First, she feels indignation toward Hannah's failure to live up to mainstream expectations of motherhood. As O'Reilly puts it:

*Sula*, while signaling motherline disconnection through a mother-daughter split, is concerned with a *daughter's* re-identification with a normative discourse, in this

case, the myth of unconditional motherlove, and how this results in the daughter's disconnection from the motherline. ("Disconnections" 58)

Sula resents Hannah's participation in promiscuous sexual acts, for she does not adopt a traditional role of mothering. Moreover, Sula overhears what she feels to be her mother's personal rejection of her; this comment strikes a personal blow, for Hannah says, "I love Sula, I just don't like her. That's the difference" (57). However, Sula also resents her mother's willingness to succumb to what she sees as a confined and oppressed gender role. As she overhears her mother saying that she does not "like" her, Sula absorbs the statement as evidence of her mother's confinement in a constrictive social role. These occurrences cause Sula to reject her mother and the role of mothering rooted in her female ancestry. Instead, Sula adopts characteristics usually associated with the males of Morrison's fiction and thus becomes a 'masculine' character. She makes this move in order to gain more personal agency in the context of conventional gender norms.

Morrison depicts Hannah as refusing to commit to one man. Instead Hannah's relation to men revolves around sex, making her an emblem of the act that constitutes feminine heterosexuality. As Morrison stated in a 1979 interview with Betty Jean Parker, "Sula's mother, Hannah, is sexually selfish...She doesn't want an affair, a relationship, or a meaningful anything" (Parker 63). Thus Hannah does not conform to the traditional role of the mother as the submissive wife, yet she still "loved all men," for "it was manlove that Eva bequeathed to her daughter" (101). After her husband Rekus dies, Hannah "simply refused to live without the attentions of a man" (42). Yet, even though Hannah loves men, she will not associate herself with one man. The narrator comments that "She would fuck practically anything," but would sleep with no one because "sleeping with

someone implied for her a measure of trust and definite commitment” (44). The narrator dubs Hannah a “daylight lover” (44), suggesting not only her refusal to commit to a man, but also her blatant and open demonstration of the female’s part in heterosexual relations. Hannah’s promiscuous sexual activity, devoid of any lasting commitment, constitutes behavior usually associated with male figures, yet Hannah is female. This intertwining of a heterosexual male-associated sex drive and a biologically female character causes Hannah’s character to emblemize the idea of female heterosexuality.

This promiscuity combines with other features of Hannah’s personality so that she does not live up to Sula’s expectations of motherhood. Like Wright’s mother, Hannah meets the idea of the absent mother because she fails to fulfill society’s myths about the ways in which a mother should act. In her essay, “Disconnections from the Motherline,” Andrea O’Reilly describes how Sula’s “identification with normative ideologies of motherlove causes her to reject the motherline” embodied by her mother and grandmother (“Disconnections” 58). O’Reilly views the way in which Hannah’s comment, “I love Sula. I just don’t like her. That’s the difference” (*Sula* 57), resonates with Sula as a form of abandonment because of “the myth that motherlove is unconditional” (“Disconnections” 59). Even though Hannah states that she still loves Sula, the claim that she does not *like* her suggests that she does not admire and appreciate her—even though she feels an attachment to her daughter, she does not care for her under all circumstances. Yet, the fact that this discussion on motherlove takes place between three women, all of whom suggest that they “can’t say love is exactly what [they] feel” for their children suggests that society’s expectation of guaranteed motherlove is indeed false (57). Sula’s eavesdropping on her mother’s denunciation of unconditional love

causes her to engage in what O'Reilly dubs "mother blame" ("Disconnections" 59). In hearing Hannah's comment, Sula not only feels resentment, but also disgust. The fact that her mother, and the other mothers of the community, feel *obligated* to love their children, suggests to Sula that motherhood is not voluntary. Instead, it is a role of confinement.

Hannah's place as an 'unloving' mother also has roots in her own evaluation of Eva's mothering as sub-par. For example, Eva demonstrates the same flirtatious "manlove" as Hannah, and "old as she was, and with one leg, had a regular flock of gentlemen callers, and although she did not participate in the act of love, there was a good deal of teasing and pecking and laughter" (41). In addition, Eva delivers a comment in Hannah's presence that parallels the latter's denunciation of unconditional motherlove. Hannah asks her, "Mamma, did you ever love us?... You know. When we was little?" Eva answers, "No. I don't reckon I did. Not the way you thinkin'" (67). Even though both women are adults, Hannah approaches Eva as a child approaching her mother, and Eva's answer—"Not the way you thinkin'"—suggests that her love did not meet the child's wishes for motherlove. Additionally, the fact that Eva burns her son because he yearns to crawl "all up inside [her] womb" suggests her break with expected love (72). O'Reilly writes in "Maternal Healing" that "the mother enables the daughter to love when she herself becomes a mother" (156). Because Hannah does not feel the expected affection from her mother, she cannot pass this same passion on to her own daughter. Thus Hannah's comment suggests that her own mother's attitude toward her informs her relationship with Sula; it also affirms the fact that Sula's female ancestors view mothering as a role that merits obligation over willingness.



The resentment fostered by Hannah's profession of her true feelings for Sula causes the young girl to feel reluctance toward her entrance into adult heterosexuality, a realm of being embodied by her mother's own indiscriminate sexual behavior. O'Reilly describes that after Sula hears her mother's comment, she goes to the river with Nel and engages in an act that symbolizes her reluctance to enter heterosexual adult femininity. At the river, the two girls "partake in a highly symbolic initiation into heterosexuality" in which they push twigs into the ground in repetitive fashion ("Disconnections" 60). However, when Nel's twig breaks, the girls "threw the pieces into the hole...until all of the small defiling things they could find were collected there" (Morrison 59). This "gesture of disgust" suggests the girls' aversion to entering puberty and expected feminine heterosexuality ("Disconnections" 58). O'Reilly articulates that Sula ultimately rejects adult femininity and maternity in her killing of Chicken Little. Because her mother's promiscuous behavior embodies this expectation, this move constitutes a rejection of her. By embodying female heterosexuality, Hannah also represents the potential for motherhood. In denying adult female sexuality right before entering puberty, Sula also attempts to shed the possibility of becoming a mother, a role that she views as restrictive because of her mother and grandmothers' professed experience with it.

Sula finalizes this rejection by watching her mother burn to death and Eva remembers that "she had seen Sula standing on the back porch just looking" as flames consumed her mother (78). Yet at the same time, the ending of Hannah's life leaves Sula to face the world without a mother-figure with whom she can root her sense of self and feminine ancestry. Sula recalls the event as well: "I stood there watching her burn and was thrilled. I wanted her to keep on jerking like that, to keep on dancing" (147). By

merely watching and not assisting her mother, Sula suggests her ambivalence toward Hannah's death, if not participation in her killing. She does not consider the loss of her mother as significant enough to move, nor does she think of Eva's sadness at losing a daughter. Instead Sula derives entertainment from watching her mother "dance" and casts aside the feelings of her mother and grandmother. In this manner Sula rejects her entire motherline, and also simultaneously punishes both her mother and grandmother for taking on restrictive roles of motherhood—roles that Sula thinks they did not desire nor fulfill. Hannah abandons Sula in death, and Eva abandons her in spirit, as the two face a psychological quarrel throughout the rest of the novel—Sula puts Eva in a home because she is "scared of her" (100). As O'Reilly writes, "Sula is twice orphaned; first by her mother's comment and later by her mother's death" ("Disconnections" 61).

Sula rejects motherhood for a role that manifests qualities usually reserved for men, and within the context of the novel, she becomes a masculine character. As O'Reilly explains, Sula "fashions a female selfhood modeled on the values of autonomy, independence, and self-sufficiency" ("Disconnections" 61). After Nel's wedding, Sula leaves her community for "The Big City" and college (99). Upon her return to Medallion, Eva looks "at Sula pretty much the same way she had looked at BoyBoy that time when he returned after he'd left her" (91). Sula's departure symbolizes a break with her community, which also suggests a breach of feminine self-identification. As Christian writes of Morrison's female characters, "In attempting self-definition, [they] must necessarily ask their respective communities what is expected of them. The response reveals much about each community's sense of womanhood and adulthood, as well as about the natural process of growth" (241). Sula violates the female relationship to

community, and instead adopts a masculine role of self-reliance and removal from the town. Christian discusses the differing role of male characters in many African American novels:

[T]he protagonists quickly move from the insularity of their natal communities into confrontations with the outer world. It is through this confrontation, buttressed by their own often imperfect understanding of their own communities, that they seek their identity...Having stepped beyond their communities in an attempt to exert some control over their lives, the male protagonists find themselves in a hole. (Christian 241)

Like Wright, Sula seeks to “exert some control over her life” through learning. When Eva asks her, “When you gone to get married? You need to have some babies,” Sula tells her, “I don’t want to make somebody else. I want to make myself” (92).

Sula does participate in indiscriminate female heterosexual relations similar to those of her mother, such as her affair with Nel’s husband and her fling with Ajax, yet she also stresses her desire to remain detached from relationships that may confine her to a role of submission or motherhood.<sup>1</sup> For example, right after having sex with Jude and thus ruining her best friend’s marriage, Sula tells Nel, ““The real hell of Hell is that it is forever,”” suggesting a parallel between Hell and the bondage of marriage (107). Later, Sula confronts the expectation that she become a wife with the question, ““Is that what I’m supposed to do? Spend my life keeping a man?”” (143). Instead of tying herself to a role of marriage and/or motherhood, Sula chooses, like Richard, to “be [her] own father.” Sula rejects parenthood to cultivate herself, and the self she fashions manifests

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<sup>1</sup> Hannah’s sexual activity is similarly detached. However, she has been married and also has a child, whereas Sula attempts to avoid matrimony and motherhood at all costs.

characteristics that Morrison usually reserves for her males. Like Eva's husband BoyBoy, Paul D. of *Beloved* (1987), and so many of Morrison's other male characters, Sula leaves the community of her family and her childhood in order to find herself. As Sula says of men, "They ain't worth more than me" (143).

Sula's character chooses independence from community and female ancestors, and because of this independence, the people of the Bottom shun her. However they do not realize that her position holds the town together, and in this sense Sula's character operates as the tie that binds the town together. The people of the Bottom do not understand Sula's identity, but think, as Nel does: "You can't act like a man. You can't be walking around all independent-like, doing whatever you like, taking what you want, leaving what you don't" (142). For example, even though Sula and Hannah both participate in promiscuous sexual relations, the town remains behind Hannah and shuns Sula, even though the former sleeps with "mostly the husbands of her friends and neighbors" (42). The difference between the two women is that Hannah possesses a more traditional role in the community, and thus, the town mourns the death of "the beautiful Hannah Peace" (76). In contrast, the town shuns Sula in life and in death. Sula's idea of self reigns victorious, and right before she dies, the narrator writes that Sula is "completely alone" is "where she had always wanted to be—free of the possibility of distraction" (148). As a result, the town holds for Sula "the most magnificent hatred they had ever known," and "The death of Sula Peace was the best news folks up in the bottom had had since the promise of hard work at the tunnel" (173, 151). In her essay, "*The Bluest Eye* and *Sula*," Jan Furman describes the town's relationship to Sula: "[T]he town needs Sula as much or perhaps more than she needs it...Her defiance unifies the

community by objectifying its danger” (235). However, in celebration of her death, the town engages in a sort of parade, which beckons the crumbling of the community, since “A lot of them died there” (162). This sort of mass suicide suggests that the hatred for Sula holds the town together. As the tie that binds, Sula’s presence becomes almost god-like, even if it is fear and not love that they feel for her. Thus the town’s celebration of her death is damning. Even her last name suggests that something about her presence holds “Peace” in the Bottom.

Even though the town does not accept her, Sula’s important position in the community makes her somewhat of a feminist figure. The powerful position from which she unites the town suggests that even though her community shuns her because it does not understand her unconventional ways, her adoption of the stereotypically male characteristics of independence, education, and personal agency is not necessarily negative. Sula is to be respected, for even though she rejects her motherline, she does so in an effort to gain agency and avoid confinement—even though she refuses to become a mother herself, she attempts to debunk patriarchy’s assignment for motherhood. As O’Reilly writes, “Throughout the text, Sula speaks out against the subservience and, in particular, the self-erasure that traditional motherhood and marriage require of women. ‘The narrower their lives,’ Sula says, ‘The wider their hips’” (“Disconnections” 62), (*Sula* 121). In a feminist context, *Sula* represents the dual realization that, while children require adequate mothering, a mother must also be able to function without the pressure of outside expectations.

However, even though Sula seems a feminist hero, O’Reilly suggests that Morrison views Sula’s loss of connection to her feminine ancestry as a tragic flaw.

Similar to the danger involved in Richard Wright's unreconciled break from his mother, there exists for Sula the consequences of abandoning one's sense of self as rooted in familial history. Morrison mentions in an interview with Anne Koenen (1980):

I thought she [Sula] had a serious flaw, which led her into a dangerous zone which is...not being able to make a connection with other people...Sula's behavior looks inhuman, because she has cut herself off from responsibility to anyone other than herself...Sula put her grandmother away. That is considered awful because among Black people that never happened. You must take care of each other. That's more unforgivable than anything else she does, because it suggests a lack of her sense of community. Critics devoted to the Western heroic tradition—the individual alone and triumphant—see Sula as a savior. In the Black community she is lost. (“Disconnections” 62)

Thus while it would seem that she becomes the essence of a feminist hero, Sula's break with her female ancestry—her viewing of Hannah's death and putting away of Eva—constitutes her abandonment, even murder, of those to whom she is indebted. She loses her sense of history, community, and self. As O'Reilly writes, “Sula is a self-made orphan” and “Daughters who are orphaned, either literally or psychologically, do not develop a loved sense of self or learn the teaching of the motherline from which to create a strong and proud selfhood as a black woman” (“Disconnections” 63).

There exists also within *Sula* a sense that Morrison punishes her protagonist for abandoning her family. For example, the novel suggests that Sula dies of a sexually transmitted disease. Evidence for this claim comes from the fact that she attempts to avert Nel's question questioning on the nature of her illness:

“What ails you, have they said?”

Sula licked the corners of her lips. “You want to talk about that?”

Nel smiled, slightly, at the bluntness she had forgotten.

“No. No I don’t...”

In addition, the nature of Sula’s pain points to the symptoms of a sexually transmitted disease, for she describes it as “a fluttering as of doves in her stomach, then a kind of burning, followed by a spread of thin wires to other parts of the body. Once the wires of liquid pain were in place, they jelled and began to throb” (148). Sula’s cause of death is a result of promiscuous sexual behavior. It is important to note that her mother, who also participates in indiscriminate and frequent sex, does not incur a sexually transmitted disease, and therefore is not punished for her actions in the same way. Of course, Sula is not the only character that can be criticized within the novel. Nel, for example, contrasts heavily with Sula because she confines herself to a domestic role of wife and mother. She even admits that her love for her husband (who eventually cheats on her with her best childhood friend) “had spun a steady gray web around her heart” (95). Obviously Morrison does not completely reject Sula, because in contrast with Nel she champions the values of personal choice and agency. Yet, her stance on Sula does appear to be a mix of both appreciation and disapproval. While Sula does not suggest violent psychological tendencies as Wright does, she does abandon her kin—and for Morrison, this is just as regrettable.

In fact, right before Sula dies, she expresses a desire to return to the womb, suggesting a deep-seated desire to reconnect with the motherline. She ponders as she lies in “Eva’s old bedroom” (139), in the bed in which her own grandmother slept:

It would be here, only here, held by this blind window high above the elm tree, that she might draw her legs up to her chest, close her eyes, put her thumb in her mouth and float over and down the tunnels, just missing the dark walls, down, down until she met a rain scent and would know the water was near, and she would curl into its heavy softness and it would envelop her, carry her, and wash her tired flesh always. Always. Who said that? She tried hard to think. Who was it that had promised her a sleep of water always? (149)

Sula's desire to return to the womb suggests a need to feel the affirmation of a mother. She longs to be in a space of definite security. The specificity of the place—Eva's bed—in which Sula dreams and dies suggests that she yearns to reconnect with her mother and grandmother, even if she does so unknowingly. However, Sula never reconnects with Hannah or Eva, and dies wanting to be totally on her own “where she had always wanted to be” (149). Like Richard Wright, Sula never truly fathoms the impact that her mother, or grandmother, have on her.

## II. The Potential for Healing: Joe and Audre

### A. Joe Trace, *Jazz*

Unlike Richard Wright and Sula Peace, Joe Trace does not break willingly from his mother. Rather, Joe is virtually orphaned by his parents during his infancy. As Rhoda Williams, a woman who takes Joe into her family home during his youth, tells him, ““O honey, they disappeared without a trace.”” Joe replies that, ““The way I heard it I understood her to mean the ‘trace’ they disappeared without was me”” (124). The absence



of his mother becomes something with which the self-titled Joe Trace becomes obsessed—both consciously and sub-consciously—for the rest of his life. However, even though he remains the focus of this section, Joe is not the only parentless child in *Jazz*.

As Sarah Appleton Aguiar writes:

In fact, most characters share one essential similarity: they have been ‘orphaned,’ either literally or symbolically. Dorcas’ parents have been murdered; Joe’s father is unknown and his mother has rejected him; Violet’s mother has committed suicide and her father has fled; Felice’s parent’s are forced to leave their daughter in another’s care; Golden Gray’s mother denies him and hides his father’s identity; True Belle is torn from her daughters to accompany her white mistress.

(“Listening to the Mother’s Voice” 51)

Aguiar also notes that while each character suffers from the absence of both parents, each “is primarily mourning the lack of mothering or, in the words of Marianne Hirsch, the lack of ‘relationships’ to ‘powerful maternal figures who come to represent a female past’” (Aguiar 51). Joe states during his narrative that he “didn’t miss having a daddy because first off there was Mr. Frank...the best man in Vesper County to go hunting with” (125). For Joe, the yearning for his parents lies within the fundamental need for his mother.

Joe’s break from his biological mother is involuntary. She abandons him in his infancy because the ‘wild’ characteristics from which she derives her name make her unable to perform as a human mother. O’Reilly writes in her article “Maternal Healing” that “Wild is the archetypal wild woman...[she] emits howls, laughs, bites, and sings, but she does not speak” (160). Within the novel, the narrator relates Wild to a deer because of

her intense fear of human contact. For example, Golden Gray notices her “deer eyes” and relates the sight of her to that of his horse, who is “also black, shiny, and wet” like Wild, the “berry-black woman” (160, 144). In addition, when he encounters Wild just before she gives birth to Joe, “She is covered with mud and leaves are in her hair. Her eyes are large and terrible. As soon as she sees him, she starts then turns suddenly to run, but in turning before she looks away she knocks her head against a tree she has been leaning against” (144). Wild’s very name, given to her by Hunter’s Hunter, suggests both her natural habitat and her aversion to domesticity. Her origins are never made clear within the novel. In fact, Joe remains unsure as to whether or not she is even his mother, for “Nobody told Joe she was his mother. Not outright” (175). As Aguiar writes, “Wild’s story...is ultimately inconclusive. She appears naked and pregnant, and following Joe’s birth her physical presence ‘disappears without a trace.’ Her origin is never disclosed, nor are we enlightened with the conclusion of her story” (55).

Indeed, one comes to wonder if Wild is not in fact a ghostly specter, for she is both “Everywhere and nowhere” (179), and all the people of Vesper County know of her are her traces: the “redwings” (176), “the scrap of a song [that] came from a woman’s throat” (177), and “that babygirl laugh” (167). Even Hunter’s Hunter recalls that “Every now and then when he thought about her he was convinced she was dead” (167). Because of her ‘wild’ and inhuman characteristics, Wild appears unable to perform socially expected functions of motherhood. She never “learned how to dress and talk to folks” as most human beings do (166). Also, she never “nursed her baby,” an inherent characteristic of mothering which is built into the physical anatomy of mammal mothers (166). Because of her wildness, Joe’s mother will not or cannot nurture him. Instead, she

abandons Joe, either willingly or unwillingly, and thus simultaneously orphans him. She becomes his "secret mother that Hunter once knew but who orphaned her baby rather than nurse him or coddle him or stay in the house with him" (178).

Because Joe is orphaned by Wild, he cannot form a firm sense of self or belonging. This confused identity manifests in Joe's lack of a given name, a tendency to change personalities, a state of prolonged childhood, and virtually sub-human hunting talents. In order to gain control of his deprived sense of self, Joe attempts to dissociate from his biological mother and find a substitute lover to fill in the "inside nothing" left by her absence (37). However, the absence of mothering proves fatal, as Joe's obsession with hunting Wild culminates in the confused murder of a young girl. Ultimately, the need to reconnect with the mother clouds Joe's judgment and leads him to commit an act of violence uncharacteristic of his inherently benevolent nature.

The absence of his mother leaves Joe with a lack of knowledge of his identity, both literally and figuratively. O'Reilly notes in "Maternal Healing" that "Wild's mode of communication is touch: the primal 'language' of the body, that which circulates outside of words. When she does speak, she only does so in song and laughter" (160). Because of her seeming inability to use human words, Wild leaves Joe with no verbal identity of his own. Instead, his caretaker, Mrs. Rhoda names him "Joseph after her father, but neither she nor Mr. Frank either thought to give me [Joe] a last name" (123). In addition, Joe labels himself "Joe Trace" on the first day of school because, as he says, "I had to have two names," and "the 'trace' they [his parents] disappeared without" was indeed Joe (124). O'Reilly explains Joe's initial lack of a name: "With no familial

identity to call his own, and severed from his motherline, Joe makes up his own identity and literally names himself" ("Maternal Healing" 161).

Yet not only does Wild leave Joe without a literal identity, she also leaves him with a cloudy sense of self that causes him to change personalities several times. Joe claims that before he met Dorcas, he "changed into new seven times. The first time was when I named my own self, since nobody did it for me, since nobody knew what it could or should have been" (123). O'Reilly writes that "Joe's shifting selfhood is experienced in a diachronic mode; he continuously shifts from one self-identity to another" (161). This muddled sense of self manifests in a confused mindset toward his mother. Because he does not know nor understand Wild, Joe cannot fathom how he should feel about her:

From then on he wrestled with the notion of a wildwoman for a mother.

Sometimes it shamed him to tears. Other times it messed up his aim and he shot wild or hit game in messy inefficient places. A lot of his time was spent denying it, convincing himself he had misread Hunter's words and most of all his look.

Nevertheless, Wild was always on his mind. (176)

Because of his mother's seemingly inhuman and elusive nature, Joe questions his own knowledge of her. He wonders who or what she is, and if she is even his mother. He also broods over the fact that he cannot get any sort of affirmation from her: "Say anything... Give me a sign, then. You don't have to say nothing. Let me see your hand. Just stick it out someplace and I'll go; I promise. A sign" (178).

Because Joe cannot reconnect with his mother, he cannot fully develop a mature, adult self. Instead, he remains a sort of child figure. For example, in an attempt to

reconnect with his mother, Joe locates what he believes to be Wild's habitation and climbs into the cave in an act symbolic of re-reentering the womb:

Finally he stuck his head in, pitch dark. No odor of dung or fur. It had, instead, a domestic smell...Crawling, squirming through a space low enough to graze his hair. Just as he decided to back out of there, the dirt under his hands became stone and light hit him so hard he flinched. He had come through a few body lengths of darkness and was looking out the south side of the rock face. A natural burrow. Going nowhere. Angling through one curve of the slope to another. Treason River glistening below. Unable to turn around inside, he pulled himself all the way out to reenter head first. Immediately he was in open air the domestic smell intensified...Then he saw the crevice. He went into it on his behind until a floor stopped his slide. It was like falling into the sun...(183)

Joe enters the cave in hopes of finding more information about his mother—how she lives, what she eats—or perhaps to steal a glimpse of her. In his yearning, he behaves like Plum in *Sula*, for “he wanted to crawl back into [the] womb” (*Sula* 71). As O'Reilly writes, “Joe goes into the maternal space of ‘Wild’s chamber of gold’ (221) so that he may be returned to the place of his beginnings. Joe longs to discover where he came from so that he may, at last, know who he is” (“Maternal Healing” 161). Instead, Joe remains a sort of permanent child because his mother's absence disables him from fully growing up.

In fact, Joe's obsession with locating his mother causes him even to abandon human characteristics of selfhood for more ‘wild’ behaviors. He learns excellent tracking techniques from Mr. Frank, “a hunter's hunter,” and becomes “more comfortable in the

woods than in town” (126-7). Joe also labels the animals he hunts “prey” and is often attributed animal characteristics during explanations of his hunts. For example, when hunting Wild, Joe drops “to his haunches” and sees himself “pawing around in the dirt” (177, 178). In addition, the narrator constantly mentions Joe’s “two-color eyes” (70), as if his eyes—a combination of his mother’s “deer eyes” (160) and human features—resemble two forms of being. Since Wild cannot affirm Joe’s sense of self, he endeavors to create it alone. In an attempt to get as close to his biological mother as he can, Joe becomes most comfortable with the predatory and animal-like lifestyle of hunting—and more specifically, hunting the deer-like Wild.

Because he cannot obtain the affirmation he craves from the wild mother who abandoned him, Joe attempts to forget and reject his mother in order to gain some semblance of control over his situation. Since Wild has robbed Joe of his agency and personal history in his infancy, he endeavors to regain this agency by blocking her from his mind. As previously explained, Joe obsesses over the affirmation of his mother—“Wild was always on his mind” (176). However, this fixation eventually turns to disallowance: “In Vienna he had lived first with the fear of her, then the joke of her, finally the obsession, followed by rejection of her” (175). As O’Reilly notes, “When his pleas for confirmation...go unanswered he turns away from Wild in anger and shame” (“Maternal Healing” 162). O’Reilly points to Joe’s disappointment as evidence of this rejection:

[A] simple-minded woman too silly to beg for a living. Too brain blasted to do what the meanest sow managed; nurse what she birthed... There are boys who have whores for mothers and don’t get over it. There are boys whose mothers

stagger through town roads when the juke joint slams its door. Mothers who throw their children away or trade them for folding money. He would have chosen any of them over this indecent speechless lurking insanity. (*Jazz* 179)

Like Richard in *Black Boy*, Joe feels ambivalence toward his biological mother and enacts the “protective numbing that...accompanies a traumatic experience” (Burrows “Knots” 116).

To supplement this denial of the mother, Joe attempts to find a substitute for her in the form of a female lover. First, he singles out Violet to fill his “inside nothing” (37). As the narrator says, “he had not chosen Violet but was grateful, in fact, that he didn’t have to; that Violet did it for him, helping him escape...the ripe silence that accompanied them” (30). In Violet, Joe locates a form of departure from the longing he feels for his mother. She helps him to “escape all the redwings in the county” (30), all the signs and suggestions of his mother that leave him with no answers. In addition, Violet’s choice of Joe—her marking of him—temporarily supplants his mother’s refusal to claim him. Violet labels Joe, “what was mine, what I chose, picked out and determine to have and hold on to” (95). Her claim to Joe eliminates any uncertainty as to their relationship—“They were drawn together because they had been put together” (30)—and this certainty acts as a substitute for the confusion Joe feels as a child over the mother of whom he is unsure. Even Violet states, “from the very beginning I was a substitute” (97). In addition, Joe meets Violet in a place that he feels comfortable, his home of Vesper County, “under a walnut tree... They knew people in common; and suspected they had a least one relative in common” (31, 30). A relationship with Violet causes Joe to feel grounded and safe, as symbolized by his fall from the tree to meet her.

However, even though Violet affirms Joe's sense of belonging for a time, he eventually loses this self again upon their move to New York City, an artificial place completely the opposite of the natural rural environment where Joe spends his childhood. As Joe says, "Surprised everybody when we left, me and Violet. They said the city makes you lonely" (129). In a way, Joe's move to the city proves to be another path in his attempted denial and substitution of his mother, for the move suggests to Joe that he has left the haunting presence of his mother in Virginia: "Part of why [he and Violet] loved it [the city] was the specter they left behind" (33). However, as O'Reilly notes, "Wild remains 'always on his [Joe's] mind'" ("Maternal Healing" 162, *Jazz* 176).

This move to the city, coupled with his growing ambivalence toward Violet, causes Joe to finally use Dorcas to fill the space created by his absent mother. Yet, in a confused effort to re-assert his sense of personal agency, Joe objectifies Dorcas. Violet proves to be an inadequate substitute for the mother's love because she represents love Joe found in his adult life. Dorcas, however, makes Joe feel like a child again, a child with the power to choose who he wishes for a relationship. Thus Dorcas takes Joe back to a time in which he can be re-mothered. He feels at this point in the novel that Violet can never go back to this time, for the two met when both had already left their childhood homes to work for themselves. Joe talks about his relationship with Dorcas during his first narrative: "Dorcas, girl, your first time and mine. I *chose* you. Nobody gave you to me. Nobody said that's the one for you. I picked you out...I didn't fall in love, I rose in it. I saw you and made up my mind" (135). Joe feels that his assertive claiming of Dorcas makes up for the powerless state of his motherless childhood. Yet even though he attempts to assert his personal agency, Joe's declaration resembles that of a child



choosing a possession. Moreover, Joe treats Dorcas as a child would treat a pet, giving her treats and gifts to entice her to remain with him, to build her loyalty:

I brought you treats, worrying each time what to bring that would make you smile and come again the next time. How many phonographic records? How many silk stockings? The little kit to mend the runs, remember? The purple metal box with the flowers on top full of Schrafft's chocolates. Cologne in a blue bottle...Flowers once, but you were disappointed with that treat, so I gave you a dollar to buy whatever you wanted with it...Just for you. (134)

Joe describes Dorcas as "The girl I knew...Nobody knew her that way but me...Nobody tried to love her before me" (213). His unique relationship with Dorcas substitutes for his lack of a relationship with his mother. Because the novel does not suggest Wild had any other children, one can only assume that Joe would have had an exclusive and individual relationship with her. In fact, her wild status causes Joe's mother to become a novelty, a one-and-only in Vesper County. As O'Reilly writes, "Joe finds in Dorcas the mother he never knew and wants from her the love he never had" (162). Dorcas makes him feel special, singling him out with her love just as a mother does her child. The uncommon relationship Joe has with Dorcas, in his mind, makes up for the lack of the uncommon, or even common, relationship he would have had with Wild.

However, Joe's lack of knowledge about his mother's identity confuses him into actually equating Dorcas with Wild. For example, throughout the novel, he likens both of them to deer—Wild with her "deer eyes" (160) and the "hoof marks" on Dorcas' cheeks (130). When the young girl abandons him, Joe cannot deal with the pain of a second refusal—it is as if his mother rejects him yet another time. After Dorcas breaks up with

Joe, he goes out to find her, yet the narrator's description of his search for Dorcas becomes intertwined with imagery from Joe's past quests for his deer-like mother. The section leading up to Dorcas' death begins, "As he puts on his coat and cap he can practically feel Victory [his childhood companion and hunting partner] at his side when he sets out, armed, to find Dorcas. He isn't thinking of harming her...He is hunting for her though, and while hunting a gun is as natural a companion as Victory" (180). For the next five pages, Joe's hunt for Dorcas becomes intermingled with remembrances of his hunts for Wild, suggesting the muddled nature of his mindset toward his mother. Eventually, it becomes unclear in the passage as to who Joe actually hunts—Dorcas or his mother. O'Reilly writes, "Wild and Dorcas eventually merge to become one person...Joe's search for Dorcas on that January day becomes more and more blurred with the earlier search for his mother in Virginia; by the end of the section, the two searches have merged into one" ("Maternal Healing" 163). As Dorcas dies from Joe's bullet, she speaks to herself about her unwillingness to tell the others at the party who shot her: "I know his name, but *Mama* won't tell" (193, emphasis added). Her mental statement suggests that she equates herself with Joe's mother, as if she, like Violet, understands that her love is a substitute.

Joe's confusion of Wild and Dorcas proves dangerous, for his muddled mindset leads him to commit a violent act of aggression that is uncharacteristic of his true nature. In his youth, Hunter's Hunter tells Joe and Victory, "I taught both you all never kill the tender and nothing female if you can help it" (175). Yet, Joe becomes lost in the heat of the moment: "But if the trail speaks, no matter what's in the way, you can find yourself in a crowded room aiming a bullet at her heart, never mind it's the heart you can't live

without” (130). Joe loses control of himself, yet his maniacal behavior contrasts with Felice’s confession at the end of the novel that she believes Joe to be a good man:

He was that kind, and I sort of know what Dorcas was talking about while she was bleeding all over that woman’s bed at the party...when I met the old man I sort of understood. He has this way about him...I think he likes women, and I don’t know anybody like that. I don’t mean he flirts with them, I mean he likes them without that. (206-7)

Felice also compares Mr. Trace to her father, remarking that “his eyes are not cold like my father’s,” and she discusses the kindness with which he treats his wife upon her visit to their apartment (206-7). The fact that Felice is given the last narrative of the story suggests that her voice and opinion are meant to lend a lasting impression—that she is correct in her observations. As Aguiar writes, “Joe is not...an egocentric member of the patriarchy bent on the conquest and domination of women” (58). Rather, he is like a misguided child led to do something he knows is wrong, and even the teenage Felice picks up on Joe’s status as a child-figure, stating that “he is like a kid when he laughs” (207).

Aguiar asserts that Joe’s “lack of mothering, and the loss of the mother’s history” causes him to adopt intensely patriarchal ideals in his relationship with Dorcas in order to make up for the control he loses as an abandoned child (59). She writes:

Joe’s definition of manhood dictates that he must assume the role of creator and he chooses Dorcas to fulfill that role...Joe has ‘named’ Dorcas; he has reconstructed her to his specifications...In molding Dorcas to conform to his

vision, Joe has relegated her to the position of object; he has assumed ownership of her. (58)

Moreover, Aguiar relates Joe's gift-giving to the way in which a "master' treats his mistress'" (58). She claims that even though Joe is not a man committed to violence against women in general, "he is, however, thoughtlessly mimicking patriarchal agendas in his incomprehensible pursuit of the unwilling Dorcas...Joe treats Dorcas like a bought-and-paid-for whore" (58). His renting of Malvone's room certainly supports this claim, yet as Felice's narrative suggests, Joe's character does not seem bent on andocentric ideals of patriarchy. He treats Violet with kindness in their home (207) and "his eyes are not cold" (206). Instead, Joe attempts to possess Dorcas as he could not possess his mother. In a society dominated by patriarchal ideals, this possession manifests in masculine modes of conquest. Unfortunately, Joe's hunt for his mother ultimately leads him to murder her substitute.

Paradoxically, Dorcas' death, as upsetting as it may be, proves a necessary step in Joe's healing process. Even though a young girl remains murdered and Joe "was all broke up. Cried all day and night. Left his job and wasn't good for a thing" (205), the novel ends with a sense of peace and emotional well-being. One of the last images is that of Felice, Joe, and Violet together in their apartment (221), finding companionship in the family-like atmosphere provided by each other's company. Aguiar writes that "with Felice [Joe and Violet are] given a second chance" (61). In addition, the narrator closes with the suggestion that both Violet and Joe finally become content in their relationship with one another. After work, they spend the day together in the city. They tell "each

other those little personal stories they like to hear again and again” (223). O’Reilly comments on Joe’s healing:

As a boy, Joe never came to terms with the loss of the mother; he spent his life trying to forget his mother and trying to become someone other than his mother’s son. When he loses his mother this second time, he relives the pain and loss he denied and repressed as a boy. Only when Joe truly acknowledges and feels the emotional wounds of his motherlessness is healing made possible. (“Maternal Healing” 163)

Virtually the entire novel deals with the mourning of Dorcas. Finally, once Joe and Violet come to terms with her death, Joe can finally heal from the deficit of his mother. O’Reilly asserts, “Only when [Joe] mourns the loss of [his] mother is selfhood made possible. As the narrator of *Jazz* puts it, “nothing was left to love or need” (224).

Mothering in *Jazz* provides an element of cohesion to the novel, since almost every character mourns the loss of his/her mother. Even the narrator suggests tones of maternity. Aguiar writes that “the narrator assumes the function of the mother’s voice. She, possessing the powers of orality which have been lost to the orphaned descendents, is the only true voice in the text...it is she who has given voice to the histories [of each character]; it is she who acts as mother” (62-3). Aguiar also claims that “At the novel’s end, the narrator allies herself with Wild, implying that she too is, in a sense, an absent mother figure” (63).<sup>2</sup> Moreover, for the epigram of the novel Morrison uses a passage

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<sup>2</sup> To evidence this, Aguiar references *Jazz*, page 221: “I’d love to close myself in the place left by the woman [Wild] who lived there [her cave] and scared everybody. Unseen because she knows better than to be seen. After all, who would see her, a playful woman who lived in a rock? Who could, without fright? Of her looking eyes looking back? I wouldn’t mind. Why should I? She has seen me and is not afraid of me. She hugs me. Understands me. Has given me her hand. I am touched by her. Released in secret. Now I know.”

from *The Nag Hammadi*, “a Coptic text of gnostic writings discovered in 1945” (Conner). The text comes from “Thunder, Perfect Mind,” “a revelation text spoken by a female narrator who claims to be both mother and daughter” (Conner, *Nag Hammadi Library*). Thus the narrator takes on the role of mother to the text. Her position suggests healing and renewal, for “The narrator of ‘Thunder, Perfect Mind,’ promises that those who attend to her utterance will find her presence when they ‘go up to their resting place,’ ‘and they will live and not die again’” (Conner, *Nag Hammadi Library*). The actual text Morrison uses in her epigram likens the mother-narrator to the Christian God: “I am the name of the sound/ and the sound of the name./ I am the sign of the letter/ and the designation of the division” (*Jazz* xiii). This similarity suggests that the narrator has the ability to save—that mothering itself is the saving grace.

Because of this saving grace and Joe’s eventual healing, there exists within *Jazz* an element of renewal that does not exist in *Black Boy* or *Sula*. Wright and Sula convince themselves that by breaking with the mother they may gain more agency in an oppressive society. Where Richard and Sula never come to grips with their division from the mother and experience a chronic yearning for her, Joe finally regains a sense of peace and belonging in the world through his relationships with other people.

#### B. Audre Lorde, *Zami: A New Spelling of my Name*

The potential for healing that emerges in *Jazz* is perhaps even stronger in Audre Lorde’s “biomythography,” *Zami: A New Spelling of My Name*, which suggests a mode of revision and in its very title. “*Zami*” which Lorde identifies in the “Epilogue” as “A Carriacou name for women who work together as friends and lovers” (255), is as she

writes, “A New Spelling” of her “Name,” meaning that the title reflects a re-naming and re-envisioning of the self. In addition, the book’s self-attributed genre—“biomythography”—implies a partly fictional, partly historical reinterpretation of her own life and history. In an early-1980s interview, Lorde stated that biomythography “is really fiction. It has the elements of biography and history of myth. In other words it is fiction built from many sources” (Tate “Audre Lorde” 115). In *Zami*, Lorde writes a sort of joint memoir-novel, perhaps admittedly more fictional than Wright’s *Black Boy*, but more biographical than Morrison’s novels. Thus, it can be said that within *Zami* there exists both Audre Lorde the historical author and Audre Lorde the partly-historical, partly-fictional character. For purposes of understanding, from this point on, the former will be referred to as “Lorde” and the latter, “Audre.”

As Ektaterini Georgoudaki writes, “Lorde follows tradition to the extent that she gives the mother figure an important place in her works, with her own mother at the center” (Georgoudaki 54). As a child, Audre experiences a break with the mother similar to that experienced by Richard, Joe, and Sula. This break manifests in two main features: a yearning for the mother’s love, and a paradoxical dual resentment toward her mother’s resignation to the oppression of the white patriarchal world and failure to fulfill her expectations for unconditional love. This break with the mother lends Audre a lost sense of self, as she adopts the expectations of a society which clashes with the matriarchal roots of her foreign-born parents. However, even though Audre experiences a break with the mother similar to that of the other protagonists within this study, Lorde herself is different. *Zami* bears an obvious tone of reverence, longing, and respect for the mother, her feminine, matriarchal roots, and women in general. Like Joe Trace, Audre is

eventually able to achieve a sense of peace and belonging through a symbolic relationship. On the whole, Lorde uses her “biomythography” to re-evaluate her own childhood assumptions regarding her mother. In doing so, Lorde also shatters Richard, Sula, and Joe’s assumptions of unconditional motherlove and reformulates mainstream gender ideologies of contemporary American society.

Anxiety over a break with the mother emerges in Lorde’s juxtaposition of her childhood yearning for the mother and a deep-seated reverence. This duality of longing and admiration suggests that the mother never completely fulfills Audre’s need for maternal love. For example, Lorde often refers to her mother as “Linda,” stressing both her respect for her as another woman and a certain distance between mother and daughter. Moreover, Lorde suggests Audre’s yearning for connection with the mother with her inability to ever truly know her mother’s version of “home.” In the very first chapter of the book, Lorde discusses her parent’s move from Grenada to the United States in 1924 and the extent to which her mother missed her place of birth:

[N]ow, in this cold raucous country called america, Linda missed the music... Whenever we were close to the water, my mother grew quiet and soft and absent-minded. The she would tell us wonderful stories about Noel’s Hill in Grenville, Grenada, which overlooked the Caribbean. She told us stories about Carriacou, where she had been born, amid the heavy smell of limes. (11-13)

Lorde writes about the sadness with which her mother remembered her home. For Audre and her sisters in *Zami*, their mother’s home—her roots and history—are separate and unknowable. Lorde writes, “Once home was a far way off, a place I had never been to” (13). Audre’s mother even suggests to her children indirectly, that her “home” is a treat to



be gained with good behavior—"For if we lived correctly and with frugality, looked both ways before crossing the street, then someday we would arrive back in the sweet place, back *home*" (13). Writing in retrospect, Lorde identifies the discovery of her own roots and her own personal history, with her first visit to Grenada as an adult. She writes, "When I visited Grenada I saw the root of my mother's powers walking through the streets. I thought, this is the country of my foremothers, my forebearing mothers, those Black Island Women who defined themselves by what they did" (9). Before this, however, the young Audre's sense of "home"—a sense of personal history rooted in the mother—is an absent and intangible ideal. This sense of longing prevents Audre from fully knowing her own roots, and this gap cannot be fully cured until she may visit her mother's native home as an adult.

Just as Lorde paints her mother's "home" as an unknowable idea, she also paints the mother as an elusive identity whom Audre can never truly grasp. Linda never seems to give Audre the love for which she looks. For example, Lorde writes about the times during which the young girl crawls into bed with her mother on Saturday mornings:

Saturday morning. The one morning of the week my mother does not leap from bed to prepare me and my sisters for school or church. I wake in the cot in their bedroom, knowing it is one of those lucky days when she is still in bed, and alone. My father is in the kitchen. The sound of pots and the slightly off-smell of frying bacon mixes with the smell of percolating Bokar coffee...I get up and go over and crawl into my mother's bed. Her smile. Her glycerin-flannel smell. The warmth...I crawl against her...Her arm comes down across me, holding me to her for a moment, then quiets my frisking. "All right, now." I nuzzle against her

sweetness, pretending not to hear. “All right, now, I said; stop it. It’s time to get up from this bed. Look lively”...Before I can say anything she is gone in a great deliberate heave. The purposeful whip of her chenille robe over her warm flannel gown and the bed already growing cold beside me. (33-4)

Audre’s attempts to get close to her mother reflect Linda’s failure to show any prolonged reciprocal affection. Lorde presents the mother allowing Audre to get close for one second to obtain one small ration of love, then pushing her away, as if to desensitize her or harden her to attachment. There also exists within the passage a sense that Audre’s mother perceives something sexual in her daughter “gently rubbing against [her] mother’s quiet body” (33-34). Lorde follows this episode with an italicized quote that further conveys the evasive nature of her mother’s love: “*Wherever the bird with no feet flew she found trees with no limbs*” (34). Audre’s lack of “feet” and “limbs” conveys her mother’s refusal to allow her a place to root her sense of self and build a nest. Because of this, Lorde writes, “My heart ached and ached for something I could not name”—the mother (85).

Audre’s yearning for her mother also manifests in a dream she experiences after having an abortion. The anxiety suggested by the dream itself conveys Audre’s angst over curtailing the physical manifestation of that self by preventing the birth of a potential daughter. Lorde writes:

Just last Spring around that same time one Saturday morning, I woke up in my mother’s house to the smell of frying bacon in the kitchen, and the abrupt realization as I opened my eyes that the dream I had been having of giving birth to a baby girl was in fact only a dream. I sat bolt upright in my bed, facing the little

window onto the air shaft, and cried and cried and cried from disappointment until my mother came into the room to see what was wrong. (111)

The dream occurs on a Saturday morning on which Audre experiences “the smell of frying bacon in the kitchen”—this morning would have been a day in which the childhood Audre was able to crawl into bed with her mother and experience a small snippet of maternal affection. Instead, she experiences the virtual opposite: the blunt realization that she, herself, is after all not a mother. Audre’s reaching out for her own mother in a time of psychological crisis suggests a deep-seated inherent—almost childlike—longing for the affirmation and affection of a mother. During young adulthood, Audre experiences psychological angst as to the unspoken hostilities between Linda and herself, and like a child at summer camp she inquires, “what did my mother think about now that I had gone away?” (230). Audre, like the other protagonists of this study, represents a child-figure even in her early adulthood because of an unfulfilled longing for the mother.

In order to heighten the elusive nature of the mother’s love, Lorde reflects on her mother with deep reverence, as if Linda were a larger-than-life woman whom Audre could never truly reach nor comprehend. Lorde writes, “My mother was a very powerful woman. This was so in a time when that word-combination of *woman* and *powerful* was almost unexpressable in the white american common tongue” (15). In addition, Lorde calls her mother a “Black dyke,” saying, “As a child, I always knew my mother was different from the other women I knew” (15). To Lorde, the term “Black dyke,” is not a derogatory label, but an emblem of strength and self-assurance, as she writes later in *Zami* that the older lesbians with whom she was acquainted, namely Vida and Pet,

“preferred the word ‘dyke,’ and it seemed much more in charge of their lives to be dykes” (206). Moreover, Lorde discusses her mother’s imposing physical features from the viewpoint of the streets of New York, where people would defer to her equanimity: “To me, my mother’s physical substance and the presence of self-possession with which she carried herself were a large part of what made her *different*. Her public air of in-charge competence was quiet and effective” (16). Georgoudaki comments on the way in which both the young Audre and older Lorde view the mother:

She works hard both inside and outside the house nurturing her children, caring for her husband and for other black people. She also has an imposing physical appearance: a large, ample, and graceful body, and a full bosom. Lorde praises her mother’s physical attractiveness and connects it with her moral qualities (power, dignity, determination, self-possession, modesty, etc.) which gained the respect of her community. (3)

Still, however, the reverence with which Audre views her mother lengthens the distance between them. Linda’s beatings of Audre only heighten this gap, since the punishments “made [Audre’s] arms and back sore from whatever handy weapon my mother could lay her hands on to hit [her] with” (90). Thus the respect Audre holds for her mother is positioned at a safe distance—the distance created by a ‘can’t have’ notion of maternal affection.

Despite the fact that she yearns for Linda’s affection, Audre also willingly breaks with the mother by bearing a sort of paradoxical dual resentment toward her: Audre dislikes the way in which her mother responds to the oppression of mainstream American society, yet she also submits to white patriarchy’s assessments, often wishing her mother

could become the ideal white mother. Lorde discusses her mother's position as an outsider in American society: "My mother...took pains, I realize now, to hide from us children her many instances of powerlessness. Being Black and foreign in New York City in the twenties and thirties was not simple, particularly when she was quite light enough to pass for white, but her children weren't" (17). Linda possesses not only a physical appearance that makes her an outsider in her contemporary society, but she is also of foreign birth, placing her outside the realm of the social and cultural understanding of the U.S. Although Audre does not realize the meaning of race as a child, Lorde attests to her knowledge of race in high school when she mentions that "In my first year at Hunter, there were three other black girls in my term" (85). From this point on (and perhaps earlier), Lorde possesses an understanding of her mother's racialized existence which concerns her throughout the rest of her youth. As Georgoudaki writes, "the poet perceives the complex problems...in her mother's experience as an immigrant from Grenada living in Harlem and being surrounded by a hostile racist and sexist society" (55). In contrast, Audre wishes desperately to be liked at school, and thus adopts a stance of naïve resilience toward the disenfranchising attitudes of those around her, particularly her classmates. For example, when Audre wants to run for President of her class during elementary school, her mother demands that she doesn't, asking her, "What in hell are you doing getting yourself involved with so much foolishness? You don't have better sense in your head than that?" (61). Audre's mother does not want her daughter to get hurt, for she knows how cruel her class will be when it comes time for the election—there is no chance for Audre, just disappointment. However, as naïve as she may be, Audre wishes to assert her own success and independence in her classroom of all-white

students: "I was in seventh heaven. I knew I was the smartest girl in the class. I had to win" (61). She continues her bid for the election, even though she loses in the end. However her resilience marks her desire to assert herself, and she views her mother's position as backing down in the face of challenge.

Most of Lorde's resentment toward her mother's vulnerability stems from the fact that Lorde herself embraces her position as an outsider and uses it to argue for social good. Yet, in retrospect she views her mother as bearing a hidden sad and broken part of herself in the face of oppression. She writes, "In my mother's house, there was no room in which to make errors, no room to be wrong...She had to use these defenses, and had survived by them, and had also died by them, at the same time" (58). Her mother's position as a Black Grenadian immigrant in the United States makes her a victim of racial and xenophobic oppression in a land in which she does not wish to remain. Audre's parents' dream was "of going home," however they lost this dream during the Great Depression (10). Therefore her mother remains stuck in a hostile environment. Audre resents her mother's transgressions against her in order to merely 'get by' among white society with the least amount of conflict. For example, Lorde writes that her mother "told the nuns [at school] that unlike my two sisters, who were models of deportment, I was very unruly, and they should spank me whenever I needed it" (27). Lorde views her mother's camaraderie with the nuns as violation of an assumed mother-daughter alliance. In other words, her mother chooses to please the white nuns and behavior of compliance over her own daughter. Georgoudaki writes about Linda's internalization of American norms, "Internalizing Anglo-American standards...inevitably leads to the devaluation and suppression of her own identity and her cultural values as a Grenadian woman. The

results are a negative self-image and psychic distortion which in turn, generate despair, anger, and aggression...against her daughters” (57). To Lorde the author, a “warrior, poet, lesbian, mother” (Georgoudaki 52), a woman who embraces her position as an outcast as a podium from which to argue for social change, Linda’s complacency suggests a weakness to be frowned upon.

However, Lorde also realizes in retrospect that her mother’s attempts to comply with white male standards were merely efforts to ensure that she and her sisters could get by with the least amount of strife or pain. For example, Lorde writes after Linda tells Audre, “You don’t need friends,” that “I did not see her helplessness nor her pain” (61). Looking back Lorde realizes that it hurt her mother to see her daughters spurned in school, however she knew that they needed a strong education. Georgoudaki writes, “the mother gives priority to the daughter’s external survival and, therefore, tries to force them to accept white standards as she did” (57). Yet, as a child, Audre herself also internalizes dominant cultural ideologies. Even though Audre possesses a deep appreciation of her mother’s fortitude and composure, Linda’s strengths also, in the words of Georgoudaki, “caused problems to the young daughter whose consciousness was split between the images of ideal womanhood/motherhood (genteel, middle-class, white), which the mainstream media imposed on her, and the actual female model (working-class black) she had at home” (56). Audre wishes on many occasions that her mother could be more like the mothers of her classmates—her white classmates, that is. Lorde writes:

My mother was different from other women...But sometimes it gave me pain and I fancied it the reason for so many of my childhood sorrows. *If my mother were like everybody else’s maybe they would like me better...*I was very proud of her,

but sometimes, just sometimes, I wished she would be like all the other mothers, one waiting for me at home with milk and home-baked cookies and a frilly apron, like the blonde smiling mother in *Dick and Jane*. (16, 55)

In adopting white patriarchy's standards of what a mother should be, Audre also violates the mother-daughter relationship. For example, she opens up to her white guidance counselor at school about how her mother does not love her and how she herself cannot fulfill the expectations set by her more complacent older sisters. Her mother asks her, in an emphatic reply, "How could you say those things about your mother to that white woman?" (85). Audre holds for her mother a double standard—she wishes for her to be resilient in the face of oppression, yet she also secretly wishes her mother were similar to the ideal white housewife. These expectations cause Audre to further the hiatus between herself and her mother.

In breaking with her mother, Audre literally formulates a new name for herself on two levels. First, the child Audre presents her first major deviation in selfhood when she invents a new spelling of her name on the first day of school. In her notebook, she pens "AUDRELORDE" because she "did not like the tail of the Y hanging down below the line in Audrey, and would always forget to put it on, which used to disturb my mother greatly" (24). In addition, as mentioned above, the title of the book, *Zami: A New Spelling of My Name*, signifies Lorde's assertion of her own recreation of herself. This re-identification suggests a need to break away from the mother, a need to separate from someone she feels violates her expectations of motherhood by loving her conditionally. As Georgoudaki writes, Lorde views her relationship with her mother as "castrating... The mother is psychologically crippled by the racist and sexist society in



which she lives, and she in turn cripples her daughters” (58). In valuing the ideals of white American patriarchy over the matriarchy of Linda’s homeland of Grenada, both Audre and her mother abandon the roots of their female ancestry and thus lose a vital portion of their personal histories.

However, Lorde realizes the biased and unfair nature of the mainstream gender assumptions by which she judged her mother in her youth. As mentioned, Lorde the writer blames the distance between her childhood self and her mother not on either party, but on white patriarchal American society. Victoria Burrows writes, Audre, like Sula, “grows up in a maternal household distorted and traumatized by the external pressures of racial, class and sexual oppression, and this drives a wedge between the successive generations of women” (“Ambivalent” 130). By looking at her mother through the eyes of the dominant culture, Audre develops a muddled sense of self that cannot be cleared up until Lorde the writer offers her commentary. This commentary comes with the way in which Lorde reformulates dominant notions of gender, suggesting that there exist no natural differences between men and women besides those of biology. Rather, assumptions of gender are purely formulations socialized into children after birth. By correcting mainstream assumptions of gender roles, Lorde shatters the paradigm established by Richard, Sula, and Joe that the way to deal with the mother as a woman is to adopt masculine characteristics.

For example, Lorde counters the heterosexist nature of the Oedipus complex, a phenomenon The Columbia Encyclopedia describes as:

[A] Freudian term, drawn from the myth of Oedipus, designating attraction on the part of the child toward the parent of the opposite sex and rivalry and hostility

toward the parent of its own. It occurs during the phallic stage of the psychosexual development of the personality, approximately years three to five.

(“Oedipus Complex”)

However, Audre’s Oedipal complex takes the form of attraction from daughter to mother. For example, Lorde writes of sitting between her mother’s legs as the latter brushes her daughter’s hair. Lorde remembers “her strong knees gripping my shoulders tightly like some well-attended drum...I remember the warm smell caught between her legs, and the intimacy of our physical touching nestled inside of the anxiety/pain” (33). The Oedipus Complex is understood in the terms of a natural attraction to the parent of the opposite sex. However, Lorde reformulates the theory to suggest affection for the parent of the same sex, suggesting that such attraction is just as natural as that of Freud’s theory.

In addition, Lorde recalls an incident during her adolescence when she enacts a sexual fantasy with her mother’s cooking instruments—a mortar and pestle—that stresses flexible sexual roles. Instead of identifying with the mortar, Audre obsesses over the pestle and “The heavy sturdiness of this useful wooden object [that] always made her feel secure and somehow full” (73). She mentions that the pestle is “slightly bigger at the grinding end than most pestles, and the widened curved end fitted into the bowl of the mortar easily” (72), making the pestle a phallic symbol. She then proceeds to liken the grinding of the mortar and pestle to a heterosexual act of sex:

I grabbed the head of the wooden stick and straightened up, my ears ringing faintly. Without even wiping it, I plunged the pestle into the bowl, feeling the blanket of salt give way, and the broken cloves of garlic just beneath. The downward thrust of the wooden pestle slowed upon contact, rotated back and

forth slowly, then gently altered its rhythm to include an up and down, back, forth, round, round, up and down. (78).

Audre feels, during this episode, a “heavy fullness at the root of me that was exciting and dangerous” (78); she also mentions a “vital connection” between her and the pestle. This sexual experience with her mother’s cooking tools comes just after Audre’s first menstruation, and therefore the episode emerges as her first post-adolescent experience with sex. Thus Lorde argues the genderless nature of Audre’s sexual fantasy by suggesting that her association with the pestle is completely natural.

Moreover, the mortar is significant in that it belongs to Linda, and therefore Audre seems to be enacting a sexual fantasy with the mother. Later, she fantasizes about her mother during recollections of the kitchen incident: “Years afterward when I was grown, whenever I thought about the way I smelled that day, I would have a fantasy of my mother...looking down upon me laying on the couch and then slowly, thoroughly, our touching and caressing each other’s most secret places” (78). Interestingly, even though Lorde later ‘comes out’ as a lesbian, she recalls her sexual fantasy with her mother in terms of the male-female sexual act enacted with the mortar and pestle. In the “Prologue” she also writes, “*I have always wanted to be both man and woman*” (7), suggesting a fluidity in gender that flies in the face of traditional ideologies.

In addition to dismantling gender norms, Lorde also symbolically reconnects with the lost mother, suggesting perhaps the strongest element of healing within this study. Throughout *Zami*, Audre struggles with leaving her mother, yet she never returns to her home to live with her, even after the death of her father. However, eventually Audre does achieve a sense of peace and belonging similar to that achieved by Joe Trace of *Jazz*.

This affirmation comes at the very end of *Zami* through a meaningful relationship with Afrekete, a woman who seems to be a composite of many of Audre's lovers, including her mother. Lorde writes of how, like her mother Linda, Afrekete buys West Indian fruit "under the bridge" (249). Both Audre and Afrekete understand "that whatever it was [from under the bridge] had come from as far back and as close to home—that is to say, was as authentic—as was possible" (249). Thus both women associate "home" with the same place, as if through Afrekete, Audre finally can identify with the elusive West Indian "home" of her mother. Lorde also writes that in Afrekete's presence, "Another piece of me felt...about four years old" (246). Because Lorde chooses to begin *Zami* around the time she is four, this statement suggests that Afrekete helps her to reinscribe her childhood longing for the mother. Afrekete's confidence, "the assurance" she offers Audre makes up for the insecurity she experiences due to her unreconciled break with the mother (247). In addition, because Lorde places Afrekete at the very end of *Zami*, her character suggests an element of finality. Audre's search for her mother leads her to another black woman whose "print remains on [Lorde's] life with the resonance and power of an emotional tattoo" (253). The renewal Audre experiences through her relationship with Afrekete suggests that one can repair oneself from childhood without necessarily reuniting with the actual mother.

Thus Lorde realizes the tragedy inherent in her original break with the mother, however her relationship with Afrekete mends her chronic longing. Afrekete enables her to come to grips with the distance between her and Linda. In the context of reformulated notions of gender and motherhood, Lorde may re-evaluate her childhood judgments of

her mother. She relocates blame from the shoulders of her mother to those of the skewed and defeating ideals of white patriarchy As Georgoudaki writes:

One of the strategies [Lorde] uses is to reassess motherhood. . . . She still complains about her mother's lack of understanding and tolerance and her use of physical violence, which resulted in the daughter's confusion, guilt, and sense of worthlessness, betrayal, rejection, and isolation. Yet Lorde shifts her criticism from her mother to society. For, it is her mother's cultural and social oppression that makes her internalize Anglo-American interpretations of blackness and womanhood in order to be accepted by society and thus to survive externally. (57-8)

Lorde counters the patriarchy of American culture with the powerful women-driven nature of her mother's Grenadian roots by mythologizing them at the beginning and end of the text. In fact, as previously mentioned, the reverence Lorde infuses into *Zami* for her mother seems to come after her first visit to her mother's roots in Grenada, where she sees "the root of my mother's powers walking the streets" (9). In this land, Audre finally discovers the long, lost "home" of both Linda and herself. She recognizes, at the end of book, "the women who helped give me substance," and lists eighteen names of women, one of which is her mother (255). Lorde also writes that "*How Carriacou women love each other is legend in Grenada, and so is their strength and their beauty*" (14).

Hence *Zami* emerges as perhaps the strongest advocate of the value and power of the maternal line, for with it Lorde offers a vision of hope and regeneration for the future and peace with not only her roots, but also herself.

#### IV. Conclusion

Within this study, Wright's *Black Boy*, Morrison's *Sula* and *Jazz*, and Lorde's *Zami: A New Spelling of My Name* profess the importance of the rooting of a child's personal history through the mother. Each mother-child relationship takes place in a world dominated by white patriarchy where the black mother must raise her child in the face of a society which seeks to disempower them. In each instance within the above literature, the child witnesses the mother's struggle as a black woman in the face of oppressive expectations of gender and motherhood, and this struggle leads to a break between mother and child. The disconnect from the mother causes a disconnect within the child's sense of self, as he/she also struggles to gain agency in a cruel world. Each character becomes tricked by mainstream society into thinking that power comes with the adoption of patriarchal characteristics. Yet the severe fragmentation that occurs within each child stresses that it is not patriarchy which should be adhered to, but rather, it is the mother, for the mother offers the child a sense of roots and personality that is crucial to the formation of a healthy sense of self.

The sections of this study are ordered in a way that leads to the conclusion that healing may only be attained when the child re-identifies with the mother. As Ektaterini Georgoudaki writes, "Race and gender impose on mother and [child] a double powerlessness and a double degree of self-hatred, but they also make possible a stronger ultimate affection. The split between mother-[child] must be healed, and reconciliation comes with recognition of the mother's strength" (58). Richard Wright never moves past feeling sorry for his mother; he loves her, but views leaving her as a necessary step to gaining influence as an African-American male. However, in extracting himself from his

mother, he fails to realize the profound and hidden psychological impact she possesses over him. His regret over his mother's condition leaves him with a violent impulse toward women, an impulse that emerges in the text of his novels. Sula's experience of abandoning Hannah and Eva parallels that of Wright, although with less violent undertones, because even though Sula appears to constitute a feminist icon, Morrison frowns upon her for abandoning her maternal roots. Joe Trace, however, offers a more positive example of reconnecting with the mother, for, in the words of O'Reilly, "only when Joe truly acknowledges and feels the emotional wounds of his motherlessness is healing made possible" (163). Yet Audre Lorde lends the most constructive example of the importance of mothering, for with *Zami* Lorde re-evaluates her own childhood assessment of her mother and relocates her mother as a locus of strength and power. In doing so, Lorde also reinscribes the assumptions of gender and motherhood made by the previous three characters.

It is accurate to attribute O'Reilly's assessment of *Jazz* to all four of the above works—whether they do so intentionally or unintentionally, each "affirms the importance of motherwork and celebrates the power of maternal healing. The deep psychological wounds" of each character "remind us of how essential preservation, cultural bearing, and in particular, nurturance are for emotional well-being" (O'Reilly "Maternal Healing" 164). This focus on mothering does not suggest that fathering and paternal roles necessarily take backstage. Nor does this paper make any sort of sociological claim as to the nature of African-American motherhood at large. Rather, it aims to stress the need to re-evaluate society and the assessments placed on all races and genders by the prioritizing of white patriarchal norms. For as O'Reilly states, "hope for change and renewal begin

with the mother. While the hand that rocks the cradle may not rule the world, it leads us back to our past and points the way to our future" ("In Search" 377).



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